

## PROGRAM NOTES

October 9, 2016

Compiled by Dr. Paul Borg

### Passions & Reveries.

Music often evokes visual images for the imaginative listener. Sound creates image; yet, image also inspires sound. This two-way sensory street underlies the musical choices for the QSO this season. As we work through this abundant repertory, especially of the 19th century, the variety and richness of this sound/sight interaction inspires us with its amazing impact.

*Dawn on the Moscow River*  
Introduction to the opera *Khovantchina*

Modest Mussorgsky  
(1839-1881)

Our concert (and concert season) appropriately begins with the orchestral depiction of dawn that opens Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Khovantchina*. It exemplifies the close connection between sight and sound. Although Mussorgsky set the first scene of a complicated historical story near the Moscow River, all we in Quincy need is to imagine ourselves next to the Mississippi River, early in the morning as dawn breaks. Close your eyes and let the music emerge from a mystical darkness into a quietly breaking morning light. Then, the ever-increasing in musical activity suggests greater light and the beginnings of the activities of the day. The quiet ending lets us reflect on the wonder that is a beautiful dawn.

Mussorgsky never finished the opera. That was accomplished shortly after his death by his younger compatriot, Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov. The industrious Rimsky-Korsakov took on the task of finishing the opera's orchestration and even of revising other musical matters he thought not quite right. Subsequent opinion has not been kind to the corrections that Rimsky-Korsakov made to Mussorgsky's works. However, *Dawn on the Moscow River* is a great example of a musical resuscitation that, in fact, works.

*Capriccio espagnol*, Op. 34

Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov  
(1844-1908)

Imagine the dark, cold winters of Russia. Then, imagine the allure that the exoticism and warmth of Spain held for Russians in the 19th century. The result is this exuberant composition that Rimsky-Korsakov wrote in 1887.

The work begins with an *alborada* (= dawn in Spanish), the lively music that is characteristic of a festival that begins at dawn. After a brief pause, the remaining four sections are played *attacca* (no pauses). These alternate slower, reflective movements (2. *Variazioni* and 4. *Scena e canto gitano*) with dances (3. *Alborada* and 5. *Fandango asturiano*). Rimsky-Korsakov wrote a treatise about how to write effectively for orchestra (*Principles of Orchestration*). *Capriccio espagnol* is perhaps the best example of his abilities to do so. As you tap your foot to the dance rhythms, close your eyes and

envision wild dancing by smartly dressed Spaniards. Then, pay attention to the shifts from full orchestra to the solo instruments that interrupt the first *alborada*. Next, notice the changes among the various instrument sections, horns to strings to woodwinds that alternatively perform the main melody of the *Variazioni* movement.

After the return of the *alborada* with its emphasis on solo performers, we hear a rhapsodic, improvisatory gypsy gathering (*Scena*) and its competition among the various solo cadenzas: violin, flute, clarinet, harp. As the movement gains momentum (*canto gitano*), we become irresistibly engaged by the insistent triple rhythm which finally erupts into the *Fandango asturiano*. Here again, we can be amazed by Rimsky-Korsakov's deft manipulation of the orchestral colors.

The envisioning of Spain from the longing, cold eyes of a Russian is the active embodiment of sound turning into sight, or at least, imaginary sight. The work is among the most frequently performed of Rimsky-Korsakov's compositions.

### *Pictures at an Exhibition*

Modest Mussorgsky  
orchestration by Maurice Ravel

The second half of our concert reverses our sensory direction from sound - sight to sight - sound. In 1874, Mussorgsky viewed an exhibition of paintings, water-colors, and architectural drawings by his recently deceased friend, Victor Hartmann, in Moscow. Both were interested in trying to establish a "Russian" artistic tradition, freed from other Western European influences. Whether that objective was actually achieved, Mussorgsky's musical efforts were powerful and remain wonderful examples of his musical creativity.

He wrote the work for solo piano. Its immense scope, however, suggested orchestral colors rather than piano to many later musicians. The best-known, and perhaps best achieved, version was arranged by Maurice Ravel in 1929.

Mussorgsky takes us on a guided tour of the art exhibition. We are ushered around via a "*promenade*," the musical representation of someone wandering around a gallery. His individual interpretation involves unusual meters, 5/4 alternating with 6/4, suggesting the halting gait of someone who becomes engaged in the visual, rather than attentive to walking. This *promenade* recurs with decreasing frequency throughout the composition. The various movements' titles represent the various art works that we view through the musical eye of Mussorgsky.

*Gnomus*. A grotesque dwarf, limping along.

*Il vecchio castello* (The Old Castle). A minstrel singing at night in front of an old Italian castle.

*Tuileries*. The Paris park where children are playing and quarreling, supervised by their nurses.

*Bydlo*. The Polish ox cart lumbering along on its huge wheels.

*Ballet of the Chickens in their Eggshells*. From a drawing about the ballet "Trilby."

*Samuel Goldenberg et Schmuyle*. The dialogue between a rich and a poor Jew.

*Limoges: Le Marché*. A market town with people arguing about prices.

*Catacombae. Sepulchrum romanum*. A self-portrait (Hartmann) looking at the catacombs of Paris by lantern light.

*Cum mortuis in lingua mortua.* (Speaking to the dead in a dead language) "Hartmann's creative spirit leads me [Mussorgsky] towards the skulls; he addresses them and they gradually become illuminated from within."

*The Hut on Fowls' Legs.* A clock in the shape of the Russian witch Baba Yaga.

*The Great Gate of Kiev.* The architectural design for a gate (never constructed) in Russian style and surmounted by a helmet-shaped cupola.

The correlation between the visual images he saw, now lost to most listeners, and the mental images that we can create via Mussorgsky's music is quite astonishing. He managed to capture Hartmann's visions and provide them to a much larger audience than the original exhibition ever could.