

Pictures at an Exhibition 2018

Concierto de Aranjuez for Guitar and Orchestra (1939)

JOAQUÍN RODRIGO ■ 1901-1999

Though Joaquín Rodrigo, born on November 22, 1901 at Sagunto, Valencia, on Spain's eastern coast, lost his sight when he was three from diphtheria, he early showed a pronounced aptitude for music. His parents enrolled him in a school for blind children in the nearby city of Valencia, and at age eight, he began formal lessons in harmony, piano and violin; his teachers in composition included Francisco Antich, Enrique Gomá and Eduardo López Chavarri. During the 1920s, Rodrigo established himself as a pianist with performances of challenging recent works by Ravel, Stravinsky and other contemporary composers, and he began composing seriously in 1923 with the *Suite para Piano* and the *Dos Esbozos* ("Two Sketches") for Violin and Piano. His first work for orchestra, *Juglares* (written, like all of his scores, on a Braille music typewriter and then dictated to a copyist), was played in both Valencia and Madrid in 1924; his *Cinco Piezas Infantiles*, also for orchestra, won a National Prize the following year. In 1927, he followed the path of his compatriots Albéniz, Granados, Falla and Turina, and moved to Paris, where he enrolled at the Schola Cantorum as a pupil of Paul Dukas. Rodrigo immersed himself in the musical life of the city, befriending Honegger, Milhaud, Ravel and other Parisian luminaries, receiving encouragement from Falla, and enjoying success with a performance of his orchestral *Prelude for a Poem to the Alhambra*, whose subject matter and distinctly Spanish idiom established the style that consistently characterized his creations. In 1933, he married the Turkish pianist Victoria Kamhi. A Conde de Cartagena Grant the following year enabled him to remain in Paris to continue his studies at the Conservatoire and the Sorbonne. The outbreak of civil war in Spain in 1936 prevented Rodrigo from returning home, and he spent the next three years traveling in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and living in the French capital. He returned to Madrid after the Spanish Civil War ended in 1939, and established his position among the country's leading musicians with the premiere of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* for Guitar and Orchestra the following year. His prominence in Spanish musical life was recognized with many awards, honorary degrees and memberships, and, in 1947, the creation for him of the Manuel de Falla Chair at the University of Madrid. In addition to teaching at the University, Rodrigo also served as Head of Music Broadcasts for Spanish Radio, music critic for several newspapers, and Director of the Artistic Section of the Spanish National Organization for the Blind. Though best known for his series of concertos for one, two and four guitars (*Concierto de Aranjuez*, *Fantasia para un Gentilhombre*, *Concierto para una Fiesta*, *Concierto Madrigal*, *Concierto Andaluz*), flute (*Concierto Pastoral*), cello (*Concierto como un Divertimento*) and harp (*Concierto Serenata*), Rodrigo also composed a ballet, a zarzuela, an opera, numerous orchestral works, music for the cinema, many songs, and solo numbers for piano and guitar. He died in Madrid on July 6, 1999.

The small town of Aranjuez, thirty miles south of Madrid on the River Tagus, is a green oasis in the barren plateau of central Spain. In the mid-18th century, a palace, set amid verdant forests and parks, was built at Aranjuez as a summer retreat for the Spanish court. Generations of Spanish kings thereafter settled into Aranjuez every spring, when the countless nightingales would serenade them from the cedars and laurels, the court ladies would promenade in the cooling shade, and the men would hone their equestrian skills with the famous cream-colored Andalusian horses bred nearby. When Rodrigo sought inspiration for a new concerto in the difficult, war-torn year of 1939, it was to the elegant symbol of by-gone Spain represented by Aranjuez that he turned. "Having conceived the idea of a guitar concerto," he recalled, "it was necessary for me to place it in a certain epoch and, still more, in a definite location — an epoch at the end of which *fandangos* transform themselves into *fandanguillos*, and when the *cante* and the *bulerias* vibrate in the Spanish air." He further stated that he had in mind the early decades of the 19th century when composing this *Concierto de Aranjuez*. Of the work's mood and the character of its solo instrument, the composer wrote, "Throughout the veins of Spanish music, a profound rhythmic beat seems to be diffused by a strange phantasmagoric, colossal and multiform instrument — an instrument idealized in the fiery imagination of Albéniz, Granados, Falla and Turina. It is an imaginary instrument that might be said to possess the wings of the harp, the heart of the grand piano and the soul of the guitar.... It would be unjust to expect strong sonorities from this *Concierto*; they would falsify its essence and distort an instrument made for subtle ambiguities. Its strength is to be found in its very lightness and in the intensity of its contrasts. The *Aranjuez Concierto* is meant to sound like the hidden breeze that stirs the tree tops in the parks, and it should be only as strong as a butterfly, and as dainty as a veronica."

The *Concierto de Aranjuez* has enjoyed a great popularity since it was introduced in 1940, having been recorded many times, made into a ballet, and set in an array of popular, jazz and even commercial arrangements. With few precedents to guide him, Rodrigo created a work that not only embodies the essential qualities of his musical style and the spiritual ethos of Spain, but also solves the difficult technical problems inherent in combining an unamplified solo guitar with a full orchestra. Rodrigo adapted the three traditional movements of the concerto form to reflect different aspects of the soul of Spanish music — the outer movements are fast in tempo and dance-like, while the middle one is imbued with the bittersweet intensity of classic flamenco *cante hondo* ("deep song"). The soloist opens the *Concierto* with an evocative, typically Spanish rhythmic pattern of ambiguous meter that courses throughout the movement. The orchestra, in colorful fiesta garb, soon enters while the guitar's brilliant, virtuoso display continues. The haunting *Adagio*, among the most beautiful and beloved pieces ever written for guitar, is based on a theme of Middle Eastern ancestry, given in the plangent tones of the English horn, around which the soloist weaves delicate arabesques of sound as the music unfolds. The finale's lilting simplicity (one commentator noted its similarity to a Spanish children's song) serves as a foil to the imposing technical demands placed on the soloist, who is required to negotiate almost the entire range of the instrument's possibilities.

Like all of Rodrigo's best music, the *Concierto de Aranjuez* bears the unmistakable stamp of his craftsmanship and stylistic personality, of which the noted Spanish composer Tomás Marco wrote, "His aim has been to create a Spanish ambiance, full of color and agreeable tunes, where folklore is a picturesque element and references to art music of the past consist of distilled 17th and 18th-century mannerisms." This masterful *Concierto* is glowing evidence of Rodrigo's ability to capture the spirit of his native land in music that is both immediate in appeal and lasting in value.

Pictures at an Exhibition (1874)

MODEST MUSSORGSKY ■ 1839-1881

TRANSCRIBED FOR ORCHESTRA (1923) BY MAURICE RAVEL ■ 1875-1937

Though the history of the Russian nation extends far back into the mists of time, the country's cultural life is of relatively recent origin. Russian interest in art, music and theater dates only from the time of Peter the Great (1672-1725), the powerful monarch who coaxed his country into the modern world by importing ideas, technology and skilled practitioners from western Europe. To fuel the nation's musical life, Peter, Catherine and their successors depended on a steady stream of well-compensated German, French and Italian artists who brought their latest tonal wares to the magnificent capital city of St. Petersburg. This tradition of imported music continued well into the 19th century: Berlioz, for example, enjoyed greater success in Russia than he did in his native France; Verdi composed *La Forza del Destino* on a commission from St. Petersburg, where it was first performed.

In the years around 1850, with the spirit of nationalism sweeping across Europe, several young Russian artists banded together to rid their art of foreign influences in order to establish a distinctive nationalist character for their works. Leading this movement was a group of composers known as "The Five," whose members included Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander 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. Vladimir Stassov, a noted critic and the journalistic champion of the Russian arts movement, organized a memorial exhibit of Hartmann's work in February 1874, and it was under the inspiration of that showing that Mussorgsky conceived his *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

At the time of the exhibit, Mussorgsky was engaged in preparations for the first public performance of his opera *Boris Godunov*, and he was unable to devote any time to his *Pictures* until early summer. When he took up the piece in June, he worked with unaccustomed speed. "Hartmann's is bubbling over, just as *Boris* did," he wrote to a friend. "Ideas, melodies come to me of their own accord, like a banquet of music — I gorge and gorge and overeat myself. I can hardly manage to put them down on paper fast enough." The movements mostly depict sketches, watercolors and architectural designs shown publicly at the Hartmann exhibit, though Mussorgsky based two or three sections on canvases that he had been shown privately by the artist before his death. The composer linked his sketches together with a musical "Promenade" in which he depicted his own rotund self shuffling — in an uneven meter — from one picture to the next. Though Mussorgsky was not given to much excitement over his own creations, he took special delight in this one. Especially in the masterful transcription for orchestra that Maurice Ravel did in 1922 for the Parisian concerts of conductor Sergei Koussevitzky, it is a work of vivid impact to which listeners and performers alike can return with undiminished pleasure.

Promenade. According to Stassov, this recurring section depicts Mussorgsky "roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, 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 on short, bandy legs.

Promenade — The Old Castle. A troubadour (represented by the saxophone) sings a doleful lament before a foreboding, ruined ancient fortress.

Promenade — Tuileries. Mussorgsky's subtitle is "Dispute of the Children after Play." Hartmann's picture shows a corner of the famous Parisian garden filled with nursemaids and their youthful charges.

Bydlo. Hartmann's picture 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, with only their arms, legs and heads protruding.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle. The title was given to the music by Stassov. Mussorgsky originally called this movement "Two Jews: one rich, the other poor." It was inspired by a pair of pictures which Hartmann presented to the composer showing 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, with animated conversations flying among the female vendors.

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, bearing the title "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, the fearsome witch of Russian folklore

who eats human bones she has ground into paste with her mortar and pestle. She also can fly through the air on her fantastic mortar, and Mussorgsky's music suggests a wild, midnight ride.

The Great Gate of Kiev. Mussorgsky's grand conclusion to his suite 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. The work ends with a heroic statement of the *Promenade* theme and a jubilant pealing of the great bells of the city.

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