

Benjamin Grosvenor: Schumann & Mussorgsky

Benjamin Grosvenor piano

Robert Schumann (1810–1856)

Blumenstück, Op.19 (1839)

8'

Fantasie in C, Op.17 (1836)

30'

- i. Durchaus fantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen; Im Legenden-Ton
(Quite fantastic and passionately delivered; In the manner of a legend)
- ii. Mäßig. Durchaus energisch (Moderate. Quite energetic)
- iii. Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu halten (Taken slowly. Keep quiet throughout)

INTERVAL

Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition (1874)

30'

Promenade 1

No.1: Gnomus

Promenade 2

No.2: The Old Castle (Il vecchio castello)

Promenade 3

No.3: Tuileries. Children quarrelling after play

No.4: Bydło (A Polish Ox-cart)

Promenade 4

No.5: Ballet of the unhatched chicks

No.6: Two Polish Jews, one rich, the other poor (Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle)

Promenade 5

No.7: Limoges, the market place

No.8: Catacombae. Sepulchrum Romanum – Con mortuis in lingua mortua

(Roman tomb – with the dead in a dead language)

No.9: Baba Yaga (The hut on fowl's legs)

No.10: The Great Gate of Kiev

This is, mostly, a programme of ‘visual’ music. While music is – of course – abstract, no matter what ‘programme’ a composer attaches to it, it can come as no surprise that for many people it can conjure up powerful imagery in the mind’s eye. Those who have aphantasia – an inability to visualise – would of course have a different experience. At the other end of the scale are synesthetes, such as the composers Messiaen and Scriabin, who ‘hear’ colours and other visual phenomena. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle. We may find that music generates more or less vivid pictures in the imagination, perhaps inspired by the composer’s ‘programme’ (or helpful explanations in the notes...), perhaps a purely idiosyncratic reaction to the musical stimuli that has nothing to do with either. Whatever the case, these pieces are a fascinating way to explore how music might represent ‘pictures’.



In January 1839 **Robert Schumann** wrote to his future wife Clara about a new collection of piano pieces: ‘I shall run them prettily together, and call them “Kleine Blumenstücke”, like one calls pictures’. ‘Blumenstücke’ refers to a still-life painting of flowers, an art-form that flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries. For the academic Holly Watkins, flower paintings have several associations, from suggesting a simple romantic gesture to symbolising the natural decay of living things: captured in a painting for eternity while the original subject lasts only a few short days. Schumann’s *Blumenstück* was composed, romantically, with Clara in mind – a musical ‘bouquet’ as it were – and dedicated to the splendidly-named Majorin Friederike Serre auf Maxen who supported Robert and Clara in their early relationship. It is a series of musical episodes, opening with a charming melody that does not quite appear again, though its contour of four falling notes (frequently identified as the ‘Clara’ motif) recurs throughout. The second episode is the work’s ‘refrain’, repeated a further three times. In between the music revolves through more playful sections, periodically darkening into the minor key, yet retaining throughout the falling, sighing motif, exquisite in its tiny, short-lived form.

The four-note motif can also be heard in Schumann’s *Fantasie* in C, written around the same time. As in *Blumenstück*, both Clara and the image of flowers are at its centre, yet it is also intertwined with Schumann’s admiration of two other composers. After playing it through for the first time, Clara wrote to her future husband that she ‘was drawn involuntarily towards the window, and ... felt like leaping out to the beautiful spring flowers and embracing them’. Clara was one of the few pianists at the time able to tackle its complexities; another was fellow composer Liszt, to whom Schumann later dedicated the *Fantasie*. But the initial impetus was the music of Beethoven. Schumann had hoped that the *Fantasie*’s publication might contribute financially towards a statue to Beethoven, to be erected in Bonn. A line from Beethoven’s song cycle *An die ferne geliebte* (‘To the distant beloved’) is quoted in the first movement.

Fantasies can, and frequently do, allow the wheels to come off conventional form. This one somewhat resembles a sonata in that it has three movements and is structured around a series of themes. But the movements are in an unconventional order: a fast and turbulent opening, a brisk and noble march, and an elegiac finale. The material itself is organised in a free-wheeling style, especially in the first movement with its rapid changes of mood, ranging from furious to reflective. The opening is rhapsodically lyrical, yet requires the pianist to maintain fiendishly fast semiquavers in the left hand under the passionate melodic line. A middle section, marked ‘Im Legendenton’ (in the manner of a legend) builds from an almost folk-like melody into further elaboration, giving the sense that the legend is one of those with a mighty quest to overcome. After many twists and turns, and the return of the opening material, the movement closes in a peaceful C major. The central movement opens grandly, its march alternating with passages of utter exuberance. The dotted rhythms throughout give it a quality of hectic breathlessness. The last movement is slower, but no less intense. It finally resolves, however, into a lengthy, serene passage and a well-deserved rest after an extraordinary technical and emotional challenge.

In terms of representing the visual in music, **Modest Mussorgsky**’s *Pictures at An Exhibition* (1874) lays its cards firmly on the table. It was a response to an exhibition of paintings in St Petersburg by Mussorgsky’s friend Viktor Hartmann, who had recently died. The composer places himself directly inside the work during the repeated ‘Promenade’ theme, initially in a stately version, then varied upon several times throughout. He wrote that he had conjured up a musical picture of himself ‘roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly, in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and at times sadly, thinking of his departed friend.’

The movements (and pictures) are often paired together to provide contrasts. After the growling ‘Gnomus’, and a gentle Promenade, we hear the mournful ‘Il vecchio castello’. ‘Tuileries’ is light as a feather and over in a flash; while ‘Bydło’, suggesting the movement of cattle, is ponderous and heavyweight. The ‘Ballet of unhatched chicks’ has the atmosphere of a cartoon caper, and is followed by a movement representing a contrast in itself: the snarls and grumbles of Goldenberg and Shmuyke. After a stirring version of the ‘Promenade’, ‘Limoges’ depicts a busy day at the market, before lurching into the suitably haunting ‘Catacombs’, with its great slabs of sonority. A shivering tremolando introduces ‘Cum mortuis in lingua mortua’, a sepulchral ‘Promenade’ among the dead. ‘The Hut on Fowl’s Legs’ is, in its outer sections, punchy and somewhat sinister, with ferocious bass octaves and combative right hand responses; yet it softens into some enigmatic ripples in the central section. Returning to its thunderous octaves, the fowl’s legs finally scuttle up to the Great Gate of Kiev: ‘Promenade’ is transformed in grand style: a noble chorale, cascading fistfuls of notes, and a full-blooded, celebratory conclusion.