

Llyr Williams: Pictures in Music 4 | Lluniau mewn Cerddoriaeth 4

8 October | 8 Hydref 7.30pm

Dora Stoutzker Concert Hall | Neuadd Dora Stoutzker

Vision Fugitives Op.22

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

1 Lentamente

3 Allegretto

5 Molto giocoso

7 Pittoresco (Arpa)

8 Commodo

9 Allegro tranquillo

10 Ridicolosamente

17 Poetico

20 Lento irrealmente

As a student at the St Petersburg Conservatory Prokofiev won notoriety as an *enfant terrible* and acclaim as a formidably gifted pianist whose muscular style was to characterise many of his early compositions. During his extended absence from Russia after 1918 the composer enjoyed a glittering career in Europe and America finding success with his *Scythian Suite*, *Classical Symphony* and *Third Piano Concerto*. Following his return to the Soviet Union in 1936 his fortunes continued for some years with notable achievements in the realm of ballet (*Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella*) and his universally acclaimed *Fifth Symphony*. When Prokofiev came under attack from the authorities in 1948, he began to appreciate how fragile these triumphs were, built as they were on the shifting sands of Soviet policy. In response to criticisms from Stalin's repressive regime Prokofiev simplified his musical style to accommodate the official Party line but with only a modicum of success becoming a demoralised and broken man, dying five years later, ironically, on the same day as his main persecutor, Josef Stalin.

It is, however, from an earlier period of his career that the twenty miniature pieces that comprise *Vision Fugitives* belong; written between 1915 and 1917 and assembled for publication out of chronological order. Gone are the abrasive, discordant harmonies and driving motor rhythms found in his *Scythian Suite*, now replaced by a more restrained manner, often introspective, and a previously unfamiliar side of his musical personality which might seem at odds with the turbulent political and economic times in which Prokofiev lived. It is almost as if the composer was untouched by the progress of the Great War, seeking refuge in pure music away from increasing economic difficulties, growing social unrest and the overthrow of the Tsar.

The title, *Visions Fugitives*, is a poetic translation of *Mimoletnosti* (meaning 'things flying past') taken from the Russian symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont whose lines 'In every fleeting

glimpse I see worlds; they change endlessly, Flashing in playful rainbow colours' provided the work's stimulus. Prokofiev's response is to create a series of evocative images, spanning a variety of moods (but mainly reflective) that are by turns impressionistic and dream-like (2, 7 and 17) playful (3, 5 and 11) clowning (10), grotesque (4 and 9) as well as aggressive (14), Scriabinesque languor (18) and cryptic (13 and 16). It is only in number 19 (*Presto agitatissimo e molto accento*) that Prokofiev offers a musical response to the February revolution of 1917. Of the movement's nervous, frantic energy, insistent rhythms and brevity the composer later apologetically offered that 'It was more a 'reflection of the crowd's excitement than of the inner essence of revolution'.

Political agendas aside, these intimate and atmospheric snapshots are, nearly a century after the events surrounding their composition, Prokofiev's most enduringly popular and accessible piano pieces.

The Seasons Op. 37a

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93)

November: Troika

January: By the Fireside

February: Carnival

May: May Nights

June: Barcarolle

July: Song of the Reaper

August: The Harvest

September: The Hunt

If any Russian composer can be said to encapsulate the essence of their mother country it is Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky who, curiously, founded no school of imitators and his name is conspicuously absent from the Balakirev-led group associated with the Russian nationalist movement. He made a lasting impact in music for the stage and the concert hall, but his music for the piano, often written to supply the demands of an amateur market, shows a preference for works of modest dimensions and is the least well-known of his output.

One work that has steadily gained popularity is his collection of pieces misleadingly entitled *The Seasons* – a work originating from 1875 as a commission by the editor of a St Petersburg monthly periodical *Nuvellist*. Early the following year, the first of twelve pieces appeared, one per month, each with accompanying subtitles and matching verses, the whole eventually published as a set. The January and February pieces (written late in 1875) were sent to the journal's editor for approval, Tchaikovsky promising a revision if they were not acceptable. Music for March, April and May were composed separately; but owing to the pressure of other commitments (including orchestrating *Swan Lake*) the remaining months were all composed together.

Although Tchaikovsky had little interest in the work, the collection has considerable charm and its individual numbers are well suited to an amateur pianist who, like the composer, might possess a modest technique but whose sensitivities could identify with the music's changing moods. That said, the music is not without its challenges. Whether picturesque or intimate, most of the pieces are in simple ABA form, each inhabiting a subtlety of expression that raises these works above the level of the salon.

After the cosy warmth of January, bustling crowds animate February's Carnival and in March we hear a lark's plaintive chirruping. April brings snowdrops and an elegant waltz, while May evokes a beautiful evening in St Petersburg. The gentle Barcarolle of June frames a central passage conjuring Venetian gondolas and segues to July's energetic hay-making followed by an agitated harvest gathering for August. September arrives with an exhilarating hunt (note its jubilant horn calls) and yields to October's poetic musing. The three-horsed Russian sleigh that is 'Troika' (November) is a wonderfully jingling movement, (much-loved by Rachmaninov) and anticipates the joy of Christmas in December's delightful waltz -Tchaikovsky here at his most engaging, crowning a collection that has become his best-known piano work.

Pictures at an Exhibition

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-81)

- 1 'Gnomus'
- 2 'Il vecchio castello'
- 3 'Tuileries'
- 4 'Bydlo'
- 5 'Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells'
- 6 'Samuel Goldenburg and Schmuyle'
- 7 'The Market Place at Limoges'
- 8 'Catacombs'
- 9 'The Hut on Fowl's Legs'
- 10 'The Great Gate of Kiev'

For most of his lifetime, Modest Mussorgsky was considered a dilettante, a dabbler in music who never quite took the profession of composing seriously. Indeed, despite the success of *Boris Godunov* in 1874 he was considered by many a "drink-sodden little inefficient Government clerk...who also happened to be a genius". During the same year as his operatic triumph, he visited a memorial exhibition of pictures by his friend the architect and artist Victor Hartman who had died a year earlier. Like many artists before and since, his work was, by all accounts, of transient interest and would now be long forgotten were it not for the permanence bestowed upon him by Mussorgsky and later by Maurice Ravel who orchestrated the work in 1922.

The suite opens with the promenade theme, in alternating metres (5/4 and 6/4 time), which conveys a spectator strolling around the gallery. The first picture, 'Gnomus', is a design for a wooden nutcracker in the shape of gnome with crooked legs that Hartmann made for the St Petersburg Artists' Club in 1869. After this menacing scene the spectator moves on, via a calmer version of the promenade theme, eventually pausing by an old castle ('Il vecchio castello'). A haunting melody (that Ravel assigns to a solo cor-anglais) over a lilting triple time accompaniment evokes Hartmann's watercolour of a melancholy troubadour singing before an old Italian castle. The promenade theme leads to 'Tuileries', where the playing of squabbling children thumbing their noses at each other in the famous Parisian gardens is briefly and effectively captured. The spectator moves on, without a break, to 'Bydlo', a scene of a lumbering Polish oxcart with huge wheels driven by a peasant singing an old folk song. A perceptible darkening of the promenade theme leads to a 'Ballet of Chickens in Their Shells' - based on a design that Hartmann made for the Bolshoi ballet in 1871 - where agitated rhythms convey the chicks' clamorous excitement.

The next portrait depicts two Polish Jews, 'Samuel Goldenburg and Schmuyle'. One is rich and given an assertive theme in unison, the other poor and evoked by nervous, agitated rhythms coloured by Ravel's muted trumpet). We return to France for 'The Market Place at Limoges', where local women gossip and argue on a bustling market day. The music reaches fever pitch before tensions dissolve directly into the solemn and rarified atmosphere of the Paris catacombs. In the first of these two other-worldly portraits, dissonant chords lend their own eerie drama while the second represents Hartmann exploring the underground galleries by the light of a flickering lamp. Following this scene 'The Hut on Fowl's Legs' is one of the most fantastical of Hartmann's drawings representing a clock on legs upon which squats the old witch Baba-Yaga. The music is amongst the most violent in the suite and leads without a break into the final tableau: 'The Great Gate of Kiev'. Expansive and dignified music of Slavonic splendour brilliantly conveys Hartmann's design for new city gates which suggest they were conceived on a grand scale.

Notes by David Truslove, 2020

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