

Pictures at an Exhibition

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About the Unit

The unit provides opportunities for children to learn how

- Society, time and place can influence the composition of music
- Composers may be inspired by non-musical starting points
- Repetition and variation are important elements in musical structure
- Arrangers rework and reinterpret music composed by others

It could provide a useful focus for a visit to an art gallery to be interpreted through music, art and dance.

As well as considering how Mussorgsky interprets Hartmann's original pictures, pupils could create their own visual interpretations of Mussorgsky's music. The unit links to animations of Gnomus and Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks.

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Mussorgsky came from a family of wealthy Russian landowners. He showed early musical talent, and was an excellent pianist and imaginative composer.

He belonged to a group of Russian composers that included Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. Their music was influenced by the Russian language, folk music and the music of the Russian Orthodox Church.

A lot of Mussorgsky's works were never completed. Rimsky-Korsakov edited and arranged several works after Mussorgsky's death, including Pictures at an Exhibition.

Pictures at an Exhibition and Orchestrations

Mussorgsky composed *Pictures at an Exhibition* as a suite of pieces for piano. However, the work became popular when the French impressionist composer, Maurice Ravel, arranged the work for orchestra in 1922.

Today, orchestral arrangements of Pictures at an Exhibition are much more likely to be heard than the original piano work. Although Ravel's orchestration is best known, other interpretations are well worth listening to.

Listening to the original piano versions, and comparing these with orchestrated versions provides an introduction to the art of arranging and adapting music and encourages careful and detailed listening. Points for discussion include:

- Do arrangements add to or detract from Mussorgsky's original piano work?
- How might Mussorgsky have felt? *Delighted? Flattered? Curious? Angry? Horrified?*

One critic thought orchestration spoiled Mussorgsky's work, comparing arrangers to small children colouring in black and white sketches. Different arrangers have identified and developed different elements of the original suite of pieces. Some have not only altered the original rhythms, tempo and dynamics, but have even rewritten entire sections. Other arrangers have added choirs and even camel bells! Others have created entirely electronic arrangements which Mussorgsky could never have imagined.

Ravel's orchestration, along with those of many other arrangers can easily be found online. Naxos have produced a handy and affordable CD of different orchestrations edited by Leonard Slatkin. See

http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=8.570716

Victor Hartmann

Victor Hartmann was a versatile and busy artist. Although working mainly in watercolour (painting 150 versions of Limoges market alone!) he made architectural drawings, designed a range of household objects and even tried his hand at theatrical and ballet scenery. Unfortunately, some of the original sketches and paintings relating to *Pictures at an Exhibition* have been lost.

Hartmann was just 39 when he died. As he was so popular, a memorial exhibition of over 400 of his watercolours, architectural drawings and drawings took place in February 1874 in St Petersburg.

Pictures at an Exhibition

Pictures at an Exhibition can be thought of as a set of carefully-observed miniatures: a series of pages from a composer's sketch-book. Each musical episode is short, but carefully balanced and crafted.

Just as a series of paintings may share a theme, there are links between Mussorgsky's compositions. The macabre fascinated Mussorgsky, and makes its appearance in *Gnomus*, *The Old Castle*, *Catacombs* and the nightmarish *Babar Yaga*

Promenades and Processions

Mussorgsky connects his musical 'pictures' with music suggesting visitors walking from picture to picture. This is called the 'Promenade'. The impression of walking is enhanced by the music alternating between five and six beats to the bar.

Pictures begin with music suggesting a grand and formal procession to mark the opening of the exhibition. Important people seem to make their entrances. The Promenade music returns between

- a) Gnomus and The Old Castle
- b) The Old Castle and The Tuilleries
- c) Bydlo and the Ballad of the Unhatched chicks.
- d) As the variation 'Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua'

- Each time, the mood of the music is different, reflecting how the pictures affect the viewer. Can pupils describe these moods? (*self-assured /nervous and slightly agitated/ quiet and reflective, etc*)
- Listen to the opening promenade in a large space, like the hall. Imagine this is an art gallery, and that pupils are visitors at the opening of a private exhibition. Think about different ways of walking; stopping to view the exhibits; greeting other visitors, etc. Perhaps some visitors could follow a guide (carrying an umbrella)?

Gallery

- Research and select four works of art, varying in mood (disturbing, funny, reflective etc).
- Compose a 'walking' melody to be sung/played by everyone
- Discuss how each picture might affect the viewers, and how their moods might change as they move from one picture to another.
- Discuss ways in which the melody might be varied to reflect these moods. Work in four groups to compose and perform these. Vary tempo, instruments, dynamics, rhythm, etc.

Gnomus

Gnomus was inspired by a sketch by Hartmann for a wooden nutcracker. Wooden nutcrackers carved as people, animals and characters from stories were popular Victorian Christmas novelties (eg. the Nutcracker soldier, based on Hoffman's story, with music by Tchaikovsky).

Mussorgsky's nasty gnome lives in the dense dark forests of traditional fairy tales. Fast, scurrying melodies suggest a quick and secretive creature scabbling through tree roots, branches and undergrowth.

- Ravel added percussion instruments in his orchestration. What effect do children think these have?
- Children may previously have composed melodies moving by leap and step in response to Saint Saens' Kangaroos in his Carnival of the Animals. Can they compose melodies that twist and turn, start and stop suddenly to suggest the secretive and sinister Gnomus?

- Are there possibilities for children to explore animation? See Andy Lyon's animation of Gnomus at http://andylyon.com/portfolio_mod/gnomus

Different ways of moving and qualities of movement are expressed throughout Pictures at an Exhibition. In addition to Gnomus, consider:

- a) the promenades (see above)
- b) the comical ballet of the unhatched chicks
- c) Baba Yaga's hut running on chicken legs
- d) the formal procession of The Great Gate of Kiev

The entire suite of pieces offers excellent and varied opportunities for exploration and interpretation through expressive language, movement and dance.

The Old Castle

Hartmann travelled Europe painting watercolours of places, buildings and people. Sometimes he would include imaginary figures to add character and atmosphere. While in Italy, Hartmann painted a castle. He added a medieval minstrel, singing and playing the lute in front of the castle walls.

- Mussorgsky's music is mysterious and rather haunting. Did he see the minstrel as a ghost returning to the castle to serenade a long dead lover with his sad song? Could pupils weave a story around this?

This mysterious quality was picked up and developed by Ravel in his orchestration. Here, bassoons set the scene, and are joined by the haunting melody played on an alto saxophone (other arrangers have played the melody on a solo cor anglais, or muted trumpet)

A single note (G sharp) is held throughout like a drone in medieval music.

- Listen to medieval troubadour and minstrel music. Pupils might explore drones on tuned percussion and compose and perform their own troubadour songs

Mussorgsky's *The Old Castle* has been associated in film versions with Igor, the sinister peasant who soothes and controls the monster with music played on a shepherd's pipe.

- Pupils might create a film storyboard along the following lines, adding music.

You are exploring a ruined castle high up in the mountains. As you are scrambling over a low ruined wall, you trip over a loose stone and twist your ankle badly. Your companion goes off to the village to get help, as there is no mobile signal. Unfortunately, the nearest house is a very long way. You fall asleep, and when you

wake it is dark. A flickering light appears high up in a ruined window . Someone or something is singing

The Tuilleries

The Tuilleries was once a palace of the French Bourbon King. After the French revolution, the palace was destroyed and the gardens given over to the public. Mussorgsky suggests the singing games of children as they call one to another.

- Pupils might compose their own music for a park on a lazy Sunday afternoon, incorporating a singing game played by children.

Bydlo

The tune is a folk song whistled or sung by the farmer as he drives to market. The piece begins very quietly as the ox-cart approaches from a distance. In Ravel's orchestration, it becomes louder and louder as the cart gets nearer, and is at its loudest as it drives past. The music gets gradually quieter as the cart passes into the distance. Another arranger added camel bells!

- Bydlo offers an excellent opportunity to introduce or reinforce the following musical terms:

Crescendo: getting gradually louder

Fortissimo: very loud

Diminuendo: getting gradually quieter

- Pupils might compose their own music for the ox-cart as it approaches, passes and disappears again into the distance exploring the use of dynamics. What tune might an English farmer whistle or sing driving to market?

The Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks

This short, comical piece suggests hatching chicks scurrying about trying to throw off their shells.

See Natasha Turovsky's brilliant animated paintings accompany an orchestral performance at <https://www.pinterest.com/annetjeerdsma/pictures-at-an-exhibition/>

The piece is in ABA form. Children should listen carefully, indicating when they hear

- a) the introduction of the middle section
- b) the return of the opening section
- c) Pupils could choreograph and perform their own dance. What movements might be suggested for the two contrasting sections?

The Catacombs

The painting of two men in top hats (possibly Hartmann himself and another architect)

exploring the Catacombs in Paris resembles atmospheric illustrations and descriptions of gas-lit and sinister locations found in Victorian novels and stories (a genre more recently explored by Phillip Pulman).

- Hartmann's picture might inspire creative writing leading to the creation of a Victorian-style melodrama accompanied by Mussorgsky's music
 - In Catacombs, Mussorgsky tries to capture the atmosphere of a journey through the shadows, damp and decay of ancient and confusing passages. Some listeners think this is difficult to do on the piano alone. Listen to arrangements for orchestra, and for brass ensembles. Do children think these are successful in creating the gloomy atmosphere? Can they give their reasons?

The activity suggested in the pupil pages links to the use of performance poems. The rhythmic chanting of words may suggest echoing passages. Additionally, processing vocal sounds using ICT could add to the atmosphere.

Baba Yaga

Russian composers thought the mythology, superstitions and fairy tales of Russia were important. Rimsky-Korsakov had explored Russian folk tales, and his pupil Stravinsky composed music for The Firebird around another popular fairy story.

Baba Yaga appears in several gruesome Russian fairy tales. , She doesn't fly on a broomstick, but in a pestle (in which she also grinds the bones of her victims!) She lives in a very odd and frightening hut. Surrounded by posts capped with human skulls, the hut sprouts chicken legs to chase and catch unfortunate children.

In Mussorgsky's music,

- The hut sprouts legs and begins to move. It gathers momentum, running faster and faster.
- As the hut pursues children, the music suggests the excitement and terror of the chase.
- There is a point in the music which resembles a game of hide and seek, as the magical hut seems to lose track of the children, then rediscovers them. Discuss how the composer suggests this

This could lead to a study of music and film (eg. chase scenes in silent movies)

Read stories of Baba Yaga at

<http://www.thebells.net/Halloween/BabaYaga/>

Hartmann's design for a clock case in the shape of Baba Yaga's hut seems very odd.

- Could children compose music to suggest Baba Yaga's clock?
 - The witch might fly out of a window in her pestle like the cuckoo in a cuckoo clock
 - What will the chime sound like?
 - The clock might sprout chicken legs and move about on the hour.
- (n.b. the above might connect with work in *The Clock of the Long Now*)

Great Gate of Kiev (Bogatyr Gate: Ukraine)

Victor Hartmann entered a competition to design great stone gates to the city of Kiev to replace the original wooden gates.

His design is a massive structure decorated with coloured brick, topped with the Imperial Russian Eagle. To one side is a three-story belfry with a cupola shaped like a Slavic helmet

The Great Gate of Kiev is the final movement of *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This suggests a solemn procession every bit as grand as Hartmann's design for Kiev's Great Gate. Mussorgsky incorporates the ringing of church bells and the singing of a hymn. Some arrangers have actually incorporated actual voices singing a Russian hymn into their arrangements.

Building the Gate

- Discuss the stages of building the gate
- What trades might be involved? *stonemasons, carpenters, bricklayers, tillers, scaffolders, etc.*
- Imagine Victor Hartmann and Modest Mussorgsky are visiting the site. As they walk, they hear sounds of different types of building work taking place

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Vibraphone' and is in 4/4 time. It contains a whole rest in the first measure, followed by a half note G4, a half note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note B4. The lyrics 'Build a gate to be proud of!' are written below the notes. The bottom staff is labeled 'Vib.' and is in 4/4 time. It starts with a 4-measure rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, a quarter note F4, a quarter note E4, and a quarter note D4. The lyrics 'Mix ing sand and wat - er! Build with bricks and mor - tar' are written below the notes.

Procession

Children could compose music for a formal procession through the Great Gate. The music could be performed as a number of episodes within this, accompanying the mayor and civic dignitaries, the priest and choir, the town militia, etc. Each is celebrated through singing and music as they pass in turn through the massive archway

- Mayor and civic dignitaries
Here are people to be proud of
Mayor and corporation
Pride of all our nation!

- b) Builders
*Build a gate to be proud of
 Mixing sand and water
 Build with bricks and mortar*

- c) Bell founders
*Cast great bells to be proud of
 Ringing in the tower
 Can you feel their power?*

- d) Militia
*Here are soldiers to be proud of
 Listen to their feet
 Go marching to the beat*

- e) Choir
*Hear our choir to be proud of
 Every single part
 Remembered off by heart*



Instrumental parts can be added to the melody. The lowest accompanying part (drone) is best played on bass metallophone or xylophone, the other accompanying part (ostinato) may be played on alto xylophone, metallophone or chime bars.

Peal of bells may be added played on glockenspiels, chime bars or metallophones, creating interesting harmonic clashes!

- Listen to Douglas Gamley’s arrangement of the Bogatyr Gate on the CD Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition NAXOS 8. 571716. Can children create their own chant for the monks?