

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

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

A Night on Bald Mountain (1867; arranged in 1886)

Arranged by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

PREMIERE OF WORK: St. Petersburg, October 15, 1886

Russian Symphony Orchestra

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 12 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

In the 1860s, Russian music was just beginning to find its distinctive voice. A number of composers — Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky — explored native musical and folkloric sources as the basis of a national art, and became loosely confederated into a group known as “The Mighty Handful” in Russia and “The Five” in the West. Since their works took their inspiration largely from indigenous legends and folk music, Mussorgsky considered himself lucky to receive a commission in 1861 (when he was just 21) for a dramatic musical composition based on a specifically Russian subject. On January 7th, he wrote to his mentor, Balakirev, “I have received an extremely interesting commission [for music for a drama titled *The Witch* by his friend Baron Georgy Fyodorovitch Mengden], which I must prepare for next summer. It is this: a whole act to take place on Bald Mountain ... a Witches’ Sabbath, separate episodes of sorcerers, a solemn march for all this nastiness, a finale — the glorification of the Sabbath into which is introduced the commander of the whole festival on the Bald Mountain. The libretto is very good. I already have some material for it; it may turn out to be a very good thing.”

The mountain to which Mussorgsky referred, well known in Russian legend, is Mount Triglav, near Kiev, reputed to be the site of the annual witches’ sabbath that occurs on St. John’s Night, June 23-24, the eve of the feast of St. John the Baptist. The sinister god Chernobog, the devil himself in disguise, presides over the demonic revelries. The dramatic version of the music came to nothing, but Mussorgsky did complete a symphonic piece titled *St. John’s Night on Bald Mountain* in a creative frenzy in 1867. He tinkered with the music for a while and even mined some of its themes for inclusion in two later works: as a chorus for an aborted operatic project titled *Mlada*, a composite work to which Cui, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov also contributed some material; and as a choral introduction to the opera *The Fair at Sorochinsk*. However, *A Night on Bald Mountain*, Mussorgsky’s only extended orchestral work, never came to performance during his lifetime — the original orchestral version of 1867 was not published until 1968, and first recorded only in 1981.

What is now commonly known as *A Night on Bald Mountain* is as much the work of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov as of Mussorgsky. Rimsky was a self-appointed editor for many compositions by his Russian compatriots that he felt could use some polishing before being launched into the world. He thoroughly revised works by Borodin and Dargomyzsky, and prepared almost all of Mussorgsky’s compositions for publication and performance. In the case of *A Night on Bald Mountain*, he not only smoothed out the harmonies and augmented the orchestration, but also strengthened the work’s formal structure.

Rimsky prefaced his score with the following synopsis of the action portrayed by the music: “Subterranean sounds of supernatural voices ... Appearance of the spirits of darkness, followed by that of Satan himself ... Glorification of Satan and celebration of the Black Mass ... The Sabbath Revels ... At the height of the orgies the bell of the village church, sounding in the distance, disperses the spirits of darkness ... Daybreak.” The mood of the music is dark, unearthly and more than a little weird. At the beginning, swirling strings and shrieks from the woodwinds, like great gusts of wind, seem to rise out of the ground itself. The trombones blare forth a savage summons for the demons to assemble; their arrival is portrayed by the clucking and chattering of the woodwinds. A loud brass fanfare marks the appearance of Satan, and the witches join old Beelzebub in a wild and ghoulish dance. The revels go on all night, and only when dawn breaks do the unearthly participants depart and the music return to the plodding world of mere mortals. A distant church bell sounds, and the bizarre ceremony is over. All of this demonic revelry, incidentally, was cast by Rimsky-Korsakov into sober old sonata form — the exposition and recapitulation begin with the whirling string figures and the shrieks from the woodwinds.