

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

7.30PM, Thursday 5 November
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)

The Frescoes of Piero della Francesca (1955)

- I. *Andante poco moderato*
- II. *Adagio*
- III. *Poco allegro*

DURATION: c.18'

Martinů's triptych was instigated by the cycle of ten frescoes by Piero della Francesca which are usually referred to as the *Legend of the True Cross*. They illustrate the history of the wood that made the cross on which Christ was crucified, which in the legend came from a tree planted on Adam's grave. Martinů wrote that the music is not descriptive, but expresses the impression made upon him by the frescoes.

The first movement was inspired by the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon, in which she warns the king of the final destiny of the tree. Greatly alarmed, Solomon orders the tree to be buried. Despite the solemnity of this scene, the most prominent melody in the first movement is an expression of Martinů's joy on seeing the fresco for the first time.

In the second movement the Emperor Constantine dreams of an angel which hovers above his tent, holding a cross from which an unearthly light emanates. In the third movement a martial element refers to a battle scene, but the calm music that brings the work to a close undoubtedly reflects the fresco called *The Exaltation of the True Cross*.

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Trumpet Concerto (1796)

- I. *Allegro*
- II. *Andante*
- III. *Allegro*

DURATION: c.14'

Before the late 18th century trumpets had only been capable of playing the natural notes of the overtone series, with scales possible only in the upper register. In 1796 Anton Weidinger commissioned Haydn to compose a concerto for keyed trumpet, an instrument that enjoyed a brief vogue in the early 19th century before being superseded by the valve trumpet. It was only in 1800 that he felt confident enough to play the work in public.

During the opening orchestral tutti the solo trumpet plays a few 'natural' notes, but the first solo entrance is a melody in its low register that would have been impossible on the natural trumpet. Throughout the rest of the movement the trumpet displays its newly discovered chromatic abilities. In the slow movement Haydn gives the soloist a lyrical melody that wouldn't have been out of place in an opera. The finale is a swift rondo, again displaying the keyed trumpet's chromatic facility.

INTERVAL

Conductor Tomáš Netopil
Trumpet Selina Ott

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

orch. Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Pictures at an Exhibition (1874; orch. 1922)

Eleven movements, played without pause

- I. *Promenade – Gnomus – Promenade*
- II. *The Old Castle – Promenade*
- III. *Tuilleries*
- IV. *Bydlo – Promenade*
- V. *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*
- VI. *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmužle*
- VII. *The Marketplace at Limoges*
- VIII. *The Catacombs*
- IX. *Cum mortuis in lingua mortua*
- X. *The Hut on Fowl's Legs*
- XI. *The Great Gate of Kiev*

DURATION: c.35'

Following the death of the architect and artist Viktor Hartmann at the age of 39, Russian critic Vladimir Stassov organised an exhibition of more than 400 of his paintings and sketches and Mussorgsky composed his most substantial work for piano in homage. The vast majority of the works featured in the exhibition have been lost in the intervening years and only Mussorgsky's musical tribute has survived to preserve the memory of his friend's work. There have been more than a dozen orchestrations of the work, but Ravel's is by far the best known.

The opening *Promenade* sets the scene, representing Mussorgsky himself walking around the exhibition. The first picture was Hartmann's design for a wooden nutcracker in the shape of a grotesque, wrinkled gnome. According to Stassov, *The Old Castle* depicted a troubadour singing and accompanying himself on a guitar in front of a medieval castle. Ravel gives his song to a saxophone. *The Tuilleries* is a picture of children playing and quarrelling in the famous Paris gardens, which is followed by a picture of lumbering oxen pulling a heavy cart. Hartmann had made a series of whimsical costume designs for a ballet called *Trilby* in which child dancers wear egg costumes with their legs sticking out – the *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmužle is a portrait of two Polish Jews – one rich, the other a poor beggar. *The Marketplace at Limoges* is a representation of gossip and general busy-ness. An exploration by lanternlight of the Paris catacombs leads directly to a section headed by a Latin phrase meaning 'With the dead in a dead language'.

Without a pause we go straight to *The Hut on Fowl's Legs*, a depiction of the most famous of Russian witches, Baba Yaga. Again without a break we are propelled into the finale, *The Great Gate of Kiev*. In 1869 Hartmann entered a competition for a design for the Bogatyr Gate, intended to be placed at the entrance to Kyiv. The gate was never built but Mussorgsky's bold piano piece and Ravel's ingenious orchestration preserve something of its grandeur.

COPYRIGHT © ROBERT JOHNSON 2026

Notes Fund: Music for this concert has been supported by Gene Dillman