

Pictures at an Exhibition

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Masques

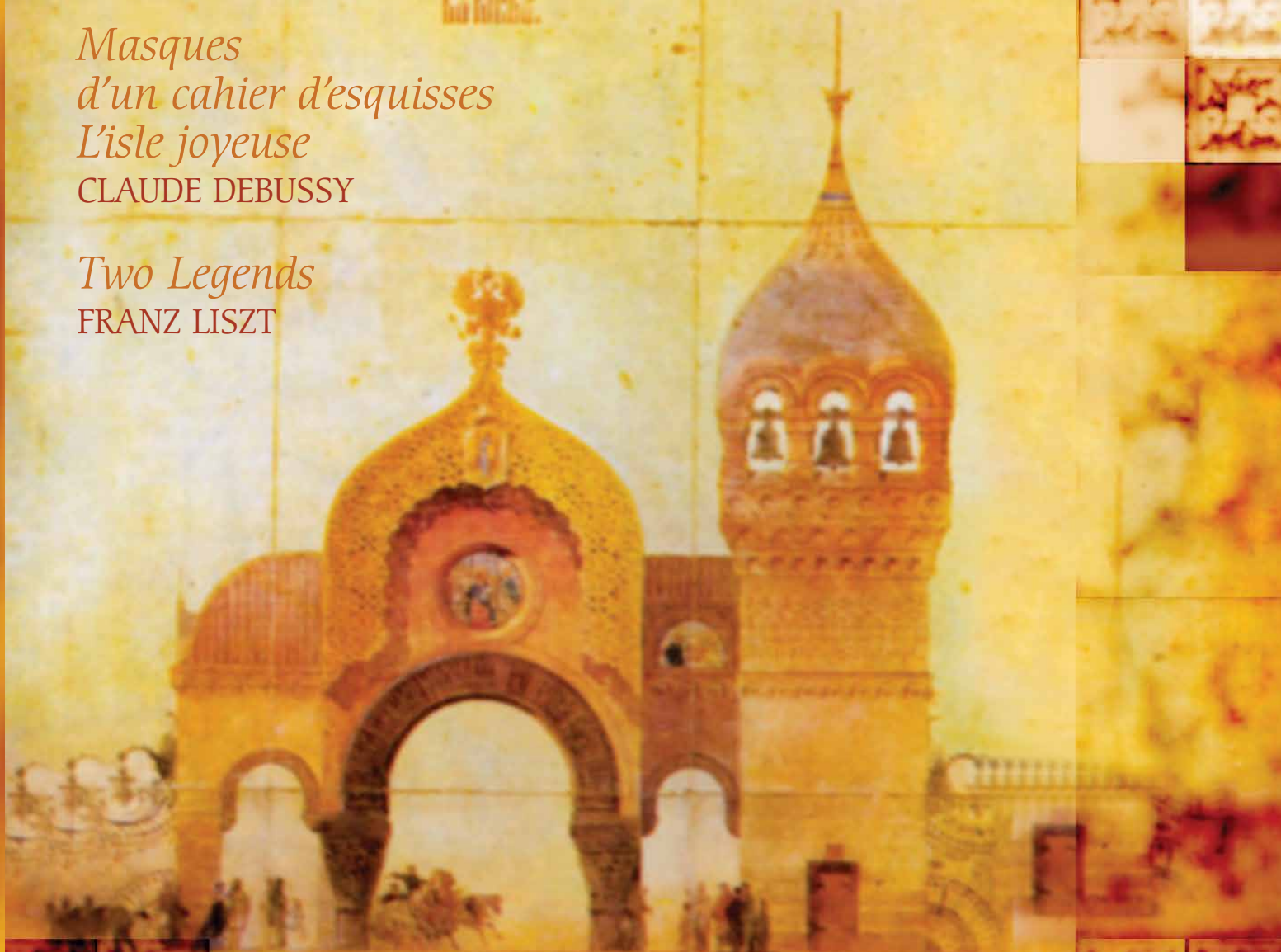
d'un cahier d'esquisses

L'isle joyeuse

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Two Legends

FRANZ LISZT



STEPHEN SAVAGE | *piano*



STEPHEN SAVAGE
piano

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)
Pictures at an Exhibition

- 1** *Promenade* 1'24"
- 2** *Gnomus (The Gnome)* 2'38"
- 3** *Promenade* 0'51"
- 4** *Il vecchio castello (The old castle)* 4'29"
- 5** *Promenade* 0'29"
- 6** *Tuileries (Children's quarrelling at play)* 1'09"
- 7** *Bydlo* 2'56"
- 8** *Promenade* 0'40"
- 9** *Ballet of the unhatched chicks* 1'06"
- 10** *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle* 2'02"
- 11** *Promenade* 1'20"
- 12** *Limoges (The market place)* 1'31"
- 13** *Catacombs (A Roman Sepulchre)* 1'30"
- 14** *Con mortuis in lingua mortua* 1'39"
- 15** *The hut on hen's legs (Baba Yaga)* 3'34"
- 16** *The Great Gate of Kiev* 5'31"

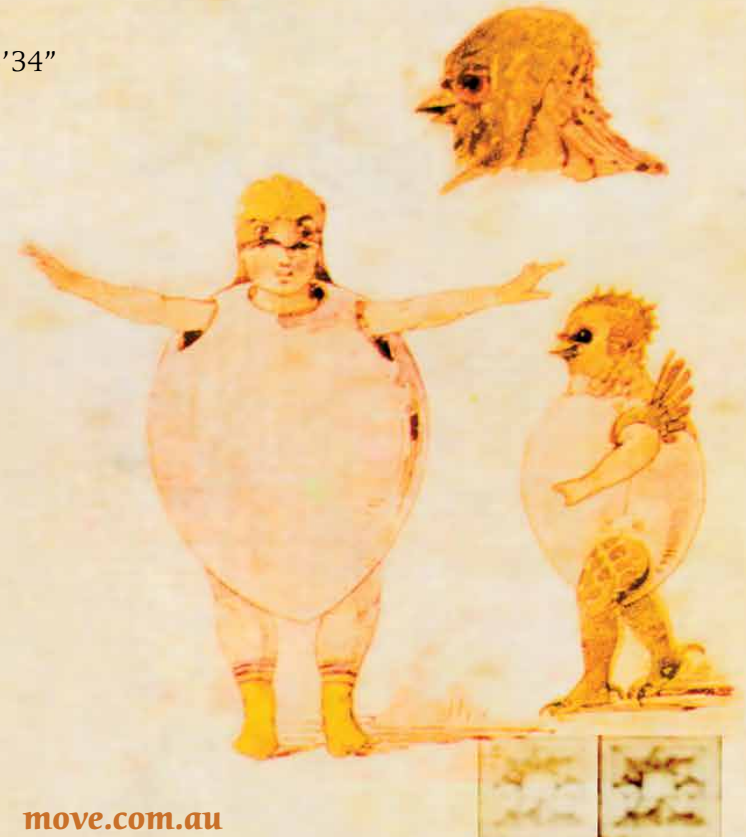
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)
Two Legends

- 17** *St Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds* 10'06"
- 18** *St Francis of Paola walking on the water* 9'10"

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

- 19** *Masques* 5'27"
- 20** *... d'un cahier d'esquisses ...* 4'30"
- 21** *L'isle joyeuse* 5'50"

TOTAL TIME 68 MINUTES



The works to be heard here all have as their point of departure the idea of expressing the visual in sound and of finding musical means to evoke the sensory, not in a picturesque manner, but so as to reveal a wide range of experience drawn from the natural, human and spiritual worlds. This is clear in the Liszt *Legends*, studies in high luminous colours and deep surging textures respectively, which are perhaps his most totally realised work in a genre he invented, the religious piano piece. (In this his successor is the Messiaen of the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus*). Debussy is constantly evocative of the senses, particularly the visual, in the way objects are seen through the refraction of often dazzling light or the depths of shadow or changes in perspective. The piano itself seems to liquify before our ears. The least painterly are the Mussorgsky, for though they derive from the works of his artist friend Victor Hartmann, his imaginative fantasy appropriates the images and imbues them with an often vehement realism which compels the performer to characterise as an actor as much as musician.

In making the music happen, performers are commonly stimulated by metaphors concerning the visual. Many concepts are shared with art: line, texture, perspective, balance, form, light and shade, articulation. Given the circumstance of recording, a further parallel can be drawn. How the works are to be heard is the equivalent of the most effective hanging of pictures in the gallery, how they are lit, where the viewer might stand. So the venue as well as the instrument and the microphone placement become integrated components in determining how the music will sound, and may also further stimulate the performer's response during the recording process.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874) starts out as an apparent suite of pieces interspersed with *Promenades*, representing the composer moving through Hartmann's memorial exhibition and his reactions to what he is seeing and experiencing in his late friend's work. Not all of Hartmann's originals have survived. *Gnomus* is based on a design for nutcrackers with the bow legs of the dwarf as handles. In Mussorgsky's imagination this transforms to a grotesquely distorted figure of power and menace, arousing fear, and also pity in the bleak central section. *The Old Castle* depicted a medieval troubadour in an essentially static scene, realised in the long melody which never breaks free of its G sharp "unrequited" underpinning. The cheeky children playing in the *Tuileries* gardens seem to be scolded

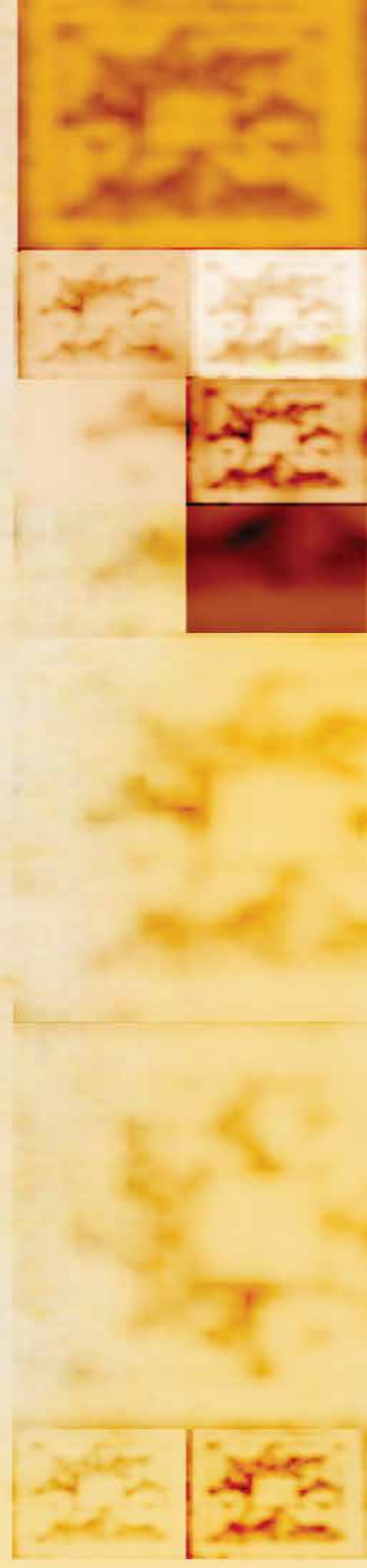
by their nanny before running off, and are drastically succeeded by *Bydlo*, a homage to the fortitude of the toiling mass of a population only recently released from total serfdom. It can be seen as a counterpart to the famous painting "Volga Barge Haulers" by Ilya Repin (1873). Both works express the dignity and suffering of the common people in a way that was then quite new. Another short *Promenade* finds him coming across the charming design of children's costumes for the *Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*, as if to say "What have we here!" The mood again abruptly changes for *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle*. The original pencil and watercolour sketches of Hartmann survive, quite mild in character, even insipid. Mussorgsky lets his imagination run riot in this encounter between a powerful bully and his terrified and trembling counterpart.


This is followed by an almost identical reprise of the opening *Promenade* heralding the second part of the work which proceeds in one unbroken span. We sense here that Mussorgsky ceases to be a viewer and seems to enter the pictures. The thematic shape at the start of *Limoges* is an elaboration of the *Promenade* theme, which is the explicit material for *Con mortuis in lingua mortua* (Hartmann depicts his own back view in an ancient crypt among skulls flickering with phosphorescence). And the final *Great Gate of Kiev* also derives from this theme, as if the friends are united through their joint work. Throughout this

entire part, Mussorgsky's inspiration and imaginative originality are at the highest level. *Limoges* seems to anticipate early Prokofiev, the *Catacombs* conjures up apocalyptic power amplified and distorted in vast resonating spaces, and from *Baba Yaga* to the monochordal reiterations of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* is but one step away. This piece is based on a design for a clock depicting the folk-image of a witch's hut on hen's legs, enabling it to turn and pursue. Together with the design for the city gate at Kiev, shaped as a warrior's helmet, we see examples of Hartmann's most characteristic and significant work. Both display a wealth of decorative detail, arising from his intensive study of ancient Russian ornament, design and folklore. He was an acknowledged leading figure in the movement to propagate traditional arts and crafts, and in this we sense the kinship between artist and composer, both working at a time of awakening to the soul and heritage of old Russia for so long suppressed following the Europeanisation of the ruling classes from the time of Peter the Great.* Both artists were united in exploring their Russian identity and Mussorgsky finds the means, especially here, and in *Boris Godunov* and in many of the songs, to have independently created a potent expression of the soul of his country and its people in a pure and uncompromising form, entirely repudiating European models and aesthetics.

The year 1863 found Liszt at a critical time in his life, following his thwarted marriage plans in 1861† and the deaths of two of his three children in 1859 and 1862. “He suffered a marked personality change. His sense of boundless optimism temporarily deserted him. He became introspective. His hair turned gray, and on his face appeared the numerous warts with which anybody who has seen photographs of him on later life is familiar”‡ He decided to go into retreat, and he moved from Rome, where he had been living since 1861 to the Madonna del Rosario, a quite dilapidated monastery about an hour from the city on poor roads, but with magnificent views. He lived there exclusively for two years from June 1861, in a simple cell, containing only a wooden bed, table and a small upright piano. He wrote: “My life is simplifying itself, and the Catholic piety of my childhood has become a regular and also a regulating feeling.”

His composing activity at this time included work on his vast oratorio *Christus*, completion of his piano transcriptions of the Beethoven symphonies, and the two *Legends* included here. No better example can be found to refute the notion of Liszt as a brilliant but empty virtuoso. These pieces employ the widest range of pianistic resource but are essentially expressions of his faith, and have a great simplicity of utterance. The first legend depicts the well-known story of St Francis of Assisi, preaching






to a flock of birds who miraculously comprehend his sermon. (The story is told in chapter 16 of the “Little Flowers of St Francis”) The writing is explicit in its evocation of the birds, the Saint’s sermon, in recitative, and the moment when God appears to give his blessing on the scene. The textures describing the birds are close to impressionistic in their refinement and the piece is touching, without a trace of sentimentality. The second legend celebrates Liszt’s patron saint, St Francis of Paola, who, refused a crossing of the Straits of Messina because he could not pay the fare, blessed his cloak and floated on it safely across. We hear the power and depth of the waters while the Saint’s theme travels serenely through the tempest. In his preface to the work, Liszt writes that the moral of the tale is that the laws of faith govern the laws of nature. The coda quotes from an earlier choral piece celebrating the Saint with a setting of the words “O let us preserve Love whole”.

Of the three Debussy pieces here, the first two are rarely played, though *Masques* was a favorite of the composer’s and Ravel thought highly of *From a Sketchbook*, and played its first performance. *L’isle joyeuse*, Debussy’s most extrovert piano piece, is frequently heard on its own, and it has long been a problem giving this work a convincing context in performance. The mature Debussy of the piano *Estampes*, *Images*, *Preludes* and *Etudes*, and the orchestral *Nocturnes*, *Images* and *La Mer* almost invariably grouped pieces in threes or multiples thereof. Here we follow the suggestion of the distinguished scholar Roy Howat who has convincingly proposed that these pieces also go together, and became separated for quite mundane reasons, involving two publishers bringing out different parts. § The result is not only a highly plausible conjunction of three pieces all originally written in 1903, but Debussy’s largest and most integrated triptych for piano. The outer pieces are in the same tonality and have related structures and proportions, while the second has a principal idea which becomes

fully realised in the central section of *L’isle joyeuse*, and a motif in its brief cadenza which is later woven into the texture at the peroration of *L’isle joyeuse*. Most tellingly, the final piece now emerges naturally and poetically from the spacious coda of its predecessor. Art lovers will have experienced the particular thrill of seeing works which were conceived together but have been dispersed to different collections at last being united for an important exhibition. Here too is the sense of a triptych restored, of two neglected pieces finding their rightful place, and *L’isle joyeuse* as the brilliant finale to Debussy’s most symphonic conception for piano.

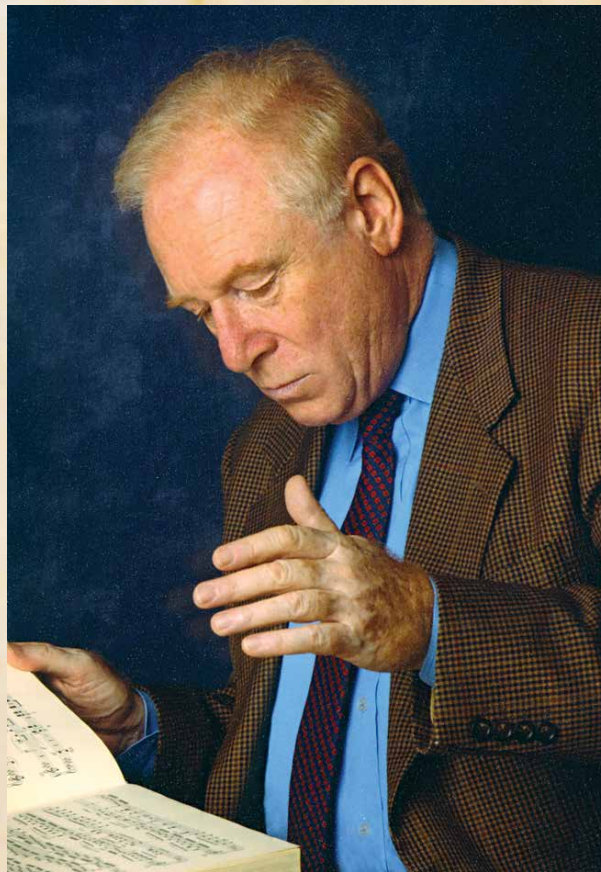


* “ ... through their slavish imitation of Western principles, the aristocrats had lost all sense of their own nationality. Striving to make themselves at home with foreigners, they had become foreigners at home.” Figs: *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* Allen Lane The Penguin Press 2002 p.53

† For a full account of this extraordinary story, see Walker: *Franz Liszt: The Final Years 1861-1886* Cornell University Press

‡ Ibid p.54

§ see R. Howat: *En route for L'isle joyeuse: the restoration of a tryptich* Cahiers Debussy vol.19 (1995) pp. 37-52



The Australian pianist Stephen Savage was born in England and after early training with Dorothy Hesse, studied with Bruno Seidlhofer at the Wiener Akademie and Cyril Smith at the Royal College of Music, London, where he became his teaching

assistant immediately after graduating. Two years later Stephen Savage was appointed the youngest Professor of Piano at the RCM at a time when he was also becoming established as a concert pianist, with frequent appearances at the Wigmore and Queen Elizabeth halls, and for the BBC, including live broadcasts in the prestigious Tuesday Invitation Concerts. He appeared in concerto performances with Sir Adrian Boult, David Atherton and Andrew Davis and became known for his insight into a wide range of music, including new compositions. He is the dedicatee of major works by Justin Connolly and Roger Smalley, whose *Accord* for two pianos he premiered with the composer.

In 1982 Stephen Savage came to Australia, and was soon appointed Head of Keyboard Studies at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University. This Department is now regarded as the most progressive in Australia, and attracts fine piano talent from overseas as well as locally. He became established as a distinguished teacher and performer in Australia, appearing with the symphony orchestras of Adelaide, Sydney, Tasmania and Queensland, with the Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra, and at the

Festivals of Sydney, Perth and Brisbane. He was given special permission from the composer to be the first pianist following Krystian Zimerman to perform the Lutoslawski concerto, and he organised and performed a week-long festival of the works of Sir Michael Tippett during the composer's last Australian visit in 1990. This remains the largest event of its kind to be mounted in Australia. He also founded and conducted the Griffith University Ensemble, and has been active throughout his career in introducing student ensembles to a wide range of the most important music of the last century. He founded the Kawai Keyboard Series in Brisbane in 1998, which is now the largest and most comprehensive recital series in Australia.

Stephen Savage has been associated with the teaching programmes of the Australian National Academy since its inception, and performs and teaches overseas frequently and extensively, travelling particularly to the UK and to many places in Asia. He is Honorary Associate Professor to the Royal College of Music during his visits there. His recordings include Tippett's Piano Sonatas, Smalley's *Accord*, with the composer, works by Andrew Ford (with the Griffith University Ensemble) and an acclaimed CD of the last three Sonatas of Beethoven.

Recording | David Spearritt and David Starr

Editing and mastering | David Spearritt

Piano | Steinway D545377

Piano technician | Michael Ryan

Venue | Theatre, Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, Brisbane

Production | Stephen Savage

Annotations | Stephen Savage

Front illustration | Victor Hartmann | Design for Kiev city gate. Main facade. Pencil, watercolour 42.9 by 60.8 cm

Back illustration | Victor Hartmann | Sketches of costumes for J. Gerber's ballet "Trilby" Watercolour, 17.6 by 25.3 cm

Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) St. Petersburg

Photos | SBM Studios

Booklet layout | Martin Wright

©+© 2004 Stephen Savage

Released 2004 by Move Records, Melbourne, Australia

Website | move.com.au

