

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2014-2015

January 30, 31 and February 1, 2015

KRZYSZTOF URBANSKI, Conductor
NOAH BENDIX-BALGLEY, Violin

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Russian Overture, Opus 72

ARAM KHACHATURIAN

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra

- I. Allegro con fermezza
- II. Andante sostenuto
- III. Allegro vivace

Mr. Bendix-Balgley

Intermission

MODEST MUSSORGSKY
orch. MAURICE RAVEL

Pictures at an Exhibition

- Introduction: Promenade
- I. The Gnome
- II. Promenade — The Old Castle
- III. Promenade — Tuileries
- IV. Bydlo
- V. Promenade — Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells
- VI. Two Polish Jews (Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle)
- VII. The Marketplace at Limoges —
- VIII. Catacombs, Roman Tombs — Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua
- IX. The Hut on Fowl's Legs —
- X. The Great Gate of Kiev

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born 23 April 1891 in Sontzovka, Russia; died 5 March 1953 in Moscow

Russian Overture, Opus 72 (1936)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, 29 October 1936; Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory; Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra; Eugene Szenkar, conductor

THESE PERFORMANCES MARK THE PSO PREMIERE

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 14 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, piano and strings

The 27-year-old Prokofiev had established himself as the *enfant terrible* of Russian music by the time he left his homeland in 1918, in the wake of the October Revolution, to spread his reputation as a pianist and *avant-garde* composer around the world. He traveled overland to Vladivostok, stopped for recitals in Japan, and then spent the next four years shuttling between the United States and Europe to perform and fulfill commissions (including an important one in 1919 from the Chicago Opera for *The Love for Three Oranges*), before deciding to settle in Germany in 1922. The following year he moved to Paris, where he imbibed the bracing modernities of Stravinsky, Honegger, Poulenc and Milhaud, and solidified his reputation as one of the day's most fearlessly progressive composers. (He bragged that his Symphony No. 2, commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky in 1924, was "made of iron and steel.")

By the late 1920s, however, after a decade abroad, Prokofiev began to think of going home. He toured the Soviet Union for two months in 1927, returned for more concerts there two years later, and in 1932 rented an apartment in Moscow. Over the next four years, he carefully assessed how the country's new political climate would affect his career, and he came to realize that his artistic evolution from his earlier thorny idiom toward a simpler, more lyrical style would suit both his own creative needs and the requirements of the Communist regime for art that was easily accessible to the widest audiences. The Leningrad Kirov's 1934 commission for a full-length, three-act ballet based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* convinced him that his views were reciprocated by the authorities, and he returned permanently to Moscow two years later, determined to hide his *avant-garde* candle under a very tightly controlled "music for the masses" bushel. "It is the duty of the composer," he explained, "to serve his fellow men, to beautify human life, and to point the way to a radiant future."

Among the first works that confirmed Prokofiev's homecoming, both stylistically and philosophically, was the rousing *Russian Overture*, which he completed in September 1936, four months after settling in Moscow. In addition to its patriotic implications, the title also indicates the work's use of themes in indigenous Russian styles, two of which Israel Nestyev said in his biography of the composer were "direct quotations of folk music" but did not identify. The immediate inspiration for the *Russian Overture* was a request for a new work from the Budapest-born conductor Eugene Szenkar, who directed the Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra from 1934 to 1936 after being forced to abandon a significant career in Germany because of his Jewish patrimony when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Szenkar, who had conducted Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges* at the Cologne Opera in 1925, led the premiere of the *Russian Overture* in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory on October 29, 1936 with enough success to prompt its performance in London, Paris, Boston and even Palestine during the following months.

The *Russian Overture* is in three large formal chapters, each subdivided. The opening section begins with two themes in the style of folk dances given in alternation, the first exuberant and leaping, the second stomping and repetitive. A broad, arching melody provides contrast before the leaping theme in developed form returns to close the first section. The central episode comprises a solemn, hymnal strain introduced by the strings and a long passage in steady, treading rhythms whose slowly accumulating intensity is capped by a reprise of the hymn tune. A transition based on the leaping theme leads to the return of the broad, arching melody to begin the final section. The trumpet recalls the leaping motive as

the generating idea for the long coda, which grows into what Nestyev called “a violent vortex” with the final triumphant iteration of the hymn tune by the brass.

ARAM KHACHATURIAN

Born 6 June 1903 in Tiflis, Armenia; died 1 May 1978 in Moscow

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (1940)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, 16 November 1940; Festival of Soviet Music; USSR State Symphony; Aleksandr Gauk, conductor; David Oistrakh, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 26 January 1962; Syria Mosque; Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, conductor; Samuel Thaviu, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 37 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

Aram Khachaturian was one of the leading composers of the Soviet Union and the most celebrated musician of his native state of Armenia. When he arrived in Moscow in 1921 from his hometown of Tbilisi, he had had virtually no formal training in music, but his talent was soon recognized, and he was admitted to the academy of Mikhail Gnessin, a student of Rimsky-Korsakov. Khachaturian's first published works date from 1926; three years later he entered the Moscow Conservatory. His international reputation was established with the success of the Piano Concerto in 1936, composed at the same time that he became active in the newly founded Union of Soviet Composers, of which he was elected Deputy Chairman of the Moscow branch in 1937 and Deputy President of the National Organizing Committee two years later. In 1939, he returned to live for six months in Armenia, where he immersed himself in the folk music of his boyhood home in preparation for composing the ballet *Happiness*. Boris Schwarz noted that the composer's synthesis of vernacular and cultivated musical styles in that work “represents the fulfillment of a basic Soviet arts policy: the interpenetration of regional folklorism and the great Russian tradition.” Khachaturian's compositional colleague Dmitri Kabalevsky wrote, “The especially attractive features of Khachaturian's music are in its roots in national folk fountainheads. The captivating rhythmic diversity of dances of the peoples of Transcaucasia and the inspired improvisations of the *ashugs* [Armenia's native bards] — such are the sources from which have sprung the composer's creative endeavors. From the interlocking of these two principles there grew Khachaturian's symphonism — vivid and dynamic, with keen contrasts, now enchanting in their mellow lyricism, now stirring in their tension and drama.” Khachaturian remained a proud and supportive Armenian throughout his life, serving in 1958 as the state's delegate to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. “My whole life, everything that I have created, belongs to the Armenian people,” he once said. The Violin Concerto of 1940 is imbued with the music of Khachaturian's Armenian homeland.

One of the achievements of the Union of Soviet Composers was the founding in 1939 of an enclave on the Moscow River near the town of Staraya Ruza set aside for creative work and rest. Khachaturian spent the summer of 1940 there, in one of the cottages in the dense pine forest, composing a violin concerto for David Oistrakh. Khachaturian had largely prepared the formal plan for the piece in his head in advance, and recalled, “I worked without effort. Sometimes my thoughts and imagination outraced the hand that was covering the staff with notes. The themes came to me in such abundance that I had a hard time putting them in some order.... While composing the Concerto I had for my models such masterpieces as the concertos by Mendelssohn, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Glazunov. I wanted to create a virtuoso piece employing the symphonic principle of development and yet understandable to the general public.” He succeeded, and the Concerto was a great success when it was premiered on November 16, 1940 in Moscow by Oistrakh. The new Concerto solidified Khachaturian's popularity at home and abroad; he was awarded the Stalin Prize for it in 1941.

The Concerto's opening movement is disposed in the traditional sonata form, with two contrasting themes and a full development section. After a brief introductory outburst by the orchestra, the soloist presents an animated motif that soon evolves into a bounding, close-interval folk dance. This theme, punctuated once by the strong orchestral chords from the introduction, continues for some time before it gives way to a lyrical complementary strain of nostalgic emotional character. As the movement unfolds,

the soloist is required to display one dazzling technical feat after another, culminating in a huge cadenza that serves as the bridge to the recapitulation. Both of the earlier themes are returned in elaborated settings to round out the movement.

The second movement is in a broad three-part design prefaced by a bassoon solo that Grigory Shneerson, in his study of Khachaturian, said imitated the improvisations of the Armenian *ashugs*, or bards. A melancholy tune occupies the movement's outer sections while the central portion is more animated and rhapsodic in nature. The finale is an irresistible rondo, filled with festive brilliance, blazing orchestral color and sparkling virtuosity.

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Born 21 March 1839 in Karevo, Pskov District; died 28 March 1881 in St. Petersburg

Pictures at an Exhibition (1874)

Transcribed for Orchestra (1923) by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

PREMIERE OF ORCHESTRAL VERSION: Paris, 3 May 1923; Paris Opéra; Sergei Koussevitzky, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 8 December 1939; Syria Mosque; Fritz Reiner, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 34 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, E-flat alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, gong, two harps, piano and strings

In the years around 1850, with the spirit of nationalism sweeping through Europe, several young Russian artists banded together to rid their native art of foreign influences in order to establish a distinctive character for their works. At the front of this movement was a group of composers known as "The Five," whose members included Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, César Cui and Mily Balakirev. Among the allies that The Five found in other fields was the artist and architect Victor Hartmann, with whom Mussorgsky became close personal friends. Hartmann's premature death at 39 stunned the composer and the entire Russian artistic community. The noted critic Vladimir Stassov organized a memorial exhibit of Hartmann's work in February 1874, and it was under the inspiration of that showing of his late friend's works that Mussorgsky conceived his *Pictures at an Exhibition* for piano. Maurice Ravel made his masterful orchestration of the score for Sergei Koussevitzky's Paris concerts in 1923.

Promenade. According to Stassov, this recurring section depicts Mussorgsky "roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly, and, at times sadly, thinking of his friend." *The Gnome*. Hartmann's drawing is for a fantastic wooden nutcracker representing a gnome who gives off savage shrieks while he waddles about. *Promenade — The Old Castle*. A troubadour sings a doleful lament before a foreboding, ruined ancient fortress. *Promenade — Tuileries*. Hartmann's picture shows a corner of the famous Parisian garden filled with nursemaids and their youthful charges. *Bydlo*. Hartmann's painting depicts a rugged wagon drawn by oxen. The peasant driver sings a plaintive melody (solo tuba) heard first from afar, then close-by, before the cart passes away into the distance. *Promenade — Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells*. Hartmann's costume design for the 1871 fantasy ballet *Trilby* shows dancers enclosed in enormous egg shells. *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle* was inspired by a pair of pictures depicting two residents of the Warsaw ghetto, one rich and pompous (a weighty unison for strings and winds), the other poor and complaining (muted trumpet). Mussorgsky based both themes on incantations he had heard on visits to Jewish synagogues. *The Marketplace at Limoges*. A lively sketch of a bustling market. *Catacombs, Roman Tombs. Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua*. Hartmann's drawing shows him being led by a guide with a lantern through cavernous underground tombs. The movement's second section, titled "With the Dead in a Dead Language," is a mysterious transformation of the *Promenade* theme. *The Hut on Fowl's Legs*. Hartmann's sketch is a design for an elaborate clock suggested by Baba Yaga, a fearsome witch of Russian folklore who flies through the air. Mussorgsky's music suggests a wild, midnight ride. *The Great Gate of Kiev* was inspired by Hartmann's plan for a gateway for the city of Kiev in the massive old Russian style crowned with a cupola in the shape of a Slavic warrior's helmet. The

majestic music suggests both the imposing bulk of the edifice (never built, incidentally) and a brilliant procession passing through its arches.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda