

SONGS FOR ALL HALLOWS' EVE

MUSIC OF MODEST PETROVICH MUSSORGSKY



Ben Flanders

baritone

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piano

Songs and Dances of Death

The Song of the Flea

or “Mephistopheles’ Song in Auerbach’s Cellar”

Pictures at an Exhibition

The Songs and Dances of Death

“Death be not proud, though some have called you mighty and dreadful, you are not so...”

—John Donne

The death in these songs is indeed mighty and dreadful, and full of pride in her work (for in Russian folklore death always comes for us in the guise of a woman) but these are not simply the songs and dances of death, there is another presence felt, that of the omniscient narrator. Each song begins with the narrator setting the scene, with the musical imagery, and words the narrator speaks.

In the lullaby the endless rocking of the cradle by an exhausted mother is the prelude to the narrator’s first words.” The child, is moaning. A candle, almost consumed, sends the shadows dancing around the room” Soon, death comes to the door as a kindly grandmother to sing the baby to sleep. In Serenade, the only song where death appears as a man, the narrator describes the dark magic of night, an invalid young woman alone. Death appears as a foreign knight, a stranger of magic power, who sings a serenade beneath the window, seducing her away from a life of pain. In Trepak, the scene is set with an empty chord, which is completed by the singer as he describes a dark foreboding forest and clearing. Then a drunk old man appears, who has become lost in a snowstorm. and his stumbling weaving progress down the path comes to resemble a stumbling Trepak in a minor key that he dances with his companion, Death. Finally, we arrive on a battlefield, the fire and smoke, the confusion and the pain, and when night comes and the battle is ended, death comes to inspect her new army of the dead. “Life made you enemies, I bring you peace, men will forget you, but at the midnight hour, I will dance on your graves, forever!”

Death does not see life in all it’s sweetness. When life is sweet, death is not there to see it. These are songs about the presence of death in our lives, as death goes about her work, seeing only that she brings release from torment, from sickness, from the horrors of war.

“Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
and dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,”

— John Donne, *Death be not Proud*



The Songs and Dances of Death

texts by Golenishchev–Kutusov

1. Lullaby
2. Serenade
3. Trepak
4. The Field Marshal

1. Lullaby

(sung in Russian)

The child moans. A candle, almost burnt out, dimly glimmers all around. All night long, rocking the cradle, a mother has not let herself sleep. In the small hours of the morning, compassionate Death is at the door. Carefully she knocks! Startled, the mother looks back anxiously...

DEATH: "Don't be frightened, my dear! Pale morning is already peeking in the window, you're tired of crying, of yearning, of loving. Doze off a little, I will sit for you. You don't know how to calm a child, I will sing more sweetly than you."

MOTHER: "Sh! My child is tossing, struggling, tearing at my soul"

DEATH: "Yes, well, with me he will quiet soon enough. Rock-a-bye baby..."

MOTHER: "His little cheeks are getting pale, his breath is getting weaker... Be silent, I beg you!"

DEATH: "This is a good sign: it takes away the pain. Rock-a-bye baby..."

MOTHER: "Damn you, get out! With your tenderness you are killing him!"

DEATH: "No. I will give the little one peaceful sleep. Rock-a-bye baby..."

MOTHER: "Mercy! Not yet, don't finish your song, your terrible song!"

DEATH: "Look, he sleeps, as quietly as the singing. Rock-a-bye baby..."

2. Serenade

Enchanting bliss, the azure night,
the tremulous twilight of spring...
She listens, weakly, with drooping head,
to the whispers of the nights' silence.
Sleep does not close her shining eyes,
life cries out for pleasure.
But, beneath the window in the midnight
silence, death sings a Serenade.

"In the darkness of captivity, harsh and confining,
your youth is fading.
I, a stranger, a knight with miraculous
power, will liberate you.

Rise, look at yourself,
your face shines with lucent beauty, rosy cheeks,
your body wound about with
rippling tresses like a dark cloud.
Watchful eyes, shining blue, you seduced me.
You are enraptured by my serenade.
Your whispers called for a knight.
Your knight is here at last with your reward,
your rapture is here.
Your delicate figure, awestruck, ravishing,
I will crush you in my strong embrace.
Listen to this nonsense my love ... be still...
you are mine!"

3. Trepak

Forest, and glades, no one around.
The blizzard cries and groans; foreboding,
as if in the dark of night, she, the evil one,
is burying someone. See! It is so!
Death embraces, lovingly,
a drunken peasant in the darkness,
and with him she dances the Trepak,
and she quietly hums a little song in his ear.

“Oh, little peasant man, poor little old man,
drank enough to quench your thirst,
weaving along the road;
but the storm like a witch, rose up, dancing,
she thoughtlessly drove you from the field into
the dark woods.
You are tormented by misfortune,
by weariness, by want.
Lie down, take a nap, and sleep my sweet one!

I will keep you warm my darling,
with the soft snow,
while all around the great game begins.
Make a bed of downy feathers my storm-swan!
Ha! Rise! Sing, stormy one.
Just like a fairytale that lasts through the night,
so this drunk will fall fast asleep.”

“Ah, you woods, skies, clouds.
The dark, the little breezes, flurries,
weave a snowy feather bed into a shroud.
I'll tuck you in like a baby little old man.
Sleep my friend, lucky little peasant man.
Summer is here, and thriving.
Above the fields the happy sun laughs,
and the sickles are swinging merrily.
A little song can be heard...
The doves are flying...”

4. The Field Marshal

The battle rages, armor flashing,
the brazen cannons roar.
Regiments are charging, horses are racing around,
and the red rivers flow.
Blazing noon, people are fighting,
as the sun is setting the battle grows fiercer!
The sunset is fading, but the enemies
fight all the more furiously and bitterly.
Finally, night has fallen on the battlefield,
in the darkness the battalions separate.
All is quiet, and with the night fog,
moaning rises up to the sky.
Then, glowing in the moonlight, on her warhorse
of bones glaring white, death appears.
In the quiet, listening to the wails and prayers
she is full of proud contentment.
Like a field marshal, touring the battlefield,
she rides to the top of a hill,
she looks back down, stops, and smiles,

and over the valley of death
her fateful voice rings out.
“The battle is done! I conquered you all!
Bow down before me, my warriors!
Life embittered you – I reconciled you!
Together, rise up, my dead ones, for inspection!
Pass by, marching with solemn ceremony,
I want to count up my army.
Then put your bones into the earth,
to take sweet rest from life.
Years will follow years, unremarked,
even the memory of you will disappear.”
“I will not forget you! Above you
a great feast will rule the midnight hour.
Dancing with heavy tread,
I will pound down the wet earth into the vault of
a grave that your bones cannot forsake.
Never will you rise again!”

Mussorgsky and the Song of the Flea

Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky (1839–1881) felt that art was best expressed through the human voice, and wrote and accompanied art songs throughout his career. He suffered from depression and alcoholism throughout his life, and much of his music was left incomplete at his death. The Song of the Flea, or more properly Mephistopheles' song in Auerbach's Cellar was written and premiered on a tour with a prominent soprano, just about a year before Mussorgsky died from alcohol poisoning.

The Song of the Flea is from a scene in Goethe's *Faust*, where the Devil himself sings this rather nasty political satire in a tavern. It seems to speak to every generation in a new way. Politics, it seems, is an evergreen source of entertainment. Paul Robeson sang it, as did many Soviet singers and singers under the Tsars. Alexander Niklayevich Strugishchev (1808–1878) in his translation from the original German, adapted the song to fit his political climate, and to make it more Russian. The Flea becomes a brother rather than a son, the tailor sews a Kaftan (either fancy robes or a military uniform in Tsarist Russia) for the flea rather than tunics or trousers, the king calls the tailor ЧУРБА́Н, (blockhead or numbskull, possibly with more unsavory overtones). The end of the poem is also ambiguous. On the face of it, the poem ends with the Devil crushing any fleas that bite him, but it can also seem like he is saying that if we the people acted like the fleas, we would be put to death immediately!

The Song of the Flea or “Mephistopheles’ Song in Auerbach’s Cellar” texts by Strugovshchikov after Goethe from *Faust*

(sung in Russian)

Once upon a time, (could be any time)
there was a king,
and with him, lived a flea.
A flea? A flea!
Dearer to him than his very own brother he was,
Ha, ha, ha! The flea?
Ha, Ha,Ha! The flea!
The king called his tailor,
”Listen you numbskull, for my dearest friend,
you will sew ... a velvet caftan!”
“A caftan for a flea?” Ha, Ha, Ha!
For a flea? Ha, Ha, Ha! A caftan?
Ha,Ha,Ha! A caftan for a flea?
Now the flea is dressed in gold and velvet,
and the total freedom of the
court is given to the flea!

Ha, Ha!
Ha, Ha! To a flea!
The king bestowed upon it the title
of a minister, and the Golden star with it,
and then all the other fleas too!
Ha! Ha!
Even the queen herself,
and her ladies couldn't endure the fleas,
couldn't even stand it!
Ha, Ha!
And they feared to even touch them,
much less to kill them.
But we, those who bite us,
we crush them!
Ha, Ha, Ha!
Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

Mussorgsky's masterpiece is the voice of a composer whose musical language falls within the development of a uniquely Russian sound world. Written in 1874 in memory of his late friend Viktor Hartmann, *Pictures at an Exhibition* is an album of pieces depicting Hartmann's paintings, several of which have survived over the last 150 years. Several scenes are uniquely Russian in origin and meaning while others allude to other cultures and eras. The work as a whole utilizes seven languages, thus revealing a Russian perspective of the work of a cosmopolitan artist, Victor Hartmann. Though most audiences are familiar with Maurice Ravel's colorful orchestration, the original piano version shows Mussorgsky's ingenuity with his own instrument and imagination in portraying scenes for one performer to interpret.

The "Promenade" is the viewer walking from painting to painting in an exhibition. The music from this opening movement occurs both as an interlude and as a theme throughout the work, breaking through the fourth wall the way a camera crew would by following its subject through different sceneries. Although the inspiration for "Gnomus" was a painting of a nutcracker, the music depicts something far more disturbing, and scholars posit that the "gnome" in question is a misshapen human being, subject to disgust and fright by viewers at the time. "Il vecchio castello" represents Hartmann's travels abroad to countries in western Europe, including Italy, as the *siciliano* rhythm suggests. The song above a constant bass rhythm is a serenade resembling that of a medieval troubadour. Hartmann's "Jardin des Tuilleries" portrayed children playing, though Mussorgsky seems to have had more of a mischievous setting in mind, as is evidenced by the scampering across the piano's middle register. The painting model for "Bydlo" remains unknown, and the darkness in the music suggests something more than mere "cattle" or an "oxcart." Some have speculated the "cart" in question refers to Pushkin's *The Coach of Life*, a poem depicting the tragic passing of human life. Mussorgsky also penned a note to the dedicatee of the work, Vladimir Stasov, that the "Bydlo" might refer to the Polish city of Sandomierz, annexed (or conquered) by the Russian Empire. Whatever the subject matter, the gravity of the mood is clear. The scene brightens immensely in the "Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks," a "scherzino" based on Hartmann's watercolor sketches for children's ballet costumes. The mood immediately darkens for the most overt references of xenophobia, those in "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle." Whereas Czarist society respected the Hebrew culture of the Old Testament, everyday sentiment towards Jewish people was anti-Semitic at best and murderous at worst.

The central Promenade begins a continuity that lasts until the end of the work. "Limoges" is a humorously chaotic scene of chattering shoppers, gossiping ladies, an escaped cow, and much more! The stark contrast of "Catacombs" is a reference not to the Parisian tombs which Hartmann visited in his travels, but to the vast Roman crypts of antiquity. Mussorgsky joined the following movement with the description of skulls glowing as he viewer approaches, possibly depicted in the eerie return of the Promenade theme. Baba-Yagá is the wicked witch of Russian folklore. She lives in a hut perched atop the legs of a chicken, and instead of a broom, she rides a mortar and pestle. Mussorgsky took Hartman's sketch of a decorative clock of Baba-Yagá's house and chose instead to portray her wild ride through the woods. Just when the feeling of terror reaches its peak, the listener is transported to safety in "The Heroic Gate of Kiev." Hartmann's sketch originated as a competition entry for a structure commemorating the failed assassination attempt of Czar Alexander II. Though his structure was not build, his gate is deeply symbolic of Russian nationalism, as is Mussorgsky's musical portrayal. Bells, Russian Orthodox hymns, and the final appearance of the Promenade close this monumental work.

PICTURES

at an EXHIBITION

Promenade

1. The Gnome

Promenade

2. The Old Castle

Promenade

3. Tuilleries (Dispute of children after play)

4. Cattle

Promenade

5. Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks

6. “Samuel” Goldenberg und “Schmuyle” (Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle)

Promenade

7. Limoges. The Market (The big news)

8. Catacombs (Roman tomb) [With the dead in the language of the dead]

9. The Hut on Hen’s Legs (Baba–Yagá)

10. The Heroic Gate (in the Old Capital of Kiev)

Baritone BEN FLANDERS is the founder and Artistic Director of Slavic Voices, as well as the workshop for singers, conductors, and pianists “Slavic Voices at Big Blue”. An Alexander teacher and former professional horn player, Mr. Flanders has been a member of Cincinnati’s Vocal Art Ensemble since 2013 and has appeared as a soloist with the Cincinnati Fusion Ensemble, Collegium Cincinnati, the Bach Ensemble of St. Thomas and other groups in the Cincinnati area. Since 2019, Mr. Flanders has been singing as a member of the Cincinnati Opera Chorus, and has performed or covered roles for Dayton Opera, Concert Nova, Queen City Opera, Nanoworks Opera, and others. He has performed as a recitalist in the US and Ukraine and is committed to bringing people together through music and poetry in the languages of eastern and central Europe.



Praised for “beautiful performances of great warmth” (Classical Voice of North Carolina), pianist MICHAEL DELFÍN has soloed for the Kennedy Center Millennium Stage and the Aspen, Eastern, and Chautauqua Music Festivals. He has performed with the Eastern Music Festival Young Artists Orchestra and CCM Philharmonia and has captured prizes in the International Crescendo Music Awards, Chautauqua Piano Competition, EMF Piano Competition, and two consecutive CCM Concerto Competitions. As a harpsichordist, he is the recipient of the 2017 Catacoustic Consort Early Music Grant and has attended the American Bach Soloists Academy.



Mr. Delfin is pursuing doctoral studies in both piano and harpsichord at the Cincinnati College–Conservatory of Music. He holds degrees in piano from the San Francisco Conservatory and the Peabody Conservatory and also in history from the Johns Hopkins University. His teachers include Boris Slutsky, Yoshikazu Nagai, Awadagin Pratt, and Michael Unger. In his spare time, Mr. Delfin enjoys literature, cooking, various forms of cardio, collecting fine teas, and stoking his paronomasia, for which there is no known cure. www.michaeldelfinpianist.net.

