



SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY

Program Notes by Steven Ledbetter

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BRUNO FERRANDIS, CONDUCTOR
JON NAKAMATSU, PIANO

GUBAIDULINA: Fairytale Poem
TCHAIKOVSKY: Piano Concerto No. 1
MUSSORGSKY: Pictures at an Exhibition

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA-FAIRYTALE POEM

Sofia Gubaidulina was born in Chistopol, Tatar Autonomous Soviet Republic, on October 24, 1931; since the fall of the Soviet Union, she has lived in Hamburg, Germany. She composed *Poema-Skazka* (Fairytale Poem) in 1971. The first performance took place on a broadcast of the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Maxim Shostakovich, on November 21, 1971. The score calls for three flutes, three clarinets and bass clarinet, two percussionists playing marimba, vibraphone, and suspended cymbal, harp, piano, and strings, for which the requested numbers are significant because they are often called upon to divide into solos or pairs. Duration is about 10 minutes.

Sofia Gubaidulina (goo- bye-DOO-lee-na) was born to a Tatar father and a Russian mother far from the political and cultural centers of Russia in a small town near the Ural Mountains. A grandfather was an Islamic mullah. She also had Jewish teachers and quite early was exposed to German art. This mixed background played a large part in her openness toward other cultures in Soviet society. A particularly decisive development for her independence as a composer was her Christian faith and devotion to the Russian Orthodox Church. Though she concealed this faith from the authorities during the sternly atheistic Soviet period, she found ways to symbolize her faith in music that might be thought of as purely abstract to those who were unsympathetic to religion.

Soon after her birth, the family moved to Kazan. The arrival of a piano at home when she was five years old proved life-changing. She began to study at once, but found the technical etudes so boring that she



Bruno Ferrandis,
conductor



Jon Nakamatsu,
piano

started composing herself, in order to have something interesting to play. She began the serious study of composition at the Kazan Conservatory at the age of seventeen under the direction of Albert Leman, then transferred in 1954 to the Moscow Conservatory, where she studied with Nikolai Peiko as an undergraduate and with Vissarion Shebalin as a graduate student. She particularly remembers the support she received from Dmitri Shostakovich at an early stage in her career when she was already marked by officialdom as being on the "wrong path"; Shostakovich, who had many experiences with official criticism of his work going back to the 1930s, told her, "I want you to continue on this 'wrong path'."

For many years in the Soviet Union, Gubaidulina supported herself by composing film scores of many different kinds—animated films, realistic live-action films and documentaries. This served two useful functions: it provided a living through the act of composition; and it gave her the opportunity to experiment with unusual instrumental combinations and unusual ways of producing the sounds from the instruments. These in turn have enriched her concert works, which often have symbolic or mystical elements expressed by unusual sound combinations or playing techniques.

Fairytale Poem comes from a period when, after experimenting with the twelve-tone techniques and electronic music in the 1960s, Gubaidulina was investigating many different approaches to sound and to the basic elements of music. The score of the piece offers no explanation for the title, nor is the work mentioned in the full-length biography of the composer by Michael Kurtz. It is conceivable—though I have no evidence to prove the point—that the score might have grown out of materials composed for an animated film, but in later years Gubaidulina expressed gratitude for being able to work on such films, in which her imagination could roam freely without having to be linked to realistic

images and characterizations in a normal realistic drama. The imaginary world of animation was an invitation to try every kind of sound and sound combination.

Fairytale Poem certainly implies the actions—and the sometimes dangerous adventures—of a story for children. There is a sense of cheerful adventure (especially when just a handful of instruments (two violin lines or a couple of clarinets) caper in lively 6/8 or 9/8 time; yet there are also dangers lurking, symbolized, perhaps, by the frequent string tremolos, or by the dense sound (soon after the beginning) in which twenty different solo stringed instruments pile up a thick chord two octaves deep. Physical gestures are implied, for which the listener can imagine cheerful play, a wild chase, a moment of heart-stopping tension, a slapstick brawl, or any other image that this music brings to mind before piano and vibraphone bid farewell to a chord of high tremolo harmonics shivering away on four solo violins.

TCHAIKOVSKY-CONCERTO NO. 1 IN BFLAT MINOR FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA, OPUS 23

*P*iotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born at Votkinsk, in the district of Vyatka, Russia, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on May 18, 1893. He composed his Piano Concerto No. 1 between November 1874 and February 21, 1875. The first performance took place in Boston on October 25, 1875, with Hans von Bülow as the soloist and B.J. Lang conducting. In addition to the solo piano, the score calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Duration is about 32 minutes.

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto had its premiere performance not in the composer's native

Russia (where, naturally, most of his work was first heard), but in the distant United States, a country that the composer himself would not visit for nearly twenty years. And thereby hangs a tale... Nikolay Rubinstein, director of the Moscow Conservatory from its founding in 1866 to his death in 1881, thought very highly of the young Tchaikovsky and conducted the premieres of a great many of his works: the first four symphonies, Eugene Onegin, Romeo and Juliet, Marche Slave, the Capriccio Italian and the Rococo Variations. Tchaikovsky planned his first piano concerto especially for Nikolay, intending that he should receive the dedication and play the solo part in the first performance.

It was not to be. On Christmas Eve of 1874, Tchaikovsky took the manuscript to Rubinstein to ask him about some technical details of the keyboard writing. He played through the first movement and received only stony silence. With mounting apprehension, Tchaikovsky played through to the end and turned to ask him, "Well?" As Tchaikovsky described it later, Rubinstein broke out in a torrent of abuse, saying that the concerto was fragmented, vulgar, clumsy, and imitative. "I was not just astounded but outraged by the whole scene. I am no longer a boy trying his hand at composition and I no longer need lessons from anyone, especially when they are offered so harshly and in such a spirit of hostility." Rubinstein, attempting to pour oil on troubled waters, promised to play the piece—if Tchaikovsky reworked it in accordance with his demands. The composer's response: "I shall not alter a single note; I shall publish the work exactly as it is."

Rubinstein eventually became a firm champion of the concerto, but in the meantime the composer dedicated it to Hans von Bülow, the distinguished German pianist and conductor who had written an important early review praising Tchaikovsky's music. (Tchaikovsky asked him to premiere it as far from Russia as possible, in case it should fail utterly.)

Von Bülow happily accepted the dedication and prepared to premiere the piece at a concert he gave in Boston late in 1875 with the orchestra of the Harvard Musical Association, a pickup ensemble that gave orchestral concerts in the years before the founding of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

The distinguished Boston composer George W. Chadwick, then just about to turn 21, heard the performance and recalled in a memoir years later, "They had not rehearsed much and the trombones got in wrong in the 'tutti' in the middle of the first movement, whereupon Bülow sang out in a perfectly audible voice, 'The brass may go to hell.' This was the first Tchaikovsky piece [I] ever heard and I thought it the greatest ever, but it rather mystified some of our local scribes [critics], who could not have dreamed how many times they would have to hear it in the future."

The Tchaikovsky concerto has long since become so popular that we forget how striking a work it is. Its famous introductory section is patronized on the grounds that it has nothing to do with the rest of the work; but Tchaikovsky's biographer David Brown has demonstrated that the opening section in fact provides a veritable anthology of harmonic progressions and melodic fragments that reappear in many guises throughout the concerto. Tchaikovsky surely did not calculate all these relationships in rational or mathematical ways. It is more likely that his mind was whirling with these ideas and that they coalesced in various ways satisfying to his inner ear. They are, in any case, quite subtle, but they set the stage suitably for the main body of the movement.

The concerto shows remarkable originality in its treatment of the "concerto problem," the opposition and coordination of soloist and orchestra. Tchaikovsky finds imaginative solutions to the formal demands, too—even though he never believed that he had sufficient mastery of form, despite the fact that he regularly outshone his Russian colleagues

precisely in the matter of musical architecture. The popularity of the concerto begins with the unusual introductory theme, a well-loved tune, made even more popular in the early '40s when it was converted into a Tin Pan Alley song called "Tonight We Love" by denaturing the meter from 3/4 to 4/4. It is, surprisingly, in the relative major of D-flat, not the home key of B-flat minor. The main theme that follows is a Ukrainian folk song, but Tchaikovsky is not so much concerned with investigating Russian folklore as he is interested here in the dramatic opposition of soloist and orchestra.

The second theme is a poignant Tchaikov-s-kyan melody with a gently rocking accompaniment familiar from his earlier Romeo and Juliet. This happens to begin with the notes D-flat and A. Tchaikovsky's biographer David Brown argues that the concerto as a whole recalls the composer's deep affection for the soprano Desirée Artôt, to whom Tchaikovsky was engaged in the winter of 1868-69, before she suddenly married another singer. Several musical references suggest that he still thought very warmly of Artôt, evidently the only woman that he ever loved. One clue, Brown maintains, is the prominence of the pitches D-flat and A, which in German would be called Des and A, as in DESirée Artôt. (This kind of use of one's initials spelled out in musical pitches is something Tchaikovsky might well have learned from the music of Schumann, who employed the device often, and whose music Tchaikovsky admired.)

The slow part of the second movement features a flute melody with a reply by the soloist. The faster portion quotes a French song, *Il faut s'amuser* ("One must amuse oneself, dance, and laugh"); this song was in the repertory of Artôt and makes a particularly clear reference to her, since otherwise the tune has little overt connection with the other themes in the score.

For his finale, Tchaikovsky concentrates on the

effective alternation of his materials, the first theme another Ukrainian folk song, and the second a tranquil string melody. He connects these by having the string melody enter over the soloist's development of the first theme, but for the most part this finale aims at virtuosic excitement, and hits its mark.

MUSSORGSKY - PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

*M*odest Petrovich Mussorgsky was born at Karevo, district of Pskov, on March 21, 1839, and died in St. Petersburg on March 28, 1881. He composed *Pictures at an Exhibition* as a suite of piano pieces in June 1874. Maurice Ravel made his orchestral transcription in the summer of 1922 for Serge Koussevitzky, who introduced it at one of his own concerts in Paris on October 22, 1922. Ravel's orchestration calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, bells, triangle, tam-tam, rattle, whip, cymbals, side drum, bass drum, xylophone, celesta, two harps, and strings. Duration is about 35 minutes.

Mussorgsky's music is the triumph of genius over technique. Though he had possibly the least formal training of any of the Russian "Five" (nationalist composers—including also Cui, Balakirev, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov—who sought to create a purely Russian musical style) and was regarded as little more than a dilettante by composers of far greater polish, Mussorgsky had a burning originality that at times was able to conquer both his lack of technique and a sad addiction to the bottle that led to an unstable life and an early demise. His genius expressed itself most directly in opera, for he had the ability to translate verbal and physical gestures into imaginative, lifelike music.

His best-known non-operatic composition is the suite *Pictures at an Exhibition* for piano solo, one of the great achievements of Russian nationalism. Even here Mussorgsky was inspired by a kind of dramatic event. The exhibition in question was a real one, a memorial showing of works by an architect named Victor Hartman, who had died at the age of forty in July 1873. Mussorgsky was a close friend of the artist's.

The news of Hartman's death shocked Vladimir Stasov, critic and spokesman for a whole generation of Russian artists and friend to both Mussorgsky and Hartman. At Stasov's initiative, a special exhibition of Hartman's work was put together in St. Petersburg, where it opened in early 1874, containing architectural plans and varied drawings and paintings with scenes of every day life and different human types. When Mussorgsky visited the exhibition, it had a powerful effect on him. On June 12 or 19 (the date is not certain) he wrote to Stasov with good news: "Hartman is boiling as Boris boiled." This was his way to say that he was deeply involved in composition and that it was going well. He continued: "Sounds and ideas have been hanging in the air; I am devouring them and stuffing myself—I barely have time to scribble them on paper...My profile can be seen in the interludes....How well it is working out."

Composing at a terrific pace, Mussorgsky finished the work by June 22. The suite was immediately hailed by his friends, particularly Stasov, to whom he dedicated it. Though it was admired, few people played the suite; it is fiendishly difficult. *Pictures* was not even published until five years after the composer's death. It only became famous and popular in the brilliant orchestral guise created by Maurice Ravel in 1922 at the suggestion of conductor Serge Koussevitzky.

The various "pictures" are linked here and there by references to the opening *Promenade*, which, as

Mussorgsky reported, was his own self-portrait, "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 departed friend."

The music representing each image is so vivid that no explanation is required, but the listener might care to know something about the original pictures.

The *Gnome* was a grotesque drawing for a child's toy, "something in the style of the fabled *Nutcracker*, the nuts being inserted into the gnome's mouth." The *Old Castle* depicted an Italian landscape with a troubadour singing his lay. Ravel makes this an extended saxophone solo, one of the most famous passages for that instrument in the orchestral repertory. *Tuileries*, a Parisian scene, showed children quarreling at play in the famous gardens, an image perfectly captured in the taunting musical figure (the universal children's cry of "Nyah, nyah!"). *Bydlo* is the Polish word for "cattle"; Hartman's picture showed a heavy ox cart lumbering along. The unlikely sounding *Ballet of Unhatched Chicks* consisted of designs for an 1871 ballet with choreography by Petipa, who always included a scene with child dancers. In this case the children were dressed as canaries "enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor, with canary heads put on like helmets."

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuylar: Mussorgsky himself owned Hartman's drawings of "A rich Jew wearing a fur hat" and "A poor Jew". He transmuted these into a single movement contrasting the arrogance of wealth to the cringing obsequiousness of poverty. Hartman's lively drawing of *The Market at Limoges* becomes a brilliant scherzo, for which he even imagined some of the conversation of the shopping housewives, for he entered bits of their dialogue in the margin of the score. The scherzo ends with dramatic suddenness in the powerful contrasting scene of the *Catacombs (A Roman Sepulchre)* in Paris. Mussorgsky noted in the margin: "The

creative spirit of the dead Hartman leads me toward skulls illuminated gently from within." The mood is continued in the passage headed *Con mortuis in lingua morta* ("With the dead in a dead language"), in which Mussorgsky himself becomes our guide through the city of the dead. The *Hut on Fowl's Legs* (Baba Yaga) evokes the fearsome witch of Russian fairy tales; Mussorgsky's music suggests rather the witch's wild flight in chase of her victims. Her ride brings us to the powerful finale of the suite, *The Bogatyr Gate* (at Kiev, the Ancient Capital), described by Stasov as "unusually original," a design for a series of arched stone gates to replace the wooden city gates to commemorate Tsar Alexander II's from an attempted assassination. Mussorgsky filled his musical image with the perpetual ringing of bells large and small, recreating the sounds heard around a Russian public monument, and Ravel has seconded him in this, capping off the score with sonorous fireworks.