

Pictures at an Exhibition

Kevin Hamel

About the Unit

The unit provides opportunities for children to learn how

- society, time and place can influence the composition of music
- composers may be inspired by non-musical starting points
- repetition and variation are important elements in structuring music
- arrangers perceive and rework music composed by others

It could provide a useful focus for a visit to an art gallery to be interpreted through music, art and dance .

As well as considering how Mussorgsky interprets Hartmann's original pictures, pupils could create new artworks interpreting Mussorgsky's music. This approach was modelled in 2001 by a group of American artists led by Susan Armington. See elements of their 'virtual exhibition' at <http://pictures.studio409art.com/>

NOTE: This unit of work should be studied in connection with orchestrations of Pictures at an Exhibition by Ravel, Leopold Stokowski and others. These may be found at the Naxos Website. www.naxos.com Extracts from all tracks may be heard on registering, and purchased online. Complete access to full versions of all Naxos recordings is available to schools through subscribing to the Naxos Music Library

Mussorgsky, M.: Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestrations compiled by L. Slatkin) / LISZT, F.: Piano Concerto No. 1 (Peng Peng, L. Slatkin)

http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=8.570716

Mussorgsky, M.: Pictures at an Exhibition / Boris Godunov (Stokowski Transcriptions)

http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=8.557645

Mussorgsky, M.: Pictures at an Exhibition (orch. Ravel) / STRAVINSKY, I.: Firebird Suite (Ormandy) (1953)

http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=9.80344

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Mussorgsky belonged to a family of wealthy Russian landowners. He showed early musical talent, and became an excellent pianist. He joined the Imperial army as an officer in 1856, where he met other talented musicians including Borodin. He resigned his commission in 1858 to concentrate on composing, taking civil service posts to make ends meet.

He belonged to a group of Russian composers that included Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. Influenced by the Russian language, folk music and the music of the Russian Orthodox Church, they wanted to develop a distinctive Russian school of composition. Mussorgsky wrote that his ambition was to capture the spirit and language of the Russian people in his music.

A lot of Mussorgsky's works were never completed. The great Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov edited and arranged a number of works after Mussorgsky's death, including *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Pictures at an Exhibition

Mussorgsky completed *Pictures at an Exhibition* as a suite of pieces for piano in three weeks during 1874. However, the work was not well known until the French impressionist composer, Maurice Ravel, arranged it for orchestra in 1922. Today, orchestral arrangements of *Pictures at an Exhibition* are much more likely to be heard than the original piano work. Although Ravel's orchestration is best known, other interpretations are well worth listening to.

Listening to the original piano versions, and comparing these with orchestrated versions of Ravel, gives a real insight into the art of arranging and adapting music and encourages pupils to listen with attention to detail.

Some musicians think Mussorgsky's piano suite should have been left alone. One critic compared orchestrating it to defacing the black and white sketches by colouring them in. Different arrangers have identified and highlighted different elements. At times, they have altered the original rhythms, tempo and dynamics of the original to create particular effects; on occasions, even rewritten entire sections. This provides really interesting possibilities for musical analysis and discussion.

- Do arrangements add to or detract from Mussorgsky's original piano work?
- How might Mussorgsky have felt? *Delighted? Flattered? Curious? Angry? Horrified?*

Victor Hartmann

Victor Hartmann was a prolific and versatile artist. Although working mainly in watercolour (painting 150 versions of Limoges market alone!) he made architectural drawings, drew designs for a range of household objects and even tried his hand at theatrical and ballet scenery. Hartmann was a great people watcher, his pictures often demonstrating a sense of humour. Unfortunately, some of the original sketches and paintings relating to *Pictures at an Exhibition* have been lost.

Hartmann was only 39 when he died. As he was so popular, a memorial exhibition of over 400 of his watercolours, architectural drawings and drawings took place in February 1874 in St Petersburg.

Pictures at an Exhibition

Pictures at an Exhibition can be thought of as a set of keenly-observed miniatures: a series of pages from a composer's sketch-book. They reflect Hartmann's wry observations of people, to which Mussorgsky has added his own. Each musical episode is short, but carefully balanced and crafted.

In the same way that a number of paintings may be connected to a theme, there are links between Mussorgsky's compositions. The macabre fascinated Mussorgsky, and makes its appearance in Gnomus, The Old Castle, Catacombs and the nightmarish Babar Yaga

Promenades and Processions

Mussorgsky connects his musical 'pictures' with music suggesting visitors walking from picture to picture. This is called the 'Promenade'. The impression of walking is enhanced by the music alternating between five and six beats to the bar.

Pictures begin with music suggesting a grand and formal procession to mark the opening of the exhibition. Important people seem to make their entrances. The Promenade music returns

- a) between Gnomus and The Old Castle
- b) between The Old Castle and The Tuilleries
- c) between Bydlo and the Ballad of the Unhatched chicks.
- d) as the variation 'Cum mortuis in lingua mortua'

- Each time, the mood of the music is different, reflecting how the pictures affect the viewer. Can pupils describe these moods? (*self-assured /nervous and slightly agitated/ quiet and reflective, etc*)
- Listen to the opening promenade in a large space, like the hall. Imagine this is an art gallery, and that pupils are visitors at the opening of a private exhibition. Think about different ways of walking; stopping to view the exhibits; greeting other visitors, etc. Perhaps some visitors could follow a guide (carrying an umbrella)?

Gallery

- Research and select four works of art, varying in mood (disturbing, funny, reflective etc).
- Compose a 'walking' melody which everyone can sing or play
- Discuss how these might affect the viewer, and their changing moods as they move from one picture to another. Vary tempo, instrumentation, dynamics, rhythm, etc.
- Discuss ways in which the melody might be varied to reflect these moods. Work in four groups to compose and perform these

Gnomus

Gnomus was inspired by a sketch by Hartmann for a wooden nutcracker. Character wooden nutcrackers were popular Victorian Christmas novelties (the best known is the soldier of The Nutcracker ballet, based on Hoffman's story, with music by Tchaikovsky).

Mussorgsky's nasty gnome lives in the dense dark forests of traditional fairytales. The melodies suggest a malevolent creature scrabbling through the undergrowth, as gnarled as the ancient tree roots and branches. Ravel added percussion instruments in his orchestration. What effect do children think these have?

- Children may previously have composed melodies moving by leap and step in response to Saint Saens' Kangaroos in his Carnival of the Animals. Here, they might be challenged to compose melodies that twist and turn, start and stop suddenly to suggest the secretive and sinister Gnomus;
- Consider possibilities for exploring animation See Andy Lyon's animation of Gnomus at http://andylyon.com/portfolio_mod/gnomus

Different ways of moving and qualities of movement are expressed throughout Pictures at an Exhibition. In addition to Gnomus, consider:

- a) the promenades (see above)
- b) the comical ballet of the unhatched chicks
- c) Baba Yaga's hut running on chicken legs
- d) the formal procession of The Great Gate of Kiev

The entire suite of pieces offers excellent and varied opportunities for exploration and interpretation through expressive language, movement and dance.

The Old Castle

Hartmann travelled Europe painting watercolours of places, buildings and people. Sometimes he would include imaginary figures to add character and atmosphere. During his travels in Italy, Hartmann painted a castle. He added a medieval minstrel, singing and playing the lute in front of the castle walls.

- Mussorgsky's music is mysterious and rather haunting. Did he see the minstrel as a ghost returning to the castle to serenade a long dead lover with his sad song? Could pupils weave a story around this?

This mysterious quality was picked up and developed by Ravel in his orchestration. Here, bassoons set the scene, and are joined by the haunting melody played on an alto saxophone (other arrangers have played the melody on a solo cor anglais, or muted trumpet)

A single note (G sharp) is held throughout like a drone in medieval music.

- Listen to medieval troubadour and minstrel music. Pupils might explore drones on tuned percussion and compose and perform their own troubadour songs

The music reflects the Gothic novels once popular throughout Europe, including Russia. Described as 'Creepy Castles, Crypts and Cobwebs', these novels often set in ancient monasteries or gloomy castles. One of the best known is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Mussorgsky's *The Old Castle* has been associated in film versions with Igor, the sinister peasant who soothes and controls the monster with music played on a shepherd's pipe.

- Pupils might create a film storyboard along the following lines, adding music.

You are exploring a ruined castle high up in the mountains. As you are scrambling over a low ruined wall, you trip over a loose stone and twist your ankle badly. Your companion goes off to the village to get help, as there is no mobile signal. Unfortunately, the nearest house is a very long way. You fall asleep, and when you wake it is dark. A flickering light appears high up in a ruined window. Someone or something is singing

The Tuilleries

The Tuilleries was once a palace of the French Bourbon King. After the French revolution, the palace was destroyed and the gardens given over to the public. Mussorgsky suggests the singing games of children as they call one to another.

- Pupils might compose their own music for a park on a lazy Sunday afternoon, incorporating a singing game played by children.

Bydlo

The tune is a folk song whistled or sung by the farmer as he drives to market. The piece begins very quietly as the ox-cart approaches from a distance. In Ravel's orchestration, it becomes louder and louder as the cart gets nearer, and is at its loudest as it drives past. The music gets gradually quieter as the cart passes into the distance.

- Bydlo offers an excellent opportunity to introduce or reinforce the following musical terms:

Crescendo: getting gradually louder

Fortissimo: very loud

Diminuendo: getting gradually quieter

- Pupils might compose their own music for the ox-cart as it approaches, passes and disappears again into the distance exploring the use of dynamics. What tune might a British farmer whistle or sing driving to market?

The Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks

This short, comical piece suggests hatching chicks scurrying about trying to throw off their shells.

See Natasha Turovsky's brilliant animation to accompany an orchestral performance at <https://www.pinterest.com/annetjeerdsma/pictures-at-an-exhibition/>

The piece is in ABA form. Children should listen carefully, indicating when they hear

- a) the introduction of the middle section
- b) the return of the opening section
- c) Pupils could choreograph and perform their own dance. What movements might be suggested for the two contrasting sections?

The Catacombs

The painting of two men in top hats (possibly Hartmann himself and another architect) exploring the Catacombs in Paris resembles atmospheric illustrations and descriptions of gas-lit and sinister locations found in Victorian novels and stories (a genre more recently explored by Phillip Pulman).

- Hartmann's picture might inspire creative writing leading to the creation of a Victorian-style melodrama accompanied by Mussorgsky's music
 - In Catacombs, Mussorgsky tries to capture the atmosphere of a journey through the shadows, damp and decay of ancient and confusing passages. Some listeners think this is difficult to do on the piano alone. Listen to arrangements for orchestra, and for brass ensembles. Do children think these are more or less successful in creating the gloomy atmosphere? Can they give their reasons?

The activity suggested in the pupil's pages links to the use of performance poems. The rhythmic chanting of words may suggest echoing passages. Additionally, processing vocal sounds using ICT could add to the atmosphere.

Baba Yaga

Russian composers thought the mythology, superstitions and fairy tales of Russia were important. Rimsky-Korsakov had explored Russian folk tales, and his pupil Stravinsky composed music for The Firebird around another popular fairy story.

Baba Yaga appears in several gruesome Russian fairy tales. , She doesn't fly on a broomstick, but in a pestle (in which she also grinds the bones of her victims!) She lives in a very odd and frightening hut. Surrounded by posts capped with human skulls, the hut sprouts chicken legs in order to chase and catch unfortunate children.

In Mussorgsky's music,

- The hut sprouts legs and begins to move. It gathers momentum, running faster and faster.
- As the hut pursues children, the music suggests the excitement and terror of the chase.
- There is a point in the music which resembles a game of hide and seek, as the magical hut seems to lose track of the children, then rediscovers them. Discuss how the composer suggests this

This could lead to an examination of music and film (eg. chase scenes in silent movies)

Read stories of Baba Yaga at

<http://www.thebells.net/Halloween/BabaYaga/>

Hartmann's design for a clock case in the shape of BabaYaga's hut seems very odd.

- Could children compose music to suggest Baba Yaga's clock?
- The witch might fly out of a window in her pestle like the cuckoo in a cuckoo clock
- What will the chime sound like?
- The clock might sprout chicken legs and move about on the hour.
(n.b. the above might be connected with work in *The Clock of the Long Now*)
- See also Matt Quinn's House of Baba Yaga constructed from found objects at The Pictures at an Exhibition Project

<http://pictures.studio409art.com/pages/quinn.html>

Great Gate of Kiev (Bogatyr Gate: Ukraine)

Victor Hartmann entered a competition to design great stone gates to the city of Kiev to replace the original wooden gates.

His design is a massive structure decorated with coloured brick, topped with the Imperial Russian Eagle. To one side is a three-story belfry with a cupola shaped like a Slavic helmet

The Great Gate of Kiev is the final movement of *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This suggests a solemn procession every bit as grand as Hartmann's design for Kiev's Great Gate. Mussorgsky incorporates the ringing of church bells and the singing of a hymn. Some arrangers have actually incorporated actual voices singing a Russian hymn into their arrangements.

Building the Gate

- Discuss the stages of building the gate
- What trades might be involved? *stonemasons, carpenters, bricklayers, tillers, scaffolders, etc.*

- Imagine Victor Hartmann and Modest Mussorgsky are visiting the site. As they walk, they hear the sounds of the different activities

Vibraphone 

Build a gate to be proud of!

Vib. 

Mix ing sand and wat - er! Build with bricks and mor - tar

Procession

Children could compose music for a formal procession through the Great Gate. The music could be performed as a number of episodes within this, accompanying the mayor and civic dignitaries, the priest and choir, the town militia, etc. Each is celebrated through singing and music as they pass in turn through the massive archway

- Mayor and civic dignitaries
*Here are people to be proud of
Mayor and corporation
Pride of all our nation!*
- Builders
*Build a gate to be proud of
Mixing sand and water
Build with bricks and mortar*
- Bell founders
*Cast great bells to be proud of
Ringing in the tower
Can you feel their power?*
- Militia
*Here are soldiers to be proud of
Listen to their feet
Go marching to the beat*
- Choir
*Hear our choir to be proud of
Every single part
Remembered off by heart*



Instrumental parts may be added to the melody. The lowest accompanying part (drone) is best played on bass metallophone or xylophone, the other accompanying part (ostinato) may be played on alto xylophone, metallophone or chime bars.

Peal of bells may be added played on glockenspiels, chime bars or metallophones, creating interesting harmonic clashes!

- Listen to Douglas Gamley's arrangement of the Bogatyr Gate on the CD Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition NAXOS 8. 571716. Can children create their own chant for the monks?