

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION PROGRAM

TAN DUN (1957-)

Passacaglia: Secret of Wind and Birds

As a young boy in rural China, Dun was intrigued by the music he heard in religious ceremonies. It was during the time of Mao Zedong, though, and Dun was not allowed to pursue music. Instead, he was sent to work on a rice farm. While there, he met local villagers who were musicians, and they taught him to play traditional Chinese string instruments. When members of a traveling orchestra were killed in a ferry accident, Dun was able to join the ensemble as a substitute. Two years later the Cultural Revolution ended, and China reopened its Central Conservatory. Out of thousands of applicants that first year, Dun was one of only 30 students who were accepted. Upon graduation he entered Columbia University in New York, where he received a doctorate in composition.

Although Dun is best known for his film scores, for which he received an Oscar and a Grammy, he has written in many other genres, including chamber works, symphonies, concertos, and operas. However, it is Dun's philosophy of music that makes him unique. He believes music is integral to life and transcends all boundaries. As a result, he often combines Eastern and Western instruments and compositional techniques, even incorporating natural objects, such as water or rocks, into his music. Sometimes he calls for interactions between the orchestra and the audience, and members of the orchestra often provide vocalizations or play their instruments in unusual ways. Dun is also known for presenting prerecorded sounds and visual images simultaneously with his music. The result is often a multimedia extravaganza that uses a variety of cutting-edge technologies.

In 2015, Carnegie Hall commissioned Dun to write a composition for National Youth Orchestra of the USA's tour of China. With the goal of combining the ancient with the modern, *Passacaglia* incorporates recordings of birdsongs on Chinese traditional instruments played back on the smartphones of the musicians and selected audience members.

Throughout the piece, the orchestra emulates the sounds of birds, the wind, and the ocean. Dun's piece thus honors both mankind's ancient desire to communicate with nature and the optimism for the future embodied by members of the National Youth Orchestra.

The title of Dun's composition is derived from the Baroque term *passacaglia*, which can be defined as a short, continuously repeated idea, usually in the bass, with upper voice parts providing variations. His *Passacaglia* begins with birdsongs played on iPhones by members of the orchestra and audience. The main theme—a slow-moving, disjunct melody—begins with a trombone solo. Each time the theme is repeated, it passes to different instruments—the brasses, breathy woodwinds, and even the timpani and tuba. Interspersed between the statements are soft bird calls. As the piece nears the end, the whole orchestra joins in with raucous, syncopated versions of the theme. The sound then dwindles down to a soft level, but there is a surprise bang at the end!

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 77

Shostakovich was no Mozartean prodigy, but once he began to study music, he progressed at an astonishing pace. When he was nine years old, he started piano lessons with his mother, and four years later he was admitted to the prestigious Conservatory at St. Petersburg. Although best known for his symphonies, he wrote in many other genres, including choral music, film scores, piano pieces, and chamber music.

Shostakovich wrote Violin Concerto No. 1 in 1948, but withheld it from publication. The composer, who had been in and out of government favor for years, was afraid Stalin would deem his work "not accessible" to the people. During the post-WW II years, millions of Russians were liquidated or sent to Siberia, and Shostakovich was terrified of "the midnight knock at the door." However, after Stalin's death in 1953, the political climate became more auspicious, and Shostakovich decided to publish the Concerto. He had written

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it for the brilliant violinist David Oistrakh, and together the two men made numerous revisions. The work was finally premiered in 1955, with Oistrakh as soloist, and it was pronounced a resounding success.

Violin Concerto No. 1 defies almost all conventions. Instead of the usual three movements, the work consists of four, with none in sonata form. Instrumentation emphasizes woodwinds but omits trombones and trumpets.

The opening movement is a slow, meditative Nocturne in free structure. An ominous theme in the low strings immediately establishes a gloomy atmosphere. The violin solo runs a gamut of three octaves, from low to the very top of the treble register, sometimes in chromatic stepwise motion but also in many leaps. Rather than the typical alternation of soloist versus orchestra, melodic importance is entrusted to the violin, while the orchestra accompanies. Oistrakh describes this movement as “a suppression of feeling,” suggesting that there are conflicts that remain unresolved.

Movement two, *Scherzo* (“joke”), begins playfully, with light staccato notes in the woodwinds. At the same time the violin presents a short rhythmic/melodic idea that eventually appears frequently in other instruments. The woodwinds play a second, more subtle motive that seems to mock the solo violin, and later on the soloist answers with the same notes. Known as DSCH, this famous motive represents the composer’s name—Dmitri SHostakovich—D, S (the German designation for E-flat), C, and H (German usage for B-natural). As the movement progresses, the mood becomes harshly sarcastic, even diabolical. The tempo accelerates, and the entire orchestra races toward the conclusion in virtuosic, driving energy. And then it abruptly stops!

For the third movement Shostakovich turns to the Baroque *passacaglia*, a continuously repeated melodic-harmonic progression, usually in the bass. This slow-moving pattern, which is quite long—17 measures—begins in the cellos and basses before passing through the orchestra. The violin enters with a beautiful,

expressive melody, which is eventually imitated by other instruments. The movement ends with a devilishly difficult cadenza, considered the most physically and emotionally draining cadenza ever written for a violinist. At the end it gradually accelerates, leading directly into the *Burlesca*, the finale. There are shrill woodwinds, wild folk-like material over a driving rhythmic ostinato, and mocking appearances in clarinet, horn, and xylophone. The soloist hurtles through a non-stop display of virtuosity, culminating in a final acceleration to Presto. While the overall mood is festive and triumphant, there is a suggestion of a less than happy resolution.

For years Shostakovich had been under immense pressure to produce works that were not only easily understood by the public but also approved by Stalin. With his First Violin Concerto he could compose as he wished. Although still tonal, the work is dissonant, complex and abstract. Many Western scholars assume Shostakovich’s use of Jewish folk material indicates a sympathetic response to the victims of the Holocaust, and this may be true. However, his use of the DSCH motive also suggests an autobiographical component, as if he is one of the oppressed, just like the Jewish people.

MODEST MUSSORGSKY (1839-1881) *Pictures at an Exhibition*

Mussorgsky, the son of a wealthy landowner, planned a military career, but political and economic situations forced him to eventually secure a civil service position. Mussorgsky’s passion, though, was music, and he joined a group of Russian nationalist composers known as “The Mighty Five.” Despite his lack of formal training, he is remembered today for his highly acclaimed opera, *Boris Godunov*, and several orchestral pieces, among them, *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

After viewing a memorial exhibit for a close friend who had recently died, artist Victor Hartmann, Mussorgsky rushed home to compose a set of 10 short piano pieces, each one inspired by a painting or drawing in the

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exhibit. He was quite pleased with what he had accomplished, for he wrote, "I consider it successful so far," and he dedicated the collection to Vladimir Stasoff, an art critic who had organized the exhibit. The resulting suite is Mussorgsky's finest piano composition. Yet the music, which was inspired by specific images, suggests instrumental effects that only an orchestra can provide. Several musicians have recognized this relationship and transcribed *Pictures at an Exhibition* for orchestra, but Maurice Ravel's masterful orchestration is the best known and has helped make this work extremely popular.

Instead of referring to a visual image, *Promenade* is a folk-like melody that fluctuates between 5/4 and 6/4 meter, suggesting a visitor strolling from one item in the exhibit to another. The theme returns several times, varied and fragmented, to unify the suite. Inspired by Hartmann's design for a Christmas nutcracker with large teeth, *The Gnome* comprises three contrasting motives that are repeated, alternated, and frequently interrupted, representing the movements of a little gnome clumsily running with crooked legs. Strong dissonance helps create the image of a deformed, repugnant creature. For Hartmann's watercolor, *The Old Castle*, the bassoons establish an undulating accompaniment, while the alto saxophone plays a folk melody that represents a medieval troubadour song.

Children are playing in *Tuileries*, the famous Parisian gardens, and this short piece is characterized by gentle two-note slurs and lighthearted 16th-note passages. Although the music becomes louder in the middle section, *Tuileries* ends very softly, with ascending notes conjuring up an image of children scampering away. Two pieces were inspired by Hartmann's watercolors made during his sojourn in Poland.

Oxen depicts a wagon's plodding with constant, slow-moving eighth notes, while the primary theme is contained in a most unusual instrument, the tuba. Two Jews are represented in *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle*—the first by a strongly modal melody and the second one by a constantly repeated rhythmic figure in the muted trumpet. The artist drew a

costume sketch for *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*, and in this miniature scherzo Mussorgsky's grace notes and staccato eighths depict the chirping of chickens. *Limoges. The Market* contains a whirlwind of fast 16th-note passages, imitating the sounds of bustling shoppers, and this piece leads directly into *Catacombs*. In Hartmann's illustration by the same name, two men are exploring the catacombs of Paris. The first section of the piece is ponderous and stark, containing juxtaposition of contrasting dynamics. As a subtitle of the second section, Mussorgsky penciled in "with the dead in a dead language." Thematic material is related to *Promenade*.

Hartmann's *The Hut on Hen's Legs* is a design for a clock in the form of Baba Yaga, a supernatural being in Russian folklore. Mussorgsky immediately evokes the presence of the witch with strings in the low register. Various instruments of the orchestra are added as the rhythm accelerates, suggesting a frenetic flight of the witch's unfortunate victim. The gentle middle section provides some respite, although the conspicuously reedy timbre of the bassoon increases a feeling of suspense. This part concludes with mysterious trills that announce a violent return of the chase in all its terror. *The Hut* is followed without a pause by the final selection, *The Great Gate of Kiev*. Hartmann had designed stone city-gates for Kiev for a competition, and Mussorgsky returns to the past to find genuine Russian melodies—one initially presented in full chords by trombones, and the other, a soft and chromatic melody appearing mostly in the woodwinds. Toward the end the entire orchestra joins in to produce a solemn but majestic procession, and the work reaches a magnificent climax with clashing of cymbals and clanging bells.

Although *Pictures at an Exhibition* was never performed in public during Mussorgsky's lifetime, Rimsky-Korsakov, the executor of Mussorgsky's estate, edited the work and saw that it was published.

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