

MYTHS, LEGENDS, & FOLK TUNES | SEPTEMBER 17, 2022

PROGRAM NOTES

Overture on Three Russian Themes

Mily Balakirev (1837-1910)

Premiered in January 1859 in St. Petersburg

Mily Alekseyevich Balakirev was born in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia in January 1837. He began composing at the age of 15 combining traditional folk music and experimental classical music practices similar to that of Mikhail Glinka. He is known primarily for his contribution to musical nationalism and his influence on other Russian composers like Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Stravinsky. In the late 1850s and early 1860s, Balakirev brought together Alexander Borodin, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and himself to form a group called The Mighty Five. Their objective was to create a distinct national style of classical music utilizing Russian folk song and dance, church chants, and exotic scales and styling.

Balakirev arranged and published collections of folk songs that would later serve as source material for other composers. His *Overture on Three Russian Themes* was composed in 1858 and features three main folk songs. Their titles when translated into English are *The Silver Birch*, *In the Fields Stands a Birch Tree*, and *There was at the Feast*. It is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

The Silver Birch serves as a graceful introduction and epilogue of the overture. After a brief burst of energy at the beginning of the piece, the slow melody of *The Silver Birch* is introduced in the woodwinds, passed to the strings, and then flows through the orchestra.

The overture then shifts to a new Allegro moderato section with the other two folk songs on display. The first subject, *In the Fields Stand a Birch Tree*, is introduced in B minor in the clarinet melody. The melody is transported around the orchestra until modulating to the key of D major, introducing a contrasting second subject based on the folk song *There was at the Feast*. Both of these folk songs were later featured in well-known works. *In the Fields Stand a Birch Tree* was used in the finale of Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony while Stravinsky utilized *There was at the Feast* in his work *Petrushka*.

The piece ends with the slow and elegant reappearance of *The Silver Birch*. The work later went on to inspire Rimsky-Korsakov's composition of the same name.

The Firebird Suite (1919)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Arranged in 1919 for Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet

After losing funding for his opera ventures in 1909, Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev decided to make a move towards the less expensive art form of ballet. He and his colleagues dreamed of creating a work that combined music, theater, and visual art that reflected the ideals and innovation of Russian art. They settled upon the Russian folklore of the Firebird symbolizing rebirth, beauty, and magic.

Diaghilev struggled to find a composer, but finally turned to a less established composer, Igor Stravinsky. A former student of Rimsky-Korsakov, the twenty-seven year old Stravinsky was so excited about the project that he began composing the score weeks before he was officially hired.

Diaghilev and his team created a story that combined Russian fairy tales, including the Firebird, Prince Ivan Tsarevich, and the ogre-like figure, Kashchei the Immortal. The entire 50-minute ballet is like an opera set to dance. Shortly after completion of the orchestra score, Stravinsky wrote a piano solo reduction of the entire ballet. He also arranged three suites for concert performance which date from 1911, 1919, and 1945. The 1919 suite was created in Switzerland for conductor Ernest Ansermet. It is scored for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (2nd doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, and strings. When it was originally published, the score contained many mistakes that were later fixed in 1985.

The introduction of the 1919 suite opens with a melodic figure in the cellos and double basses that sets the nocturnal scene in the Enchanted Garden of Kashchei. The mysterious music of the opening continues with foreshadowing of Kashchei the Immortal in the bassoon. Suddenly the Firebird appears with glistening strings and woodwinds performing a lively dance heard in the high, bird-like interjections of the upper woodwinds. The loud chords in the horn demonstrate the bird being briefly captured by Prince Ivan. Near the end of the movement, the bird is freed and Ivan takes one of its magical feathers.

The second movement introduces thirteen enchanted princesses who are captives of the evil Kashchei. Ivan falls in love with one of the princesses and they all dance a khorovod or a stately, slow round dance. The melody is first introduced by the solo oboe.

The third movement tells of the journey of the heroic Ivan in pursuit to free the captives with the help of the Firebird. After being summoned by Ivan with the magical feather, the Firebird puts a spell on Kashchei and his minions causing them to dance the "Infernal Dance" with wild syncopation and striking energy. The dance exhausts the villains and puts them into a deep sleep.

The fourth movement begins the "Berceuse" or lullaby of the Firebird with a haunting melody in the bassoon. While the villains sleep, the Firebird directs Ivan to Kashchei's soul hidden in a magic egg. Ivan destroys the egg, killing Kashchei and his minions.

All is returned to normal and the survivors all take part in a dance of celebration first heard in the horn solo at the beginning of the "Finale". The theme builds into a joyous and magical ending.

Pictures at an Exhibition

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881); Arranged by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Ravel's orchestration premiered in October 1922 in Paris

Modest Mussorgsky was widely considered the most unique member of The Mighty Five due to his defiance of Western musical standards. His works were often inspired by Russian history, folklore, and other national themes. He earned a living as a clerk in civil service while receiving his musical training from his peer, Mily Balakirev.

After the death of his dear friend and artist Viktor Hartmann, Mussorgsky composed a set of short piano pieces in 1874 titled *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The music was based on a memorial exhibition that honored the work of Hartmann. It depicts Mussorgsky's experience of walking through the gallery and contemplating the significance of each painting. There is no record of a public performance of the piece during Mussorgsky's lifetime.

In 1922, French composer Maurice Ravel was commissioned by Russian conductor Serge Koussevitzky to arrange the piece for full orchestra. The piece is scored for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings. This new orchestration became one of the standard pieces of the orchestral repertoire.

The piece begins with a recurring theme heard in each of the *Promenade* sections that represents walking through the gallery. This theme can be heard throughout the entire work in between various movements depicting the viewer walking from one painting to the next. The solo trumpets initiate the first *Promenade* which is transported through the full orchestra throughout the piece.

The first painting *Gnomus*, which is Latin for "The Gnome," depicts a carved wooden nutcracker in the form of a little gnome with crooked legs and large teeth. The music jerks and snaps as though he is cracking the shells of nuts in his jaw. The frequent starts and stops of the lurching music suggests the movements of the gnome.

The second *Promenade* is initiated by the solo horn as we move towards *Il vecchio castello*, which is Italian for "The Old Castle." This movement depicts a watercolor painting of a troubadour singing in front of a medieval castle. The melody can be heard in a duet between the bassoon and alto saxophone. The movement is followed by another iteration of the *Promenade*, this time in the trumpets and trombones with full orchestra.

Tuileries (Shrieking Children in the Palace Gardens) sets the scene with children frolicking in a Parisian garden near the Louvre. You can hear the children playing and quarreling in the sassy string figures and taunting wind chords.

Bydlo, the Polish word for "oxen," depicts an ox-drawn wagon with enormous wheels. The music starts quietly, building gradually, then subsiding, representing the approach and passing of *Bydlo*. The *Promenade* returns again in the woodwinds.

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks is inspired by a sketch of a young ballet dancer in a canary costume with an eggshell suit of armor. It is followed by *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuÿle* depicting two separate paintings: a rich patriarch heard in the winds and strings and a poor, nervous beggar heard in the stuttering trumpets.

Limoges. Le marché or "The Marketplace - Important News" depicts a peasant woman amidst the chatter of the French city's market. After the quick, scurrying movement of the market, we enter the *Catacombae* or "Catacombs." The music is divided into two sections: *Sepulcrum romanum* or "The Roman Tomb" and *Cum mortuis in lingua mortua* or "With the Dead in a Dead Language." A ghostly transformation of the promenade theme is heard in this second section.

The Hut on Hen's Legs (Baba Yaga) shows a fourteenth-century metal clock in the shape of a hut supported by a pair of fowl's legs. Mussorgsky associated this with the Russian folktale of Baba Yaga, a witch who flew through the air chasing her victims, which can be heard in the whirlwind of sounds of the orchestra.

Finally, *The Great Gate of Kiev* brings back a celebratory version of the promenade theme creating a grand ceremony with priestly chanting, ringing of bells, and crashing of cymbals. The music propels the listener to a climactic conclusion.

Notes written by Eric M. Thomas