

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
September 23, 2017
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This season opens with the quick, delightfully snarky overture to Bernstein's *Candide*. Pianist Jorge Federico Osorio returns to Peoria to perform Brahms's passionate first piano concerto. After intermission we turn to Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, evocative works inspired by the drawings of one of the composer's friends—heard here in Ravel's brilliant orchestration.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1991)
Overture to *Candide*

Bernstein's operetta Candide was completed in 1956, and it premiered on Broadway on December 1 of that year.

In 1759, the French playwright and satirist Voltaire published his *Candide*, a stinging indictment of the then-fashionable “philosophical optimism” of Leibnitz. Inspired in part by a horrible earthquake that had destroyed much of the Portuguese city of Lisbon in 1755, the play describes the philosophical awakening of Candide, a young student of the savant Dr. Pangloss. After interminable (and hilarious) tribulations, Candide sheds his optimism and concludes that “to grow one’s own garden” should be the primary aim of life. *Candide*’s satirical rejection of boundless optimism and philosophical approaches to world problems—beloved ideals of the Age of Enlightenment—caused an understandable stir at the French court and elsewhere in Europe, and it was promptly placed in the Vatican Index of banned books. (Despite this prohibition, *Candide* was popular enough to warrant at least thirteen editions prior to Voltaire's death in 1778!)

The early history of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* dates from 1950, when playwright Lillian Hellman suggested the Voltaire play as a possible subject for collaboration. Bernstein's setting of Hellman's libretto, completed six years later, had a double purpose. The broad parody of the quartet finale to Act I, and arias such as “Oh Happy We” mocks the conventions of opera and operetta. In a broader sense, however, *Candide* was a satire of the parochialism of America in the 1950s—more specifically the political paranoia that had threatened Hellman and many of Bernstein's acquaintances with blacklisting and worse. *Candide* was not completed until 1956, four years after Hellman had been called to testify at the McCarthy hearings, and two years after the humiliation of Senator McCarthy himself. Shortly after its premiere Bernstein described *Candide* as a “...political comment in the aftermath of Joe McCarthy,” and political figures are indeed the most bitterly lampooned characters in the operetta.

The overture to *Candide* is a brilliant and showy piece that sets up the sarcastic tone of the drama. It sets several musical themes and motives from the operetta, including music from the battle scene and from the arias “Oh Happy We” and “Glitter and be Gay.” The operetta *Candide* is rarely performed today, but its overture is one of Bernstein's most popular pieces of concert music.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Concerto No.1 in D minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op.15

Brahms's first piano concerto was composed between 1854 and 1859. He was the soloist in the first performance in Hanover, on January 22, 1859. Duration 45:00.

In a letter written just after his second performance of his first piano concerto, Brahms wrote to his friend Joseph Joachim: "My concerto has been a brilliant and decisive...failure." Joachim had conducted the premiere in Hanover, where it met with a polite but indifferent reaction from the audience. Five days later, Brahms played the concerto again in Leipzig, and heard a "perfectly distinct hissing from all sides" at the conclusion of the third movement. Why was this brilliant work such a flop? At least part of the reason seems to be Brahms's place in musical politics of the day. Just a few years earlier, in an editorial in his musical journal, Robert Schumann had hailed young Brahms as a new standard bearer for the more conservative party of Romantic musicians—as an antidote to the music of radicals like Franz Liszt. This work, Brahms's first large orchestral piece, did not match the expectations of either clique. The concerto lacked the showy "thrills and chills" heard in the works of Liszt, and demanded by most audiences, but its passionate nature seems to have been a bit too much for the conservatives.

This virtuosic and fiery piece is a complete contrast to the more intellectual and symphonic second concerto he wrote twenty years later, but both works now are part of the standard repertoire. A young Brahms was clearly wearing his heart on his sleeve in *Concerto No. 1*. In the aftermath of Schumann's article, he felt pressure to compose a large, symphonic work, and almost immediately began work on a symphony in D minor. The opening three movements were finished by 1854, but Brahms was dissatisfied with the orchestration, and transformed the movements into a large-scale sonata for two pianos, which he performed at private gathering with Clara Schumann. Still unsatisfied, he took the advice of his friend Julius Grimm, and combined the two conceptions of the work to create a piano concerto. (The original second movement was abandoned in favor of the present *Adagio*, but this music would resurface years later as part of his *German Requiem*.)

He was still tinkering with the concerto late in 1858, just prior to its embarrassing early performances, and made several more changes prior to its publication. Just as this trying process of composition and revision was playing itself, Brahms was struck with an enormous emotional blow. His teacher and mentor Schumann threw himself into the Rhine in 1854, in an attempted suicide. Schumann survived, but spent the rest of his life in an insane asylum. Brahms's relationship with Robert's wife Clara had always been a close and affectionate one, but with Schumann's insanity and death in 1856, it became a complicated affair, tinged with some guilt on both sides. Some writers have even traced the great emotional outcry at the beginning of the concerto to Brahms's anguish over Robert's death and his guilty love for Clara.

The opening movement (*Maestoso*) is a large-scale sonata form, and makes the most of Brahms's emotive and thoroughly Romantic themes. In the orchestral introduction, there are two contrasting ideas—one vehement and the other much more calm. The piano enters with a placid melody and the music gradually intensifies, eventually returning to the passionate mood of the opening. A horn call motive introduces a long and stormy development section, and this horn call will pervade much of the rest of the movement.

In a letter to Clara Schumann, Brahms referred to the *Adagio* as "...a lovely portrait of you." This movement opens with a flowing melody in the bassoons, setting a quiet mood that is maintained throughout the movement. The piano answers this melody, and the rest of the movement continues a gentle dialogue between soloist and orchestra. The contrasting middle section is announced by the clarinet, and after an almost meditative cadenza, there is a return of the opening idea.

The last movement (*Allegro non troppo*) is a rondo, meaning that a single theme returns throughout, in alternation with contrasting music. In this case, the main idea is a syncopated opening theme that was clearly inspired by Gypsy music. This theme serves as a counterweight to several secondary melodies, two cadenzas, and a large central fugue that develops the main theme.

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881) **Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)**

Mussorgsky's piano suite Pictures at an Exhibition was completed in June of 1874, and was published posthumously in 1886 with a dedication to Vladimir Stassov. The orchestration by Ravel dates from early 1923; it was commissioned by Serge Koussevitsky, who conducted the premiere in Paris in May of that year. Duration 33:00.

When the Russian architect Victor Hartmann died at age 39 in 1873, the writer Vladimir Stassov and several other of Hartmann's friends and associates arranged a memorial exhibition of some 400 drawings and paintings by the architect. One of the visitors to the gallery was Mussorgsky, a good friend of Stassov, who had long admired Hartmann's work. Within a few months of the exhibition, Mussorgsky had composed a suite of piano pieces based upon some of his favorites among Hartmann's drawings. The form of this programmatic suite was unusual: it portrays the composer himself walking through the gallery, standing before several pictures and forming his own musical impressions of each one.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* remained relatively obscure until 1923, when Ravel completed an orchestration of the suite for Serge Koussevitsky. Ravel's scoring was not the first attempt to transform *Pictures* into an orchestral piece, nor was it the last—there have been at least a dozen arrangements of *Pictures*, beginning with an orchestration by Mikhail Tushmalov in 1891, and orchestral versions by Sir Henry Wood, Ravel, Leonidas Leonardi, Leopold Stokowski, Lucien Caillet, Walter Goehr, and

Sergei Gorchakov. There have also been scorings for other groupings of instruments, including Elgar Howarth's brass ensemble version, a guitar version by Yamashita, Tomita's electronic scoring, and even a fancifully-staged version by the rock band Emerson, Lake, and Palmer back in the 1970s. Ravel's masterful orchestration is better known than any other, including Mussorgsky's own piano suite!

Here is a movement-by-movement "walking tour" of *Pictures*:

Promenade - This most familiar of Mussorgsky melodies, appearing between several of the movements, is used to bind the work together. In Stasov's descriptive notes for the first published edition of *Pictures*, he writes: "Mussorgsky has represented himself roving right and left, sometimes hesitantly and sometimes briskly, in order to get close to pictures that have caught his attention." The uneven 5/4 - 6/4 meter gives a characteristically Russian feel to this passage.

Gnomus - The first of Hartmann's drawings to be interpreted by Mussorgsky is of a nutcracker carved in the shape of an ugly, grinning gnome. Stasov's notes suggest that this contorted figure "...accompanies his droll movements with savage shrieks." Mussorgsky's music is suitably gruesome, with awkward, limping lines.

Promenade

Il vecchio castello (The Old Castle) - This was Hartmann's watercolor study of a medieval castle, painted when he was a student in Italy. A troubadour standing by the gate gives a sense of the castle's size. This movement gives the impression of the troubadour's lute quietly strumming in support of a melancholy melody played by the alto saxophone.

Promenade

Tuileries - This sketch shows children playing in the famous public gardens of the Tuileries in Paris. There is an argument and a chase after some high-spirited play, all portrayed in Mussorgsky's light-footed music and Ravel's transparent orchestration.

Bydlo - A sketch made by Hartmann in the Polish town of Sandomierz shows a wagon with enormous wheels being pulled by oxen (*Bydlo* is a Polish word for "cattle."). In Ravel's orchestration, this evocative melody has been given to the tuba.

Promenade

Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells - This was Hartmann's costume design for one of the scenes in *Trilbi*, a ballet presented in St. Petersburg in 1871. In this scene, children dance as baby canaries trying to break out of their shells.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle - This movement is based upon two of Hartmann's drawings of the Jews of Sandomierz: one showing a rich and well-dressed man wearing

a fur hat, and the other showing an poor man in threadbare clothes. In Mussorgsky's inventive setting, the two characters have been joined in a conversation. Ravel scored the pompous tones of Goldenberg for unison strings and winds, while the whining Schmuyle is portrayed by muted trumpet. At the end, Goldenberg's music becomes even more imperious, ending with an abrupt dismissal.

The Market-Place at Limoges - There are several surviving Hartmann drawings made during a visit to the French town of Limoges, but the specific picture that inspired this movement has apparently been lost. According to a marginal note in Mussorgsky's manuscript, this movement shows the "good gossips of Limoges" exchanging the most important news of the day: "Monsieur de Puissangeout's lost cow, Mme. de Remboursac's new false teeth, and Monsieur Panta-Pantaleon's excessively large nose."

Catacombs - This sketch shows the artist peering into the catacombs of Paris by the light of a lantern, which reveals several skulls. Ravel's orchestration brings out dark sonorities from the brasses and woodwinds.

Cum mortuis in lingua mortua (With the Dead, in the Language of the Dead) - This rather spooky version of the *Promenade* theme is based not upon a Hartmann picture, but rather on Mussorgsky's reaction to *Catacombs*. In the margin of his manuscript, the composer wrote: "The creative spirit of the dead Hartmann leads me to the skulls and calls to them; they begin to glow with a soft light."

The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga) - Baba Yaga was a fictional witch who terrified generations of Russian children at bedtime. Her hut, hidden deep in the forest, was perched on chicken legs so that it could turn to face anyone who chanced to find it. No broomstick for this lady: she rode cackling through the woods in a huge wooden mortar propelled by an equally formidable pestle (no doubt in search of naughty children to eat). Ravel's orchestration is at its most colorful in this section. This movement leads directly into the finale.

The Great Gate of Kiev - After Czar Alexander II narrowly escaped assassination in Kiev in 1866, the city council of Kiev asked Hartmann to produce a design for a monument to commemorate God's intervention on behalf of the Czar. Hartmann's design (which was never built) was a fanciful and immense arch surmounted by the Russian imperial eagle, and other symbols of the Czar's authority. This picture was a great favorite of Mussorgsky's, and he commented on it with a massive and powerful hymn of thanksgiving.

for program page

Not sure of the exact format of your program page, but here are the composer names, titles, and movements as I use them in the notes.

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Maestoso

Adagio

Allegro non troppo

Jorge Federico Osorio, piano

INTERMISSION [please confirm]

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