

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Carnival Overture, Op. 92

Antonín Dvořák was born in Mühllhausen, Bohemia in 1841 and died in Prague in 1904. He composed his Carnival Overture in 1891 and led the first performance in Prague the following year. The score calls for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

When Dvořák composed three concert overtures meant to represent the “three great creative forces of the Universe,” he called them *Nature*, *Life*, and *Love*. He originally intended that they should be played together as a set—there is some thematic unity among the three and they do make an interesting trilogy. But he eventually decided to issue them separately, and renamed them *In Nature’s Realm*, *Carnival*, and *Othello*.

Dvořák described the program for *Carnival* thus: “A lonely contemplative wanderer reaches the city at nightfall where a carnival of pleasure reigns supreme. On every side is heard the clangor of instruments, mingled with shouts of joy and the unrestrained hilarity of the people, giving vent to their feelings in song and dance.” In the music you can hear that these people are having a foot-stomping good time: the rambunctious themes whirl about the revelers with irrepressible energy. A short breather comes as the bassoon introduces a tune in the strings that is fairly dripping with Bohemian flavor.

After a bit more “clangor” the music comes to a sweet, slow section that describes, in Dvořák’s words, “a pair of straying lovers.” You can hear the Nature theme that Dvořák used in all three overtures in the clarinet’s reply to the lovers’ music, and in the English horn as it rounds off the episode. From there it’s back to the bustle of a festive night and a dash to the finish in the breathless coda.

To Dvořák, the gentle beauty of Nature, the spirit of Life, and the joys (and jealousies) of Love were all of a piece, three facets of the human condition. *Carnival* is a reminder that the human condition also allows for a great deal of *fun*.

MASON BATES

Liquid Interface

Mason Bates was born in Philadelphia in 1977. He composed Liquid Interface on a commission from the National Symphony Orchestra in 2006 and it was first performed the next year by that orchestra under the direction of Leonard Slatkin. The score calls for 3 flutes, 3 piccolos, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, E-flat clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, prerecorded “electronica,” percussion, harp, piano, and strings.

Bates includes this note with the score of *Liquid Interface*: “Water has influenced countless musical endeavors—*La mer* and *Siegfried’s* ‘Rhine Journey’ quickly come to mind—and after living on Berlin’s enormous Wannsee I formed a new take on the idea. In the course of barely two months, I watched this huge body of water transform itself from an ice sheet thick enough to support sausage vendors to a refreshing swimming spot heavy with humidity. If the play of the waves inspired Debussy, then why not examine the phenomenon of water in its variety of forms?

“*Liquid Interface* moves through all of them, inhabiting an increasingly hotter world in each successive movement. *Glaciers Calving* opens with huge blocks of sound drifting slowly upwards through the orchestra, finally cracking off in the upper register. (Snippets of actual recordings of glaciers breaking into the Antarctic, supplied by the adventurous radio journalist Daniel Grossman, appear in the opening.) As the thaw continues these sonic blocks melt into aqueous, blurry figurations. The beats of the electronics evolve from slow ‘trip-hop’ into energetic ‘drum’n’ bass,’ and at the movement’s climax the orchestra blazes in turbulent figuration.

The ensuing *Scherzo Liquido* explores water on a micro-level: droplets splash from the speakers in the form of a variety of nimble electronica beats, with the orchestra swirling around them.

“The temperature continues to rise as we move into *Crescent City*, which examines the destructive force as water grows from the small-scale to the enormous. This is illustrated in a theme-and-variations form in which the opening melody, at first quiet and lyrical, gradually accumulates a trail of echoing figuration behind it. In a nod to New Orleans, which knows the power of water all too well, the instruments trail the melody in a reimagination of Dixieland swing. As the improvisatory sound of a dozen soloists begins to lose control, verging into big band territory, the electronics—silent in this movement until now—enter in the form of a distant storm.

“At the peak of the movement, with an enormous wake of figuration swirling behind the soaring melody, the orchestra is buried in an electronic hurricane of processed storm sounds. We are swept into the muffled depths of the ocean. This water-covered world, which relaxes into a kind of balmy, greenhouse paradise, is where we end the symphony in *On the Wannsee*. A simple, lazy tune bends in the strings above ambient sounds recorded at a dock on the Wannsee. Gentle beats echo quietly in the moist heat. At near *pianissimo* from this point, the melody floats lazily upwards through the humidity and, at the work’s end, finally evaporates.”

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Pictures at an Exhibition, Orchestrated by Maurice Ravel

Modest Mussorgsky was born in Karevo, Russia in 1839 and died in St. Petersburg in 1881. He composed Pictures at an Exhibition for solo piano in 1874. Ravel orchestrated the work in 1922 and this version was first performed in Paris the following year with Serge Koussevitzky conducting. The work is scored for 3 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, alto saxophone, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, celeste, and strings.

One of Modest Mussorgsky’s closest friends was Victor Hartmann, an architect, designer, and artist of great talent and even more promising potential. When Hartmann died suddenly of a heart attack at age 39, Mussorgsky was devastated. A retrospective of the artist’s works was organized shortly after his death, and Mussorgsky was deeply moved by what he saw there. A few weeks later he began his own tribute to Hartmann, *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Mussorgsky composed a piano work of colossal proportions, so immensely difficult that performances are still quite rare. The piece is a collection of short movements, each representing one of Hartmann’s works, with a recurring “Promenade” that represents Mussorgsky strolling through the “gallery.” Many assume that all of the pictures described by the music had been on display at the Hartmann retrospective, but this is not so. Three of the pictures did hang there, but the rest Mussorgsky knew from having seen them at Hartmann’s home. Unfortunately, most of Hartmann’s art has been lost over the years; by the time Ravel’s 1922 orchestration revived interest in his work, it was too late.

The piece unfolds as follows:

Promenade: A trumpet leads as we enter the exhibition. Mussorgsky said that the uneven eleven-beat phrase in this music represented his own “unusual physiognomy.”

Gnomus: This is Hartmann’s design for a wooden nutcracker in the shape of a gnome.

Il Vecchio Castello: A painting of an unknown Italian castle, with a lute-playing troubadour included to provide a sense of scale. One of Ravel’s many brilliant strokes was assigning the troubadour’s lugubrious song to the alto saxophone.

Tuileries: A watercolor showing children at play in a corner of the famous Parisian garden.

Bydlo: “Bydlo” is the Polish word for “cattle.” The painting was a watercolor of oxen pulling a peasant cart with enormous wooden wheels.

Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells: A sketch of a child’s ballet costume in the shape of an egg, with the wearer’s head and limbs poking out through holes.

“*Samuel*” *Goldenburg* and “*Schmuyle*”: These portraits of two Polish Jews—one rich, one poor—were drawings owned by Mussorgsky himself. The quotation marks around the Yiddish name “Schmuyle” and its Germanized derivative “Samuel” seem to indicate that two different sides of the same personality were being described, neither of which was particularly pleasant.

The Marketplace at Limoges: This was Hartmann’s drawing of the cathedral at Limoges, but Mussorgsky depicted the banter of the market women in the picture’s foreground.

Catacombae, Sepulchrum Romanum: “Roman Burial Place.” This drawing showed Hartmann himself studying a pile of skulls in the catacomb by the light of a lantern.

Con Mortuis in Lingua Mortua: “With the Dead in a Dead Language.” This is a continuation of the previous piece. Mussorgsky wrote in the score: “The creative spirit of the departed Hartmann leads me to the skulls, calls out to them, and the skulls begin to glow dimly from within.”

The Hut on Fowl’s Legs: Hartmann’s drawing was a design for a clock in the shape of Baba Yaga’s hut, which stood on chicken feet. Baba Yaga was a cannibalistic witch of Russian folklore; Mussorgsky depicts her wild ride through the sky in the giant mortar she used to grind up the bones of her victims.

The Great Gate of Kiev: Hartmann once entered a design competition for a commemorative gate. A drawing that survives shows that Hartmann’s entry was a weighty structure with a cupola in the shape of a Slavonic helmet and enormous columns that appeared as if they had sunk deeply into the ground. The gate was never built.

Pictures at an Exhibition has been orchestrated more than a half-dozen times—the piano score fairly cries out for it—but by far the most popular version has been Ravel’s. When Serge Koussevitzky commissioned the project Ravel was pleased, for he had been suffering the composer’s equivalent of “writer’s block” and he hoped that the job would free his creative logjam. That was not to be, but Ravel’s brilliant work here has performed a great service to posterity: *Pictures at an Exhibition* has gone from a rarity to a concert hall staple. Russian composers always seem to have had a flair for colorful orchestration, and Mussorgsky surely did. To his credit, Ravel’s work does not make *Pictures* sound like a piece by Ravel, but instead is a superb recreation of how it might have been realized by Mussorgsky himself.

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