

Bay Chamber Concerts

Program Notes

Russian Visions with Max Levinson

Sunday, November 2, 2008 at 2:30 p.m.

Rockport Opera House

SERGE RACHMANINOFF (1873 - 1943)

Three Études-tableaux, Op. 33

No. 7, in E flat

No. 8, in G minor

No. 9, in C sharp minor

SERGEY PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Eight Visions fugitives, Op. 22

No. 1 Lentamente

No. 2 Andante

No. 3 Allegretto

No. 4 Animato – più sostenuto

No. 5 Molto giocoso

No. 15 Inquieto

No. 16 Dolente

No. 14 Feroce

PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893), transcr. Mikhail Pletnev

Concert Suite from The Nutcracker

March – Tempo di marcia viva

Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy – Andante ma non troppo

Tarantella – Tempo di Tarantella

Intermezzo

Trepak (Russian Dance) – Molto vivace

Chinese Dance – Allegro moderato

Andante maestoso (Pas de deux)

MODEST MUSSORGSKY (1839-1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition

Promenade

The Gnome

Promenade

The Old Castle

Promenade

Tuileries (Children Quarrelling at Play)

Byl'do

Promenade

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks
Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle
Promenade
Limoges - the Market
Catacombs (Sepulchrum romanum)
Cum mortuis in lingua mortua
The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga)
The Great Gate at Kiev

SERGE RACHMANINOFF (1873 - 1943)

Three Études-tableaux, Op. 33

The last of the great 19th century pianist-composers and the first of the modern school of piano-playing, Rachmaninoff held aristocratic disdain for technical difficulty at the keyboard. Full-blooded Russian sonority was there. But so was refined *legato* playing, rhythmic buoyancy and drive, a composer's ability to structure the music and an uncanny knack of getting right to the heart of the poetry. Rachmaninoff thrived on his concert giving. Countless concert tours across the States bought him a house in Beverly Hills. "The blood vessels on my finger tips have begun to burst; bruises are forming," he once wrote. "But take me away from my concerts and that will be the end of me."

The music, however, did not come without a struggle. At home, in Russia, the first 26 years of Rachmaninoff's career saw 39 publications. The next 26 years of exile resulted in just six more. It was in pre-Revolutionary Russia that Rachmaninoff composed all his operas and songs, three of the four piano concertos, two of the three symphonies and two sets of demanding piano pieces that essentially close the book on the great 19th century tradition of virtuoso études. He called them *Études-tableaux*, or *Study-Pictures*, inventing the term to describe these short, technically complex pieces that explore a mood or tell a story. He gave little away by way of explanation, however, preferring to follow Chopin's lead in the four Ballades of leaving it to the listener's imagination to fill in the specifics of the narrative.

The E flat *Étude-tableau* is known to portray a scene at a fair. Rachmaninoff said as much in 1930, when he wrote brief descriptions for the five *Études-tableaux* he chose to be orchestrated by the Italian composer Ottorino Respighi. The exuberant, bell-like flourishes with which the piece opens are followed by a more whimsical, if no less technically ferocious, bustle of an outdoor carnival. It's one of the two shortest *Études-tableaux* and one of only two in the major key. The brooding G minor *Étude-tableau* is a reflection on a painting by Böcklin on the subject of morning. The music grows out of a five-note phrase, deep in the lower register of the piano, answering the melancholy opening. With its unrelenting drive and awesome power, the C sharp minor *Étude-tableau* unremittingly stamps on any hint of the major key and concludes the Op. 33 collection on a dark note.

SERGEY PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Eight Visions fugitives, Op. 22

Prokofiev titled his collection of 20 short, sometimes epigrammatic piano miniatures *Mimoletnosti* – literally, “impressions or ideas that fly by”. We know the collection by their French translation, *Visions fugitives*. The translation derives from a fragment of verse by the Russian symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont (1867-1942) with which Prokofiev prefaces his score and which perfectly captures the essence of the music:

*In every fugitive vision
I see whole worlds:
They change endlessly,
Flashing in playful rainbow colors.*

Prokofiev had turned to Balmont for earlier compositions and had recently met the poet when he began composition of the piano pieces in 1915. He wrote the collection intermittently over three of the most turbulent years in Russian history. Prokofiev, however, was far away from Petrograd, as Saint Petersburg was known in 1917, while scenes of revolutionary passion were being played out on its streets and the Russian monarchy overthrown. "Immersed as I then was in art," he said, "I did not have a clear idea of the scope and extent of the October Revolution." So it is not surprising that his music of the time reflects little of these momentous months. Indeed, the time he spent in the distant Caucasus was one of the most productive in Prokofiev's entire life. It was then that he wrote the *Classical symphony*, the First Violin Concerto, Sonatas 3 and 4 for piano, the cantata *Seven They Are Seven* and the *Visions fugitives*.

The hallmark of the 20 piano miniatures, each lasting a little more or a little less than one minute, is clarity and succinctness, characteristics that Prokofiev strived to achieve throughout his life. The first two pieces are reflective, lyrical and crystalline in their transparency. The third is similarly pared back to essentials, though more flowing. The fourth introduces an enigmatic note, beginning purposefully with biting harmonies before morphing into a constantly repeating echo of the opening. The scherzo-like fifth is the shortest of the *Visions fugitives*. Prokofiev acknowledged that just one piece in the cycle, No. 19, is related to the events of 1917, describing it rather apologetically as "more of a reflection of the crowd's excitement than of the inner essence of the revolution." Some of the other pieces share its urgency and drive, including No. 15, the more mysterious No. 16 and the biting, ferocious No. 14 which concludes today's selection.

PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893), transcr. Mikhail Pletnev

Concert Suite from The Nutcracker

Since he first rose to international prominence by winning the 1978 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, the music of Tchaikovsky has played a central role in the music-making of Russian pianist, conductor and composer Mikhail Pletnev (b.1957). His concert transcriptions of music from the ballets *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty* both bring the art of transcription to Tchaikovsky's scores, throwing fresh light onto the music while transforming the music from one medium to another. His later concert transcription of music from Prokofiev's ballet *Cinderella* for two pianos and subsequent recording of the suite with pianist Marta Argerich won a Grammy Award in 2005. Earlier this year, cellist Steven Isserlis gave the première of Pletnev's Cello Sonata. Pletnev made his demanding concert transcription of *The Nutcracker* in 1977, taking four of the numbers from Tchaikovsky's orchestral suite and introducing a further three from the ballet. He was just 20 at the time and his dynamic, inventive score, in the tradition of the great pianist-composers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, has gained many advocates in the subsequent three decades.

MODEST MUSSORGSKY (1839-1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition

As a piece of Russian realism, alive with vivid colors, varied textures, vibrant scenes and telling everyday situations, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* ranks with the best. Its original piano version is craggy and asymmetric and does not fall easily under the fingers. Yet Mussorgsky himself was a fine pianist and knew exactly what he was doing when he wrote the music. *Pictures* lies many steppes away from the bland salon miniatures and flashy showpieces that formed the diet of 19th century Russian pianists. In it, he uses a keen sense of dramatic realism to bring to life ten pictures by his recently deceased friend, the Russian artist and architect Victor Hartmann. A memorial exhibition of 400 of Hartmann's drawings, watercolors and set designs, mounted in Saint Petersburg, gave Mussorgsky an incentive to write his own memorial to a prematurely dead friend who had given him advice about his newly revised opera *Boris Godunov*.

Mussorgsky was just 35 at the time he wrote the piece. He was born to an aristocratic land-owning family, but dispossessed of his wealth in 1861, when the Czar freed the Russian masses from serfdom. Forced to work the tedious nine-to-five shift of a civil servant and possessing an incomplete musical education, Mussorgsky had only his raw talent to fall back on. He wrote this personal tribute to his 39 year-old friend at white heat, in less than three weeks, saying he "could hardly manage to scribble it all down on paper" because the musical ideas were coming so fast. The pictorial strength of Mussorgsky's miniature tone poems far outweighs the provincialism of Hartmann's work. In the opening *Promenade*, the composer portrays himself wandering from picture to picture. As he goes deeper into the memorial exhibition, the *Promenade* melody gradually becomes integrated into the music of the pictures themselves, increasingly coloring the spectator's mood.

Promenade. Mussorgsky portrays himself and his thoughts.

Gnomus depicts a grotesque little gnome, a child's toy and design for a nutcracker, where the nuts are inserted into the shrieking gnome's mouth.

Il vecchio castello. A troubadour performs in front of a mediaeval Italian castle.

Tuileries. Hartman painted this picture after a stay in Paris. Mussorgsky gave it the subtitle *Children Quarrelling at Play*.

Bylde is the Polish word for oxen. Hartman's watercolor shows an old-fashioned wooden cart slowly moving along on its enormous wooden wheels. Mussorgsky's piano original is played *fortissimo* from the first appearance of the cart, whose melody now begins to incorporate that of the *Promenade*. [In his 1922 orchestral transcription, the best known of three dozen or so orchestrations, Maurice Ravel writes for tuba solo, approaching from the distance].

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks. Hartmann's set designs for the Petipa ballet *Trilby* include a scene with children dressed up as canary chicks still in their shells.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle was originally titled *Two Jews, One Rich, the Other Poor* by Mussorgsky, who owned the original pencil drawings.

Limoges - the Market. Hartmann's sketch, made as he stood in the market place, depicts a group of lively, chattering women.

Catacombae (Sepulchrum romanum). Hartmann's watercolor depicts the painter himself and two friends exploring the Roman catacombs in Paris by the light of a single lantern. With no break, Mussorgsky's score leads to *Cum mortuis in lingua mortua*. "It is the place of skulls." Mussorgsky wrote. "The skulls begin to glow faintly from within."

The Hut on Chicken's Legs. Here Mussorgsky took inspiration from Hartmann's intricate design for a giant clock. The hut on stilts is the legendary home of the Russian witch Baba-Yaga, whose ride Mussorgsky gleefully portrays.

The Great Gate at Kiev. Very Russian and very Mussorgsky. This imposing tone poem springs from Hartmann's design for a giant new city gate. Mussorgsky's music transforms the original *Promenade* theme into one of the grandest of climaxes.

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