

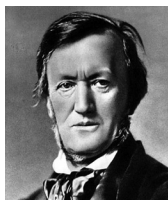
# notes

March 4/5

**PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION**

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

**30 SECOND NOTES:** This Des Moines Symphony program opens with the *Prelude to Act III of Lohengrin*, which was performed in the first (1937) Drake/Des Moines Civic Symphony season. The *B-flat Piano Concerto* is a product of Johannes Brahms's maturity, inspired by a trip to sunny Italy on the eve of his 45th birthday. Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is his evocation of images at a memorial show of works in 1874 by his friend, the artist and architect Victor Hartmann, whose original piano score Maurice Ravel rendered into the vivid colors of the symphony orchestra fifty years later.



## **RICHARD WAGNER**

**Born May 22, 1813 in  
Leipzig;**

**Died February 13, 1883  
in Venice.**

### **PRELUDE TO ACT III OF *LOHENGRIN* (1850)**

- First performed in Weimar, August 28, 1850, with Franz Liszt conducting.
- The *Prelude to Act III* was first performed by the Drake/Des Moines Civic Symphony on November 27, 1937, with Frank Noyes conducting. Subsequent performances occurred in 1950, 1977, 1992, 2008, and most recently on September 29 & 30, 2012 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

*(Duration: c. 3 minutes)*

Like all of Wagner's operas, *Lohengrin* is a heady brew of myth, legend, religion, history, philosophy and the supernatural all wrapped into

a story of redemption through love, conflict between conscience and desire, and the triumph of good over evil. *Lohengrin* is a medieval Swan Knight and one of the brotherhood devoted to the protection of the Holy Grail. Just as the Grail itself is extraordinary, so too is the opera's *Prelude to Act III* which sets the mood for the wedding festivities between *Lohengrin* and *Elsa*. The opening and closing sections of the tripartite form are derived from two closely linked motifs, both highly acrobatic in their melodic outline and both beginning with an upward leaping triplet. The first is the dazzling burst of sound that opens the act, the second is heard in lower strings and brass. The contrasting central section features the woodwinds. In a staged performance, the *Prelude* flows directly into the music of the *Wedding March* to which millions have walked the aisle, so a contrived ending is needed for the concert hall: a statement of the ominous "Forbidden Question" or "Warning" motif. Though brief, this prelude is one of the

most brilliant displays of orchestral virtuosity in all Wagner.

(Note by Robert Markow)

**The score calls for three flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tambourine and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.**



## JOHANNES BRAHMS

**Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg;  
died April 3, 1897 in Vienna.**

### PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2 IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 83 (1881)

- First performed on November 9, 1881 in Budapest, conducted by Alexander Erkel with the composer as soloist.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on November 11, 1956 with Frank Noyes conducting and Grant Johannesen as soloist. Five subsequent performances occurred, most recently on October 29 & 30, 2005 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Jonathan Biss as soloist. (*Duration: ca. 46 minutes*)

In April 1878, Brahms journeyed to Goethe's "land where the lemon trees bloom" with two friends, the Viennese surgeon Theodor Billroth and the composer Carl Goldmark. Though he found the music of Italy ghastly (he complained of hearing one opera that consisted wholly of final cadences), he loved the cathedrals, the sculptures, the artworks and, especially, the countryside. Spring was just turning into summer

during his visit, and he wrote to his dear friend Clara Schumann, "You can have no conception of how beautiful it is here." Still under the spell of the beneficent Italian climate, Brahms sketched themes for his *Second Piano Concerto* on his return to Austria on the eve of his 45th birthday. Other matters pressed, however, and the *Concerto* was put aside. Three years later, during the spring of 1881, Brahms returned to Italy and he was inspired by this second trip to resume composition on the *Concerto*. The score was completed by July. Whether or not the halcyon influence of Italy can be detected in the wondrous music of the *B-flat Concerto* is for each listener to decide. This work is certainly much more mellow than the stormy *First Concerto*, introduced over twenty years earlier, but whether this quality is the result of Brahms' trips to the sunny south, or of a decade of imbibing Viennese *Gemütlichkeit*, or simply of greater maturity remains a matter for speculation.

The *Concerto* opens with a sylvan horn call answered by sweeping arpeggios from the piano. These initial gestures are introductory to the sonata form proper, which begins with the robust entry of the full orchestra. A number of themes are presented in the exposition; most are lyrical, but one is vigorously rhythmic. The development uses all of the thematic material, with one section welded almost seamlessly to the next, a characteristic of all Brahms' greatest works. The recapitulation is ushered in by the solo horn, here given a richer orchestral accompaniment than on its earlier appearance.

It is rare for a concerto to have more than three movements. The second movement, a scherzo, was added by Brahms to expand the structure of this *Concerto* to a symphonic four movements. The composer's biographer Max Kalbeck thought that the movement had originally been intended for the *Violin Concerto* but that Brahms, on the advice of Joseph

Joachim, for whom the piece was written, had eliminated it from that work. In key and mood, it differs from the other movements of the *Concerto* to provide a welcome contrast in the overall architecture of the composition.

The third movement is a touching nocturne based on the song of the solo cello heard immediately at the beginning. (Brahms later fitted this same melody with words as the song *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* ["*My Sleep Grows Ever More Peaceful*"].) An agitated central section gives way to long, magical phrases for the clarinets which lead to a return of the solo cello's lovely theme.

The finale fuses rondo and sonata elements in a style strongly reminiscent of Hungarian Gypsy music. The jaunty rondo theme is presented without introduction. It is carefully and thoroughly examined before two lyrical motives are presented. As a study in the way in which small musical fragments may be woven into an exquisite whole, this rousing movement is unexcelled.

**The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and the usual strings.**



## **MODEST MUSSORGSKY**

**Born March 21, 1839 in  
Karevo, Pskov District,  
Russia; died March 28,  
1881 in St. Petersburg.**

### **PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION (1874)**

Orchestrated by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) in 1923.

• Ravel's orchestration first performed on May 3, 1923 in Paris, conducted by Sergei Koussevitzky.

• *The Great Gate of Kiev* was first performed by the Des Moines Symphony on December 2, 1945 with Frank Noyes conducting. *Pictures at an Exhibition* was first performed in its entirety by the Des Moines Symphony on March 9, 1980 with Yuri Krasnapolsky conducting. Five subsequent performances occurred, most recently on November 5 & 6, 2011 with Joseph Giunta conducting.  
(Duration: ca. 32 minutes)

In the years around 1850, with the spirit of nationalism sweeping through Europe, several young Russian artists banded together to rid their native art of foreign influences in order to establish a distinctive national character for their works. At the front of this movement was a group of composers known as "The Mighty Handful" or "The Five," whose members included Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, César Cui and Mily Balakirev. Among the allies that "The Five" found in other fields was the artist and architect Victor Hartmann, with whom Mussorgsky became close personal friends. Hartmann's premature death at 39 stunned the composer and the entire Russian artistic community. The noted critic Vladimir Stassov organized a memorial exhibit of Hartmann's work in February 1874, and it was under the inspiration of that showing of his late friend's works that Mussorgsky conceived his *Pictures at an Exhibition* for solo piano. Maurice Ravel made his masterful orchestration of the Mussorgsky score for Sergei Koussevitzky's Paris concerts in 1923.

*Promenade.* According to Stassov, this recurring section depicts Mussorgsky "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 friend."

*The Gnome.* Hartmann's drawing is for a

fantastic wooden nutcracker representing a gnome who gives off savage shrieks while he waddles about on short, bandy legs.

*Promenade — The Old Castle.* A troubadour (represented by the alto saxophone) sings a doleful lament before a foreboding, ruined ancient fortress.

*Promenade — Tuileries.* Mussorgsky's subtitle is "Dispute of the Children after Play." Hartmann's picture shows a corner of the famous Parisian garden filled with nursemaids and their youthful charges.

*Bydlo.* Hartmann's picture depicts a rugged wagon drawn by oxen. The peasant driver sings a plaintive melody (solo tuba) heard first from afar, then close-by, before the cart passes away into the distance.

*Promenade — Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells.* Hartmann's costume design for the 1871 fantasy ballet *Trilby* shows dancers enclosed in enormous egg shells, with only their arms, legs and heads protruding.

*Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle.* The title was given to the music by Stasov. Mussorgsky originally called this movement "Two Jews: one rich, the other poor." It was inspired by a pair of pictures which Hartmann presented to the composer showing two residents of the Warsaw ghetto, one rich and pompous (a weighty unison for strings and winds), the other poor and complaining (muted trumpet). Mussorgsky based both themes on incantations he had heard on visits to Jewish synagogues.

*The Marketplace at Limoges.* A lively sketch of a bustling market, with animated conversations flying among the female vendors.

*Catacombs, Roman Tombs — Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua.* Hartmann's drawing shows him being led by a guide with a lantern through cavernous underground tombs. The movement's second section, bearing the title

"With the Dead in a Dead Language," is a mysterious transformation of the *Promenade* theme.

*The Hut on Fowl's Legs.* Hartmann's sketch is a design for an elaborate clock suggested by Baba Yaga, the fearsome witch of Russian folklore who eats human bones she has ground into paste with her mortar and pestle. She also can fly through the air on her fantastic mortar, and Mussorgsky's music suggests a wild, midnight ride; moving then without pause to the work's finale, *The Great Gate of Kiev.*

*The Great Gate of Kiev.* Mussorgsky's grand conclusion to his suite was inspired by Hartmann's plan for a gateway for the city of Kiev in the massive old Russian style crowned with a cupola in the shape of a Slavic warrior's helmet. The majestic music suggests both the imposing bulk of the edifice (never built, incidentally) and a brilliant procession passing through its arches. The work ends with a heroic statement of the *Promenade* theme and a jubilant pealing of the great bells of the city.

**The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, whip, chime, ratchet, tam-tam, cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, xylophone, glockenspiel, celesta, two harps and the usual strings.**