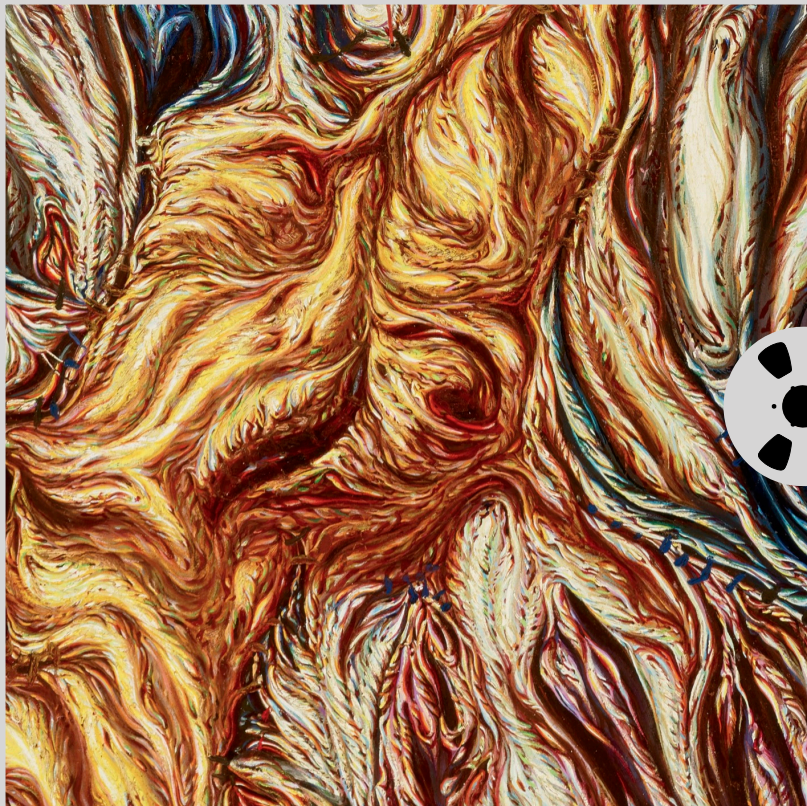


LÁSZLÓ BORBÉLY



HUNNIA RECORDS

MUSSORGSKY-PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION, BALOGH-REMINISCENCES OF AN EXHIBITION



László Borbély

Steinway Model D Concert Grand Piano

Guided tour of a rearranged exhibition

Much has been written about Mussorgsky's emblematic piano work. Allow me here to offer listeners not a complex analysis, but rather my personal (sometimes poetic, but in any case very subjective) impressions.

I do this also because in this case, not only Mussorgsky's works and those of the painter who inspired him, Viktor Hartmann, form the basis of our "museum walk", but also the reflections of Máté Balogh. Six of his piano pieces are embedded in Mussorgsky's cycle and can be heard on this disc, similar to the way in which the paintings in an exhibition interact with each other.

Mussorgsky's cycle *Pictures at an Exhibition* begins with the *Promenade* (walk). This movement (its character marking is *in modo russo*), may remind us of Eastern Orthodox church folk songs and their (liturgical) mode of performance. In the course of the work, there are five promenade movements in total, which always transform into music with a slightly different mood and character, depending on which painting the viewer starts from and where he arrives next. We can observe, for example, that the promenade after the second movement (*The Gnome*) is much more subdued than the first, since the mood of the person viewing the images has been fundamentally altered by what he has seen in the previous ones. And the post-*Bydło* promenade has a decidedly gloomy, dark atmosphere. It is also significant that the promenade movements of the cycle (about which the composer writes to his friend and patron, Stasov: 'my own image is seen in the interludes [here: the promenades]') add a peculiarly dynamic layer, an activity of physical movement, not only to these movements but to the work as a whole. With this rather modern idea, the viewer of the exhibition's paintings (who, as listeners, could be ourselves) is actively involved in the process of the work, "mounted" on the musical time.

The occasion for writing the work was an exhibition in memory of Mussorgsky's friend, the painter and architect Viktor Hartmann, held at the Academy of Fine Arts in St Petersburg. Mussorgsky's experiences there inspired him to compose the large-scale work, of which one of its greatest interpreters ever, Sviatoslav Richter, wrote: "this work is the best Russian piano piece."

It is likely that the *Gnome* movement immediately following the first Promenade was inspired by Hartmann's drawing of the design of a toy nutcracker. There is no question, however, that the work depicts a distorted figure (a gnome, if you like) with incredible conviction and tragedy. The style of the movement is quite forward-looking, and perhaps the most modern of the cycle, it is constructed from short motifs and fragments. *Il vecchio castello*, with its Siciliano rhythm, perhaps evokes a Tuscan castle. Its tone is monotonous and prayer-like, like the chant of a monastic community or even an old troubadour tune. The *Tuileries*... is clearly a musical representation of a scene from the Tuileries gardens in Paris, a bright, lively, playful movement with a motif of childlike simplicity. The *Bydło* (oxcart) can also be interpreted as an allegory of the difficulties of human life. A heavy, endless wilderness (Polish, as the title suggests) opens up before us. The oxcart moves forward with a bumpy and struggling pace, its wheels barely turning, the burden being borne with difficulty by both ox and peasant. The whole movement is a great escalation, almost unbearably tense, followed, after the climax, by the gradual receding of the cart (and the scene itself); it disappears into the distance, and the spectator, influenced by what he has experienced, moves on to the next image, and even glances at it. A motif is played, as if by chance, the beginning of *The Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*.

It's an amazing idea, the way Mussorgsky composes the mistake, so to speak (the 'prematurely' starting movement). The inspiration for the movement comes from Sherov's 1870s two-act ballet, *Trilby*, for which Viktor Hartmann created the costume designs that inspired Mussorgsky. In this case, it was nothing more than the lovely, slightly bumptious, rounded, unearthly, bird- or angel-winged figures of children in the image of a canary. *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle* are the archetypes of a rich Jew and a poor Jew who engage in an increasingly heated and confrontational dialogue, which finally ends in a loud, uncontroversial gesture; the rich Jew rebukes the poor Jew, however much he begs. The noisy market of *Limoges* is once again a picture of life, a cavalcade of people and characters, which builds up to a symphony-sized movement with a virtuoso coda. The *Catacombs* are an imprint of Hartmann's journey to Paris. It is serious, static music, again a forerunner of modernity. *The Hut of Baba-Yaga* was inspired by Hartmann's drawing of the Russian witch Baba-Yaga's wooden hut on chicken legs in the form of a clock. The last item (*The Great Gate of Kiev*) was inspired by Hartmann's design for the Kiev City Gate. It is a huge festive chime of bells, interwoven with old Orthodox folk songs. A fitting conclusion to this monumental work.

Máté Balogh's piano cycle, *Memories of an Exhibition*, which was created as an afterimage of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, places Mussorgsky's work in various refractions, thus recreating it. It is the nature of our memories that anything can be associated with anything in a free associative system. In this case, the same happens with the means of music, sometimes immediately recognisable, sometimes only metaphorically. Often it is merely a distant repetition of a motif or a further reflection on a gesture. *The Gnome in the Old Castle* evokes Mussorgsky even with the monotonously repeated G sharp notes! From a distance, even the skeleton of a siciliano rhythm appears. Still, the fearsomely limping phrasing of Mussorgsky's gnome 'disrupts' the recollection, making it more layered, as it often happens in a dream. Emotions and memories superimposed on each other – this somehow makes the atmosphere constantly vibrant. In the movement *Bydlo in the Garden of the Tuileries*, Balogh clearly returns to the medieval organum genre and performance practice, when a more 'evocative', otherworldly version of the *Bydlo* original is played, giving back exactly what Mussorgsky (deliberately) deprives the listener of: the infinity of perspective, of horizon. Balogh's infinity is not the dense, gloomy, hopeless horizon that Mussorgsky depicts. Meanwhile, the pianist's right hand (as if this were merely a mistake) 'layers' the children playing the Tuileries' Garden on top of the organum-like material, not in the original rhythm but modified in all its flavours, taking over the gnome's awkward movements.

Balogh's *Dance of the Little Chicks* recalls Mussorgsky only at a distance, as it were, in its manner; here, short, hair-thin fragments of phrases flutter in the wind in completely unpredictable, improvisatory units of time. Here we see chicks wondering at the world. In the (often only implied) two-voice dialogue of the dramatic *Schmuyle & Samuel Goldenberg* movement, the two arguing Jews are presented in a manner similar to Mussorgsky, yet here the conflict between the two men seems to be 'straightened' or 'frozen'. The *Great News in the Catacombs* is an exciting tableau, a medley of different musical elements; the work begins with a material which is powerful and monolithic by itself, then its rhythm thins out and thickens in turn. We can also recall the essential chords of Mussorgsky's *Catacombs*, as Balogh's chordal couplets are also heard as if in an endless chordal distill. Three organums can also be heard again, forming a kind of refrain to the musical material. The epilogue of the work is almost reminiscent of Olivier Messiaen's birds, as it demands an enormous lightness and virtuosity from its performer. The *Baba-Yaga at Bogatyr's Gate* evokes the final number of the Mussorgsky cycle both rhythmically and melodically. The more virtuosic material opposite the chords is distant-sounding, somewhat hidden, but in its energy it recalls the fiery momentum of the earlier Baba-Yaga movement. It only breaks out at the end of the movement, when the two materials melt into one another and flow like lava into the sonic depths.

László Borbély





Reminiscences of an exhibition

A few years ago I composed a large-scale piano piece for László Borbély, entitled *Schmuyle & Samuel Goldenberg*. The piece refers to the movement of the same title from Mussorgsky's well-known piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Mussorgsky depicts two Jewish figures of very different characters, the driving force of his work being the juxtaposition of musical material inspired by them. This is the only concept I myself have taken as a starting point: a personal, *parlando rubato*, declamatory musical material and a pronounced, decisive, energetic, chorale-like movement confronted with each other. My resulting piece is thus akin to the Mussorgsky piece through the programme in the background, through the institution of the 'common ancestor'.

In later years, it occurred to me to compose the other "Mussorgsky Pictures" accordingly, and to do so in pairs, by combining one Mussorgsky movement with another – starting from the musical conflict of my *Schmuyle* movement. I have christened the series I have thus created "*Memories of an Exhibition*".

I dedicated my cycle to László Borbély, one of the most outstanding pianists of our time.

Máté Balogh



Sándor Molnár

Tumo No. 3 (The Assumption of Mary) 1987
oil on canvas, woodblock 290×340 cm, detail.

www.festojoga.hu

Special thanks to **Eszter Molnár**

Sándor Molnár (1936-2022)

Kossuth Prize-winning painter, member of the Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Art, one of the most important figures of Hungarian neo-avant-garde abstract painting.

Sándor Molnár searched for the truth of art on canvas and in his exceptionally broad philosophical and theoretical studies. His life programme, the painter's yoga developed in 1966, named by his chosen master Béla Hamvas, showed him how to live and build his art while living only in search of artistic truth. The painter's yoga programme, divided into sections of Earth, Water, Fire, Crystal and Air (Void), was carried out point by point, yet with complete freedom. Free intellectual and artistic creation was not allowed to be practised in Hungary until the regime change in 1990, but Molnár was as hard as steel, sacrificing everything, his career and his existence for this. In the 1960s, he organised the self-taught art society, later known as the Zugló Circle, which was an island of intellectual orientation and artistic freedom at the time. In 1966, he said of abstract art: 'Painting has always been abstract.../.../ that is, there has always been - and consciously in the painters - the knowledge that the image is an independent reality, independent of any other reality, but capable of assimilating much of that other reality. /.../ It was Lajos Vajda who first made me understand the abstract form with full consciousness. There I saw the sign, which showed no object and yet was pregnant with realities."

His lifework is one of the most outstanding achievements of Hungarian abstract painting, a worthy companion to the oeuvre of Tihamér Gyarmathy, Endre Hortobágyi, Tamás Lossonczy, Ferenc Martyn, László Molnár and Béla Veszelszky.

His paintings show the most direct influence of Eastern art and philosophy in 20th century Hungarian art, and this is all the more remarkable because it is not a formal but a real intellectual influence. It is not a question of orientalism but of an original artistic interpretation of the Eastern philosophical and religious influences coming through the art and philosophy of Béla Hamvas.

The inner strength of his art lies precisely in the fact that, for him, life and art are one. He could only realise his painting at the cost of his life, and in turn, he could only realise his life through his painting. Life and art can only be one if neither is purely self-referential, life does not consist merely in the acquisition of earthly goods, and art does not function as an external aestheticization, but both derive their meaning from a higher reality. Molnár found an explication of this higher sphere of reality in the thought of Hamvasian philosophical traditionalism.

And is Molnár's painting up to date? Certainly not, if we think of the surface events, transience and changes in the world's rotation. But if we are interested in the eternal questions that lie deep down, in destiny, the soul, God, the drama of history, nothing is fresher and more alive than this abstract painting. It seems to be out of time, but that is not the case, it is just that everyday life does not touch this art. For it is not the daily events of the individual and collective consciousness that interest him, but the world of the collective unconscious, the "abstract and universal truth" to which he has devoted a special chapter in his book *The Teaching of Painting*. Because his aim was to create a purely spiritual painting capable of realising in art a reality freed from illusion.

This is how he summarised his artistic and intellectual career in his book *The Way of Painting*:

"The Path is the whole circle of transformations.

The elements are not destroyed or enumerated by the painter's yoga, but are subjected to various operations so that they can be purified of impurities and unite with the elements above them in the hierarchy. This is the operation of transference. The elements form a hierarchical series, in which the lower unites with the higher, until finally there is complete Oneness, identity with the One, and the One melts into emptiness. The manifested, i.e. the creation, is completely returned to the unmanifested, to the state before creation, to reality. The soul passes through the elements and is transformed in them. He who has traversed the whole circle of existence, the whole realm of the heart, is the master of the Earth, the master of the Water, the master of the Fire, the master of the Crystal, the master of the Air: he gains complete power over all. To enter the whole circle of existence is to cross the elements. This is the painter's yoga."

Miklós Sulyok



Recording setup

Mics for piano: **AEA R88** Stereo Ribbon, 2x **Neumann U87**

Recording engineers: **Sándor Árok, Tibor Lahó**

Balance engineer: **Sándor Árok**

Mastering engineer: **Tom Caulfield**

Recording technician: **Máté Karakai**

Recorded audio format: **DXD 352,8/32** (Studio One – PreSonus, Merging Hapi)

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Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition,

Balogh: Reminiscences of an Exhibition

01	Mussorgsky	Promenade	01:30
02	Mussorgsky	The Gnome	02:59
03	Mussorgsky	Moderato comodo assai e con delicatezza (Promenade)	00:49
04	Mussorgsky	The Old Castle	04:38
05	Balogh	The Gnome in the Old Castle	02:15
06	Mussorgsky	Moderato non tanto, pesantemente (Promenade)	00:27
07	Mussorgsky	The Tuileries (Dispute between Children after Play)	01:02
08	Mussorgsky	Cattle	02:39
09	Balogh	Bydło in the Tuileries	01:39
10	Mussorgsky	Tranquillo (Promenade)	00:51
11	Mussorgsky	Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks	01:01
12	Mussorgsky	„Samuel” Goldenberg and „Schmuyle”	02:18
13	Balogh	Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks	01:49
14	Balogh	Schmuyle & Samuel Goldenberg	04:03
15	Mussorgsky	Promenade	01:26
16	Mussorgsky	The Market at Limoges (The Big News)	01:27
17	Mussorgsky	Catacombs (Roman Sepulcher)	02:11
18	Mussorgsky	With the Dead in a Dead Language	02:02
19	Balogh	The Big News in the Catacombs	03:35
20	Balogh	Baba-Yaga at the Bogatyr Gate	01:21
21	Mussorgsky	The Hut on Hen's Legs (Baba-Yaga)	03:25
22	Mussorgsky	The Heroic Gate (in the Old Capital of Kiev)	05:14
			48:41

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Piano technician: **Balázs Tóth**

Balance and recording engineer: **Sándor Árok, Tibor Lahó**

Recording technician: **Máté Karakai**

Mastering engineer: **Tom Caulfield**

Recorded audio format: **DXD 382,5/32**

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Enikő Zsedrovits (Máté Balogh)

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