

**February 18 2010**

Mussorgsky 1839-1881 – *Pictures at an Exhibition*

Like many other early Russian composers, Mussorgsky was not primarily a professional musician. He was trained for the army and later entered the civil service. He has some music lessons from Balakirev and also came to know the other Russian musicians of his time, including Rimsky-Korsakov. Opinions differ as to whether he was simply an untrained musician with many musical weaknesses, or whether he was a Russian visionary with ideas ahead of his time. He was beset with frequent periods of drunkenness and gradually lost many of his friends; eventually being dismissed from the civil service, and died an early death. ***Pictures at an Exhibition*** was written as a piano suite in 1874. He was a friend of Hartman, a “second-rate architect” who would paint pictures on his travels. After Hartman’s death there was an exhibition of his paintings in St. Petersburg. Mussorgsky went to see the exhibition. His suite consists of a *promenade*, repeated several times, representing himself walking round the exhibition, and of musical portraits of some of the pictures he saw.

By the time he wrote this piece, Mussorgsky had become a large, ungainly fellow; so the frequent changes of time signature in these ***promenades*** and the changes of **texture** well illustrate is spasmodic movements from picture to picture, his frequent pauses, and his changes of mood as he looks at each picture.

The picture of ‘**Gnomus**’ has disappeared, but it is believed to have been that of a carved nutcracker with wizened comical features. This piece illustrates the gnome shambling along with a clumsy walk. Notice the frequent changes of speed and the pauses.

***The Old Castle*** is the illustration of a medieval castle in Italy, with a troubadour singing in front of it.

***Bydlo*** – is a Polish word meaning cattle; and the picture represents a Polish wagon with enormous wheels, drawn by oxen and carrying cattle. The melody is based on an old folk song.

**Impressionism** was an art movement that started in France around 1870 which attempted to capture the fleeting impressions or feeling of a scene, rather than detailed realism. The term ‘Impressionist’ was first used by the art critic Louis Leroy in his review of the 1874 group show of more than 30 painters who had been rejected by the official Paris Salon. Leroy titled his review, *The Exhibition of the Impressionists*, after Monet’s painting called *Impression: Sunrise*. How were these Impressionistic painters different? Discuss.

Gabriel Faure (1845-1924) was a pupil of Saint-Saens at the Ecole Niedermeyer. He served as organist at various Paris churches, including finally the Madeleine, but had no teaching position until 1897 at the Conservatoire. In 1905 he became director of the Conservatoire in the aftermath of the scandal of the refusal of the Prix de Rome to Ravel and introduced a number of necessary reforms. He retired in 1920, after which he was able to devote himself more fully again to composition, notably two final chamber works, a piano trio and a string quartet.

He died in Pars in 1924.

Fauré's nostalgic ***Pavane*** is an orchestral work with an optional chorus part, added at the suggestion of a patron, but generally omitted in modern performance. Music for solo instrument and orchestra includes the *Ballade for piano and orchestra*, the *Berceuse for solo violin* and the *Elégie for solo cello*. (Both the piano and orchestral versions of *Pavane* were heard by the class.)

**Perhaps his best known work, Fauré's *Requiem*** remains a standard element in choral repertoire, with its setting of funeral rites, rather than the full Requiem Mass of tradition. The earlier Messe basse (Low Mass) was originally a collaborative composition of 1881 with Messenger, but in final revision in 1906 consisting of four Mass movements by Fauré himself.

Chamber music by Fauré includes two fine Violin Sonatas and the *Piano Trio* and *String Quartet* of his last years. There are several evocative smaller pieces, including the *Romance*, *Berceuse* and *Andante* for violin and piano and the *Elégie*, *Romance* and *Sérénade* for cello and piano.

Fauré made a significant addition to piano repertoire, particularly in a series of thirteen Barcarolles and a similar number of Nocturnes, with five Impromptus and a single Ballade. The piano duet *Dolly Suite* was written in the 1890s for the daughter of Emma Bardac, later wife of Debussy.

**Claude Debussy** was born in St. Germain-en-Laye, a Paris suburb, in 1862. As a child he had little formal education but his musical tendencies were encouraged with lessons, those with Verlaine's mother-in-law, Mme Mauté de Fleurville (reputedly a student of Chopin), leading to his entry into the Paris Conservatoire in 1872. His reputation there was that of an erratic pianist.

In 1880 and 1881 he went for summer employment to Russia as pianist to Tchaikovsky's patron, Mme von Meck. Failing to win the *Prix de Rome* in 1883, he succeeded in 1884 with the cantata *L'Enfant prodigue*. He spent 2 years at the Villa Medici, Rome, where he met Liszt, Verdi, and Boito, and heard *Lohengrin*.

Back in Paris, living a very bohemian lifestyle in Montmartre, he met Gabrielle Dupont who became his lover for 10 years. He called her "Gaby aux yeux verts", Gaby with the green eyes. It was during this period that he started to go to *les mardis*, the Tuesday group of mainly Symbolist writers who would gather at Mallarmé's apartment in the Rue de Rome. He met amongst others, Paul Verlaine. Verlaine, in his *Art Poétique*, said "*De la musique avant toute chose*" ("Music above all else"). Baudelaire's much earlier explorations of the dark undercurrents of human existence in *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) were a fascination for the Symbolists, and the famous words from the poem *Correspondances* might summarize this attraction: "*Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent*". ("Scents, colours and sounds answer one another"). This alludes to the state of mind known as synaesthesia, the fusion of all the senses into one melodious expression. Baudelaire came back to this image in the first stanza of another poem, *Harmonie du Soir*: "*les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*" ("Sounds and scents turn on the evening air"), and this famous line was to become the title of one of Debussy's most mystical pieces – his 4<sup>th</sup> Prelude in Book 1.

Debussy – inspiration - first the Symbolists, then the Impressionists. Monet, Renoir amongst others, attempted to paint light in all its subtleties. Light on water, light on rocks, trees and landscapes and buildings.

Important friendships and influences include Erik Satie (1866-1925). Debussy later orchestrated two of Satie's **Gymnopédies**.

In 1890 he wrote **Clair de Lune**, which he revised in 1905. His "tour de force" came in 1894, an orchestral poem based on Stéphane Mallarmé's poem **Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune**. Debussy's opera **Pelléas et Mélisande** was produced in 1902 and earned Debussy widespread fame. Many critics have regarded **Pelléas et Mélisande** as a perfect fusion of music and drama, and his opera has had numerous revivals.

From 1902 to 1910 Debussy wrote chiefly for the piano, rejecting the traditional percussive approach to the instrument and emphasizing instead its capabilities for delicate expressiveness. His most important works of this period include **Estampes** (1903), **Masques** (1904), **L'Isle joyeuse** (1904), **Images** (I, 1905 and II, 1907), **Children's Corner** (1906-1908), **Préludes Livre I** (1909-1910), **Préludes Livre II** (1910-1912). His major orchestral piece from this period is **La Mer** written between 1903 and 1905 (in Jersey, Dinard and Eastbourne).

Whilst his public life became increasingly successful, his private life was riddled with scandal. In 1899, Debussy married Rosalie Texier, a dressmaker. He left her in 1904 for Emma Bardac, an amateur singer and the wife of a Parisian banker. He moved into an apartment with Emma in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, where he spent the rest of his life. Debussy married Emma in 1908, following the birth in 1905 of his daughter, Claude-Emma, the "Chou-chou" to whom the **Children's Corner** (1906-1908) was dedicated.

In 1909 Debussy learned that he was afflicted with cancer. Most of his late works are chamber music, including three extraordinary sonatas, for cello; for violin; and for flute, viola, and harp. His energies increasingly sapped by the ravages of cancer, Debussy worked on with remarkable fortitude. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 robbed him of all interest in music. France, he felt, "*can neither laugh nor weep while so many of our men heroically face death.*" After a year of silence, he realized that he had to contribute to the struggle in the only way he could, "*by creating to the best of my ability a little of that beauty which the enemy is attacking with such fury.*" One of his last letters speaks of his "life of waiting--my waiting-room existence, I might call it--for I am a poor traveller waiting for a train that will never come any more." His last work, the Fourth Sonata for Violin and Piano, was performed in May 1917 with Debussy at the piano. It was the last music that he played in public, at St. Jean-de-Luz in September.

Debussy died in March 1918 during the bombardment of Paris by airships and long-distance guns during the last German offensive of World War I.

**Erik Alfred Leslie Satie** (May 17, 1866 - July 1, 1925)

Born in Honfleur, Basse-Normandie, France, Satie was a composer and pianist; though mainly for café and cabaret audiences. Satie wrote theatre and ballet music, as well as piano music. His compositions are original, humorous, often bizarre, and very minimalistic. His music is sometimes called furniture music, supposed to be in the background of everyday life. It is evidently anti-romantic and also anti-impressionistic. Satie eventually became a leading figure of the French avant-garde.

Today he is regarded as one of the important forebears of minimalism, and John Cage cited him as a

major influence (Cage organized and performed in the premiere performance of Satie's 28 hour long *Vexations*).

He did not begin to be taken seriously as a composer by his contemporaries until he was in his forties. In 1917 the first performance in Paris of the ballet *Parade* (the orchestration of which included parts for typewriter, foghorn and rattle) caused a scandal, which established his name as a composer. Satie wrote this ballet together with Jean Cocteau and Pablo Picasso for the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev, leader of the Ballets Russes.

His works include:

*Trois Gymnopédies* (1888), piano

*Messe des Pauvres* (1895)

*Trois morceaux en forme de poire* (1901), piano four hands

*Descriptions Automatiques* (1913), piano

*Sonatine Bureaucratique* (1917), piano

*Socrate* (1918), symphonic drama

Satie gave his piano pieces names like (translated to English) *Unpleasant Glimpses*, *Genuine Flabby Preludes* (for a dog), or *Old Sequins and Old Breastplates*. He accompanied the scores of these pieces with all kinds of written remarks, through which he insisted that these should not be read out during performance.

Satie was known as an eccentric, and amongst other things he started his own church, Metropolitan Church of Art of Jesus, Leader (with himself as the only member). Every day of his working life Satie left his apartment in the Parisian suburb of Arcueil to walk across the whole of Paris to either Montmartre or Montparnasse before walking back again in the evening.

A penniless bohemian, he spent his final 27 years in a 100 s.f. room. Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel were among Satie's friends. Although not hailed by the masses, he was admired by many young composers and musicians and was a big influence on Debussy in particular.

Satie was the center of *Les Six*, a group of six French composers (Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Darius Milhaud and Francis Poulenc). The group advocated clear musical language, and opposed impressionism (for example Debussy and Ravel), slavism (Stravinsky) and post-Wagnerism (Schoenberg) in music.

Satie died in Arcueil, Val-de-Marne, Île-de-France, and was interred there in the Cimetière d'Arcueil.

**Maurice Ravel** – (1875-1937) French, of paternal Swiss and maternal Basque descent, Ravel combined skill in orchestration with meticulous technical command of harmonic resources. He wrote in an attractive musical idiom that was entirely his own, in spite of contemporary comparisons with Debussy, a composer his senior by some twenty years.

In addition to the scores for ballet and arrangements of piano works for the same purpose, Ravel wrote an evocative *Rapsodie espagnole* (Spanish Rhapsody). Orchestrations of original piano compositions include a version of the very well known *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (Pavane for a Dead Infanta), the *Menuet antique*, 'Alborada del gracioso' from *Miroirs* and pieces from *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Ravel wrote two piano concertos, the first, completed in 1930, for the left hand only, commissioned by the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm in the war, and the second, completed in 1931, for two hands.

Ravel's chamber music includes the evocative nostalgia of the *Introduction and Allegro* for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet, a violin sonata with a jazz-style blues movement, a piano trio and a string quartet. *Tzigane*, written for the Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Arnyi, is a remarkable excursion into extravagant gypsy style.

Ravel was himself a good pianist. His music for the piano includes ***Pavane***; *Menuet antique*; *Jeux d'eau* (Fountains); *Miroirs*; *Gaspard de la nuit*. Also *Sonatine* (in Ravel's neo-classical style) and *Le tombeau de Couperin* is in the form of a Baroque dance suite.

(ii) Book p. 750-753; 755; 790-797; 806-807.

(iii) Assignment: Discuss the ways in which Debussy incorporated ideas from impressionism and symbolism into his music.

Next class: Thursday March 4th