

D/CD 1008

JOHN BROWNING *piano* MUSSORGSKY

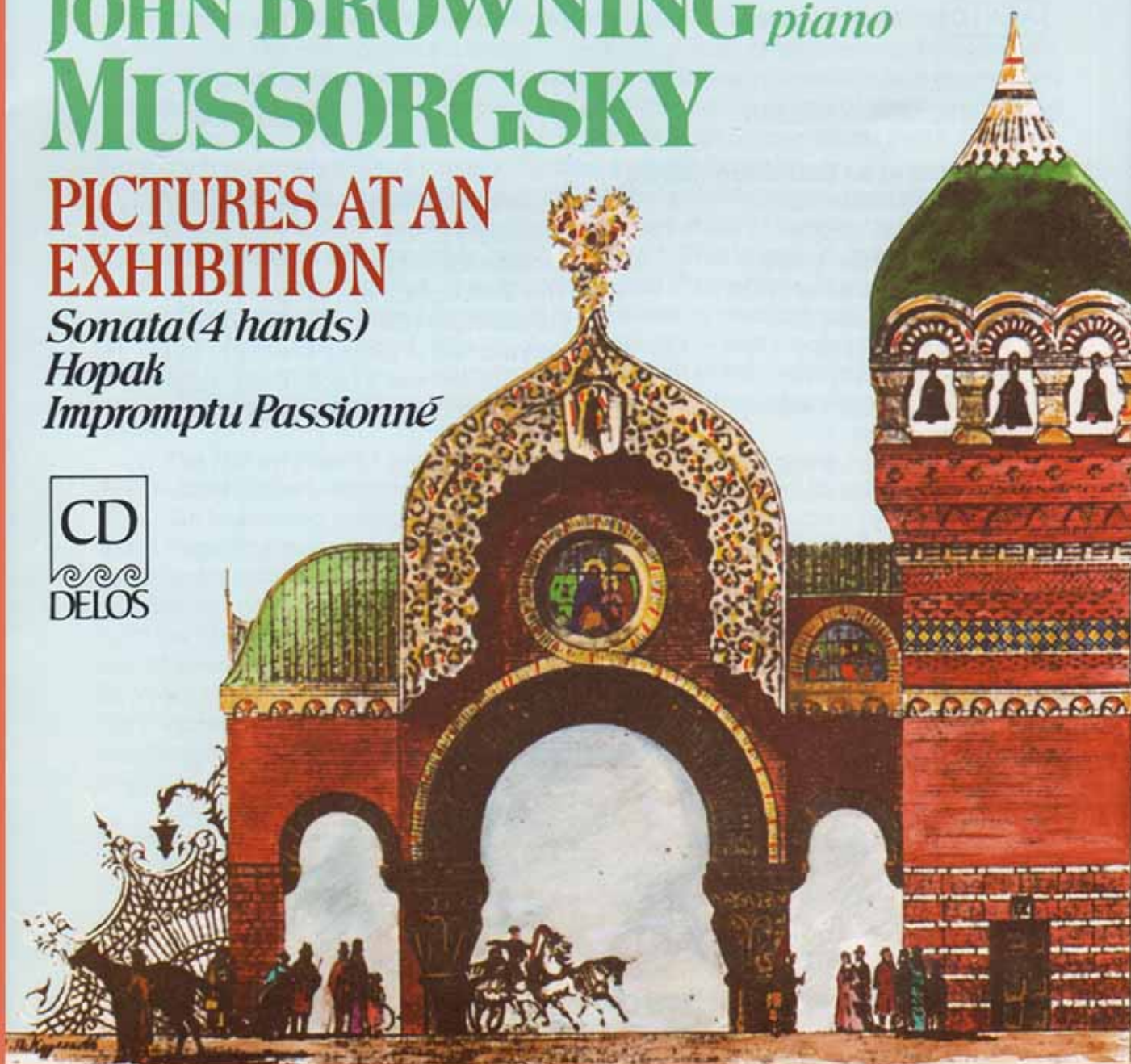
PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

Sonata (4 hands)

Hopak

Impromptu Passionné

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MODESTE MUSSORGSKY

D/CD 1008

1 Pictures at an Exhibition (33:15)

1 Promenade (1:30)

2 Gnomus (2:20)

3 Promenade (:53)

4 The Old Castle (5:15)

5 Promenade (:29)

6 Tuileries (1:02)

7 Bydlo (2:47)

8 Promenade (:48)

9 Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells (1:11)

10 Two Jews (2:12)

11 Promenade (1:33)

12 The Marketplace at Limoges (1:21)

13 Catacombs (1:54)

14 Con Mortuis in Lingua Mortua (2:26)

15 The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga) (3:14)

16 The Great Gate of Kiev (4:26)

17 Sonata (9:56)

17 Allegro assai (5:21)

18 Scherzo (4:30)

19 Hopak (1:27)

20 Hopak (arr. Rachmaninoff) (1:34)

21 Impromptu Passionné (3:36)

JOHN BROWNING, piano

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 47:34

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Steinway Piano

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My introduction to "Pictures at an Exhibition" occurred when, as a young boy, I heard Vladimir Horowitz play it in recital. So profound was the impression his performance made on me that almost twenty years later, when I found sufficient courage to learn the work, Mr. Horowitz' unpublished re-working of the original remained indelibly engraved in my mind. I shall not dispute those who prefer Mussorgsky's unaltered text. But try as I may, after much thought and work, I am unable to play the original without reservations. Thus my own version of "Pictures" has evolved. Both the authentic Lamm edition and the Ravel orchestration have been carefully studied. My amendment of the score consists of occasional doublings, changes of register, and coloristic embellishment. In "The Great Gate of Kiev" I have added a contrapuntal augmentation of the Promenade motif. Wherever my revision and that of Mr. Horowitz may coincide, I plead guilty to having been unsuccessful in discovering a finer way than his, and freely admit my unabashed admiration of his incomparable artistry. – John Browning

Modeste Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Mussorgsky's major contribution to the piano literature, **Pictures at an Exhibition**, was the result of his friendship with the Russian artist and architect, Victor Hartmann. Born and educated in St. Petersburg, Hartmann had traveled from 1864 to 1868 in France, Italy, Germany and Poland prior to his return to Russia and his meeting with Mussorgsky in 1869. The composer became strongly attached to the artist, dedicated "In the Corner" from *The Nursery* song-cycle to him in 1870, and was deeply shocked by his friend's death of a heart attack in 1873. A posthumous exhibit of some four hundred of Hartmann's works which opened at the St. Petersburg Architects Association in January of 1874 provided the inspiration for this piano work which Mussorgsky composed in a burst of creative energy during a short few days in June of the same year and which stands as a memorial to an artist who quite probably would otherwise have been totally forgotten.

In a letter to Vladimir Stassov, patron, protector and prodder for many Russian artists of the period, who had originally brought the two men together and to whom *Pictures at an Exhibition* is dedicated, Mussorgsky wrote: "Hartmann is boiling as Boris boiled. The sounds and ideas hang in the air and now I am gulping and overeating. I can barely manage to scribble them on paper. I am writing numbers with

good transitions (on *Promenade*). I want to do it as quickly and with as few interruptions as possible. My image can be seen in these *intermezzi*."

The *Promenade* are, indeed, images of the composer's progress through the exhibition. Even the occasionally uneven and ungainly rhythmical patterns he uses in them have been thought to be a self-caricature since Mussorgsky was far from being underweight.

Gnomus represents Hartmann's design for a nutcracker which hung on a Christmas tree at the St. Petersburg Artists Club in 1869. Gnarled and grotesque, the malformed gnome crunched the shells in his wooden jaws.

The Old Castle was a sketch from the artist's visit to Italy. The composer, in spinning his melancholy and haunting melody over a constant G-sharp pedal point in the left hand (a troubadour, perhaps, serenading in the Tuscan twilight), has created a little masterpiece.

By adding the charmingly peevish children playing in the *Tuileries*, Mussorgsky has taken a certain compositional license since, in Hartmann's drawings, the famous Parisian gardens are invariably deserted.

In *Bydlo* (the Polish word for cattle), a heavy peasant's cart drawn by oxen rumbles past on its huge wooden wheels and disappears into the distance.

The Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells came from a costume design for *Trilby*, a ballet choreographed by Petipa for the Bolshoi in 1877. Hartmann's rather clumsy and bulky papier-mâché eggs with the heads and limbs of the dancers protruding with every evidence of discomfort are here transformed into a deliciously glittering virtuoso gem for the keyboard.

The portrait of the *Two Jews* has often and erroneously been considered a satirical example of musical anti-Semitism whereas, in fact, Mussorgsky was so fascinated with Jewish melodies that not only did he frequently visit Russian synagogues but he would take every opportunity to listen to the singing of a Jewish family who gathered in the courtyard of a house opposite his own during 1867. In the manuscript, he noted: "A rich Jew wearing a fur hat - Sandomir - and a poor Sandomir Jew" - Sandomir being a small Polish town Hartmann had visited in 1868.

For *The Market Place at Limoges*, another souvenir from Hartmann's travels in Western Europe, Mussorgsky made the following marginal jotting in the score: "Great news! Monsieur de Puissanceout has just recovered his cow, The Fugitive. But the

good gossips of Limoges are not totally agreed about this because Mme. de Remboursac has just acquired a beautiful new set of false teeth whereas Monsieur de Panta-Pantaleon's nose, which is in his way, remains always the color of a peony." He also wrote to Stasov: "The Limoges gossips at the market is an enchanting *scherzino* and very pianistic." Enchanting though it is, he might also have added that it is one of the more fearsomely difficult pianistic hurdles ever put to paper.

For *Catacombs*, the catalogue of the original exhibition gave the following description: "Interior of Paris (surely they must have meant Roman) catacombs with figures of Hartmann and the guide holding a lamp." This is immediately followed by *Con Mortuis in Lingua Mortua* in which the original *Promenade* theme reappears as Mussorgsky, who was always interested in spiritualism, musically attempts to contact his friend. Again, a marginal note reads: "A Latin text - with the dead in a dead language. Well may it be in Latin! The creative spirit of the departed Hartmann leads me towards the skulls and addresses them - a pale light radiates from the interior of the skulls."

The Hut on Fowl's Legs was a drawing for a clock. Perched on chicken legs, the thatch-roofed shack was the home of Baba-Yaga, traditional witch of Russian fairy tales. An interesting sidelight is found in Stasov's description of an artist disguised as Baba-Yaga at a masquerade ball in 1862: "Her red braids were streaming out behind her, a large fuzzy hat was pulled over her forehead, her feet were wrapped in coarse puttees, her bony arms stuck out of the sleeves of her robe, a sparse beard protruded from her chin, and her horrible eyes gleamed maliciously, while tusks were seen in her half-opened mouth." As circumstance would have it, this startling figure turned out to be Victor Hartmann . . . thus the first encounter between the man whose works inspired the *Pictures at an Exhibition* and the one to whom the work is dedicated.

Mussorgsky's Baba-Yaga flies with fiendish glee from one end of the piano to the other and finally directly over . . .

The Great Gate of Kiev. Hartmann's design for this monumental structure was entered in a contest sponsored by the city of Kiev to commemorate the failure of an assassination plot to kill Tsar Alexander II. That the gate was never built may be due to the fact that another plot met with complete success in 1881 only three days before Mussorgsky's own death on May 16th. In this musical evocation, church hymns mingle with the pealing of countless bells and the *Promenade* theme is heard in a gloriously

triumphant final statement as the composer joins the throngs pouring through the Great Gate of Kiev to pay tribute to the memory of his beloved friend.

The **Impromptu Passionné** was composed in autumn of 1859 when Mussorgsky was 20. Moved by Alexander Herzen's novel, *Who Is To Blame?*, and especially by a scene in which the two main characters, Beltov and Lyuba, crown a passionate discussion of love with their first, last and only kiss, Mussorgsky inscribed his manuscript with ". . . to the memory of Beltov and Lyuba, October 1st, 1859."

The *Allegro* movement of the **Sonata for Piano Duet** bears a far more puzzling inscription: "December 8, 1860 - I have got married." Since Mussorgsky used a form of the verb "to marry" which in Russian is applicable only to females, the meaning of his words would be "I have given myself as a wife." And since biographers have been hard put to unearth overt sexual activity of any kind in the composer's life, it is possible that this might have been Mussorgsky's personal manifesto following his decision to leave the military service and devote himself entirely to music; a very soggy explanation for that very interesting but very cryptic sentence.

From July through October of 1879, Mussorgsky traveled to a number of provincial Russian cities with Daria Leonova, foremost contralto at the Maryinsky Theatre. As well as accompanying the singer, he also played a formidable group of his own music - most of it transcriptions of flashier sections of orchestral works. It was on this tour that the "**Hopak** of the Merry Peasant Lads, from the new opera *Fair at Sorochinsk*" was first heard publicly as a piano solo.

Richard Cumming

Playing four-hand music on the piano is difficult, even with the most musically compatible person. "Over-recording" or "dubbing" with one's alter ego is fiendishly difficult, requiring a miraculous sixth sense in synchronizing phrasing and nuance. Delos asked this feat of Mr. Browning in order that the Sonata, which deserves to be heard, might be included in this solo recording. The result more than justifies our request. This recording includes an arrangement of the Hopak done by Rachmaninoff as an interesting contrast with the less frequently heard Mussorgsky transcription.

Amelia S. Haygood



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