



Musorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition (1874)
Professor Marina Frolova-Walker

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[Promenade]

1. *Gnomus*
The Gnome
2. *Il vecchio castello*
The Old Castle

[Promenade]

3. *Tuileries (Dispute d'enfants après jeux)*
Tuileries (Children arguing after games)
4. *Bydło*
Cattle

[Promenade]

5. *Балет невылупившихся птенцов*
Ballet of the unhatched chicks
6. *'Samuel' Goldenberg und 'Schmuyle'*
'Samuel' Goldenberg and 'Schmuyle'

[Promenade]

7. *Limoges. Le marché (La grande nouvelle)*
Limoges. The Market (Talk of the town)

Deleted notes, in French:

Talk of the town: Monsieur Pimpant from Panta-Pantaléon has found his cow – the one that ran away. “Yes, Madame, that was yesterday”. – No, Madame, it was the day before yesterday. – Well, Madame, the cow was astray in the neighbourhood. – No, Madame, the cow was not astray at all.

Talk of the town: Monsieur de Puissanceout has found his cow “Runaway”. But the good women of Limoges will have nothing to do with the matter, because Mme de Remboursac has acquired some very fine porcelain dentures, while Mr de Panta-Pantaléon's obtrusive nose obstinately remains as red as a peony.

8. *Catacombae (Sepulcrum romanum)*
The Catacombs (Roman Sepulchre)

[Promenade in the minor] Musorgsky's notes in pencil (in Russian)

NB: Latin text: With the Dead in a Dead Language

It would be good to have this in Latin: the creative spirit of the late Mr Hartmann is leading me towards the skulls; he addresses them, and the skulls slowly begin to glow

9. *Избушка на курьих ножках (Баба-Яга)*
The Hut on Hen's Legs (Baba-Yaga)

10. *Богатырские ворота (в стольном городе во Киеве)*
The Bogatyr Gates (in the great city of Kiev)

Musorgsky, Stasov, Hartmann

This "first and finest of Russian piano works", as Svyatoslav Richter called it, suddenly arose from nowhere. Neither Musorgsky's own preceding piano music, nor the piano music of other Russian composers of the time can prepare us for the ambition, scale and variety of the *Pictures*. Russian piano music was largely salon music for amateurs. There was one major exception, Mily Balakirev's *Islamey* (1869), but this was an intricate and dazzling work utterly at odds with Musorgsky's aesthetic. *Pictures* is a conceptual piece as remote from the virtuoso recital as it is from domestic music-making.

Two others are associated with the piece, both friends of Musorgsky. One is the artist Viktor Hartmann (1834-73), whose work the cycle commemorates, while the other is Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906), the dedicatee. To understand the genesis of *Pictures*, we must consider three of them together. Stasov was an influential scholar and critic, a polymath with particular interests in music and the visual arts and gave his vigorous support to Russian artists whose work stood apart from the European mainstream. His hope was that Russia would emancipate itself culturally, and become an artistic leader, rather than following the West. Both Hartmann and Musorgsky were among his protégés, and it is through him that they first met and discovered their common purpose.

Viktor Hartmann was a year younger than Musorgsky and had already won a name for himself while the composer was still working in relative obscurity. His early death, when he was not yet 40, preventing his unique talent from reaching its fullest potential. The most ambitious of his projects to be realised was the complex of buildings for the All-Russian Manufacture Exhibition of 1870, in a highly fanciful and eclectic style (unfortunately, the buildings have not survived). He is remembered as one of the creators of the so-called "pseudo-Russian" style in architecture and applied arts, which relied to a great extent on folk ornamentation blown up to a grand scale.

"When ordinary things are to be built, Hartmann is no good: he needs fairy-tale buildings and magical castles, he needs palaces and constructions that must be without precedent, and then he creates astonishing things." (Kramskoy)

Hartmann's early death came as a great blow to Musorgsky even though they had not been especially close. On one occasion, he witnessed Hartmann suffer an attack from the illness that eventually killed him, but he had made light of it at the time, and this might well have come back to haunt him. He also most likely saw Hartmann's special gifts reflected in himself and felt the burden of realising his own potential now that he had outlived his colleague. In his correspondence with

Stasov, he frequently discussed Hartmann. In February of the following year (1874), Stasov organised an exhibition in memory of Hartmann, and Musorgsky, of course, attended. He composed *Pictures* over the next few months in a fit of inspiration.

But although we know the source of Musorgsky's inspiration, why did it lead him, in particular, to compose an ambitious cycle for the piano? He had previously shown no interests in this direction. I believe I have the answer to this question, even though it can only be speculative. Just a few days before Hartmann's death, Musorgsky received some very promising news. His boldly innovative song cycle, *The Nursery*, had earned him the admiration of Liszt, and now Liszt was even considering a dedication to Musorgsky, or perhaps even the composition of a fantasy on themes from *The Nursery*. Musorgsky was startled and delighted and wondered what reaction the score of *Boris Godunov* would elicit from Liszt. "Russian music is most fortunate to find such sympathy in such a star as Liszt", he wrote to Stasov. Musorgsky still relied on his day-job as a civil servant at the Forest Ministries, but now he could imagine himself as a famous artist, touring Europe and discussing the future of music with the venerable Liszt. Stasov was in Europe at that moment and offered to finance a trip that would enable Musorgsky to visit Liszt. Musorgsky demurred, claiming that he could not leave his job. Stasov persisted, but Musorgsky ended the exchange with a single-word telegram: "Impossible". As they both must have realised, the problem lay not only in Musorgsky's lack of confidence, but also his pride – he did not want to achieve fame by riding on Liszt's coattails.

Still, even if the meeting with Liszt did not materialise, it lived on in his imagination. "It is as if I can see Liszt, as if I can hear him, as if you and I are in conversation with him", he wrote to Stasov. So we have good grounds for thinking that Musorgsky composed *Pictures* for the same two ideal listeners: Liszt and Stasov. This explains why he suddenly chose to write an ambitious piano piece, and also accounts for the originality and high level of inspiration. Musorgsky was writing at the peak of his abilities.

The Reception of Pictures: A Chronology

- 1874 Musorgsky composes *Pictures*
- 1881 Musorgsky dies (from complications due to his alcoholism)
- 1886 *Pictures* is published in Rimsky-Korsakov's edition
- 1888 Tushmalov, a student of Rimsky-Korsakov's, orchestrates eight of the pieces
- 1891 Rimsky-Korsakov conducts Tushmalov's orchestration in a memorial concert
- 1896 First performance of the piano version** in a series of lectures on Musorgsky organised by Marie Olenina d'Alheim (performed by Charles Foerster)
- 1903 First Russian performance, by Grigory Beklemishev in the Kerzin circle
- 1922 Ravel creates his celebrated orchestration of the Pictures
- 1939 Horowitz creates his own arrangement of the Pictures
- 1956 Richter records the original version (performing it in public more than a hundred times)
- 1971 Emerson, Lake & Palmer create their own version, mixing their rock arrangements of Musorgsky with new material of their own
- 1975 Tomita creates an electronic arrangement

Self-Portrait in a Russian Style

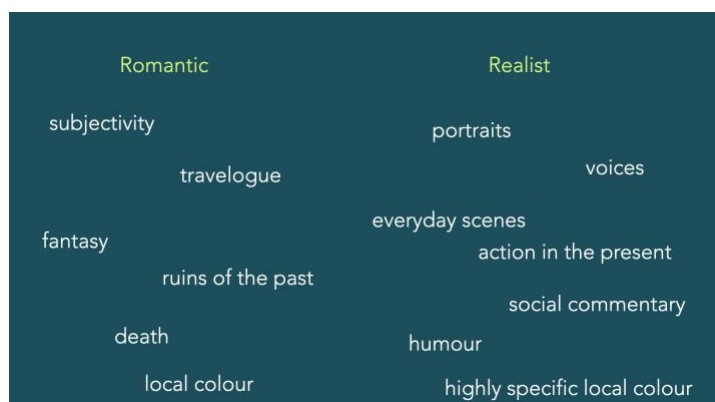
Musorgsky on Hartmann: "I remember (and how could I forget it!) my last conversation with him; he grabbed my attention with a Russian-style project ... a Russian style, which was, as he liked to put it, 'well-mannered'". Musorgsky's own Russian style, however, was never well-mannered: it was

provocative and rough-edged, causing his contemporaries to wonder at times whether his music was truly art or just the product of madness.

Musorgsky's song "Darling Savishna" presents his Russian style in microcosm, and provides a concise illustration of his chief interest: he would choose an unusual character, whom he would endow with distinctive speech patterns, and then cast this in musical terms. The song's protagonist is a mentally impaired villager, who lives as an outcast; some charitably donate food, others give him the occasional beating. This song is his monologue addressed to a beautiful peasant woman, a declaration of love with no hope of reciprocation. It is Musorgsky's challenge to the whole genre of "confession of love" as embodied in a myriad of often complacent salon songs. It is based on a scene Musorgsky himself witnessed and which he chose to set with unflinching realism. The speech of the outcast is represented through a repeated five-beat pattern. Glinka, in the previous generation, established this 5/4 metre as a characteristically Russian feature (more on this in my lecture on Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLKpJ_63dHY, from 18'30"). Musorgsky identified so strongly with the song that he even signed off as "Savishna" in some of his letters to Stasov. The song took the "Russian" 5/4 metre and overlaid it with his own contribution of idiosyncratic speech patterns matched to a striking character.

In the light of *Savishna*, look again at the Promenade that opens the *Pictures*. This is Musorgsky's self-portrait, depicting him strolling through the exhibition of Hartmann's work, and it is also cast in 5/4 (interspersed with some bars of 6/4 to reflect the unpredictability of his gait and his course through the gallery). Lest anyone miss the significance of the metre, the Promenade is marked (in faulty Italian) as "in modo russo" – in the Russian manner. In effect, we not only have an established Russian feature tied up with Musorgsky's most personal song, but also Musorgsky standing out at the exhibition in his peasant shirt. The Promenade returns several times between the pictures, and flags up the cycle as a conscious exercise in Russianness.

There is actually a precedent for a composer inserting himself into his work that Musorgsky knew well, namely Schumann's *Carnaval* piano cycle, which also includes a piece named "Promenade". There, Schumann portrayed two sides of his personality in two contrasting pieces. But while Musorgsky pays homage to Schumann's Romantic device, he gives it a kind of "realist" twist by portraying himself through a kind of Russian-peasant choral song, which in itself is communal and traditional, not an artifact of Romantic individualism. Musorgsky takes the choral-song type, and then endows it with touches of individual psychology as the Promenade reflects his reaction to various pictures. His cycle thereby straddles Romantic and Realist aesthetics, as illustrated schematically in the following slide:



East and West

The cycle is also a kind of travelogue, following Hartmann on his adventures. While the composer never set foot outside of Russia, Hartmann was a much more cosmopolitan figure. He was partly French, with a given name of Victor-Edouard. He lost his parents early in life and by early adulthood, had moved to Poland (which had been absorbed into Russia) and married a Polish woman, and he also acquainted himself with Western Europe. The Hartmann exhibition was organised chronologically, beginning with the early Russian works, then presenting three sections on his travels to Italy, France and Poland, and finally covering the work following his return to Russia. Musorgsky's scheme in *Pictures* approximates the exhibition's layout.

The two French pieces, "Tuileries" and "Limoges", are lively urban scenes, filled with happy chattering voices. In contrast, two pieces depicting Sandomierz, in Poland, are darker, and the music even switches from a high to a low register. The cycle's final triumphant peal of bells is located in Kiev, the ancient capital of Russia, and in Musorgsky's depiction, it is a product of the imagination rather than reality, perhaps a kind of heavenly Russia.

Let us take a closer look at the two dark pieces from Sandomierz, one with a Polish title "Bydło", and the other called "'Samuel' Goldenberg and 'Schmuyle'", because their message is obscure, and may even seem disturbing.

Let us begin with "Bydło". The Polish word means "cattle", but Musorgsky, in a letter to Stasov, adds a Frenchified Russian word "télègue", a horse-drawn cart for carrying hay and other large loads. In a book by Nikolai Danilevsky on Russia and Europe, which Musorgsky was likely to have read, the word bydło is also applied to the Polish lower classes (as opposed to the szlachta – the aristocracy). In today's Russian, it is a term of abuse like "plebs", but there is no evidence that the word was used as an insult in Musorgsky's time. There is also a mysterious, but unmistakably Polish reference to the texture of Chopin's famous funeral march. At the same time, this very low register and claustrophobic low thirds were used in *Boris Godunov* to characterise a very earthy Russian character, the ever-drunken wandering monk Varlaam. So, we can hear the piece as simply the movement of a cart with large wheels on an unforgiving road. Or we can think of the same scene from the perspective of a European crossing into the Russian Empire and experiencing culture shock. Or we could hear a labour song of the oppressed peasantry. Or even a parody of Chopin.

The piece portraying two Jews seems even more problematic. Hartmann had visited Sandomierz, in the south-east of Poland, and portrayed two of the town's Jews, one wealthy, one poor, in pencil drawings that were featured in the exhibition. He made a gift of these two drawings to Musorgsky, but they have not survived (other Hartmann works are often presented in their place, but these are not even copies of the originals given to the composer). Musorgsky placed the two characters into one piece and had them interact. Their different social status was emphasized by their names, the Europeanized and the Yiddish forms of the same name Samuel. Stasov replaced this somewhat cryptic title with one that offered more explanation: Two Jews, one rich, one poor. The name Schmuyle became a slang word for a Jew in Russia, but it may not yet have taken on that meaning in Musorgsky's time (the liberal Rimsky-Korsakov, opposed to antisemitism, had no problem with the original title in an 1888 orchestration of *Pictures* by his student Tushmalov).

My American colleague Richard Taruskin put forward a reading of this piece as an antisemitic caricature, and this reading has become widely known. I will present here a different interpretation that gives Musorgsky the artist the benefit of the doubt (granted, Musorgsky the man made blatant antisemitic remarks in his private correspondence, typical of the time, but this was not part of his public persona).

I propose, rather, that Musorgsky wanted to express the distance in status between the two Jews through two opposing kinds of music: the solemn cantorial chant of the synagogue, and light, wistful

street music played on the “tsimbl”, as it is called in Yiddish – the cimbalom (or dulcimer).¹ Our perspective as interpreters changes when we realise that the highly unusual musical line belonging to the poor Jew does not have to be taken as the portrayal of a trembling, wheedling character, but rather the typical instrumental figurations of a kind of proto-Klezmer music (cimbalom players rapidly repeat long melody notes to sustain them). After presenting his two characters, Musorgsky then offers us the two very different kinds of music in combination. This musical feat was a speciality of the Mighty Handful composers, who took great pride in such unexpected counterpoints.

On many other occasions, Musorgsky’s attempts at the realistic portrayal of various people were so convincing that the first reaction of his friends was laughter. Musorgsky was displeased by this, and his close friend Golenishchev-Kutuzov suggested in particular that they failed to appreciate the seriousness of Musorgsky’s intentions in the *Pictures*. Since *Pictures* was intended as a serious and ambitious cycle intended for Liszt’s eyes, and also served as a memorial for Hartmann, the hypothesis of a scurrilous caricature lacks plausibility, and all the more so if the most “obvious” element of the supposed caricature has a source in Jewish popular music of the time.

The Presence of Hartmann

Besides the Hartmann travelogue, we also have another kind of movement – between this world and the next world. From the chattering gossip at the market in Limoges we descend into the depth of the Paris catacombs. Here we encounter Hartmann himself (or perhaps his spirit) – he was present in the picture and also in Musorgsky’s description: Hartmann leads us to the skulls, whereupon the skulls begin to glow. As Musorgsky follows Hartmann, the Promenade is recast in a minor key, and becomes difficult to recognise, while the uncanny glow is represented by a very lengthy tremolo in the right hand.

Then we have another contrast, a jolt, for the next piece is represents a fearsome witch of Russian fairy tales, who lives in a house supported by hen’s legs. She guards the frontier between the land of the living and land of the dead, but sometimes she helps a heroic warrior to make the journey across. Musorgsky’s piece is not so much about the house, but the flight of Baba Yaga – she rides in a giant mortar, and steers herself through the air with the pestle. It may seem strange to situate this mythical world just after the private scene of Hartmann’s visit to the catacombs and before the bells of the finale. But there appears to be a convincing explanation. In Stasov’s memoirs, we find a description of Hartmann at a costumed ball, dressed as Baba Yaga:

“There, among the rows of plaster-of-paris Greek gods and goddesses, a witch was to be seen. This was Baba Yaga, running along, with red braids streaming behind her. A big floppy hat was pulled down over her eyes, her bony arms protruded from her sleeves. Her face was painted, with a sparse beard on her chin, her ghastly eyes glinted maliciously, and tusks jutted out from her gaping mouth.”

Musorgsky used the fancy-dress story to make Hartmann one of the heroes who would be eligible for help from Baba Yaga, who then helps him rise from the depths of the catacombs and cross, not into a shadowy Hades, but into a bright heavenly realm resounding with church bells.

We have an almost cinematic change of scene when the final virtuosic passage of Baba Yaga takes us heavenwards. While Limoges and Paris were presented as real places, Musorgsky’s Kiev is otherworldly, the source of Hartmann’s fantasy Russian style. Additionally, Hartmann did not survive to see through to reality his design for the Bogatyr Gate in Kiev, and so in *Pictures*, it also symbolises

¹ I owe this insight to Jonathan Walker, who identified the rapid repeated-note cimbalom idiom in Musorgsky and showed that the instrument was used in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

his truncated artistic life. We can hear fragments of a funeral service in the piece, but the bells are clanging in celebration, not tolling for the dead. The representation of bells was another of Musorgsky's great contributions to the Russian style, and many other Russian composers adopted the idea and tried to give it their own colouring (more on this in my lecture on *Boris Godunov* – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ongYglsetk>, from 40'30"). Amongst the bells, we hear the Promenade one last time, now elevated to a grand, rousing hymn.

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Sources and further reading:

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