



EIJI OUE
MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

ravel orchestrations

PICTURES at an
EXHIBITION

mussorgsky

schumann

chabrier

debussy

ravel



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ravel | the orchestrator

Nothing fascinated Maurice Ravel more than translating piano music into the language of the virtuoso orchestra. The time was ripe, for by 1900 Rimsky-Korsakov and Richard Strauss had brought a new opulence to symphonic scoring. Son of a Swiss engineer and automotive pioneer, Ravel was a born transcriber who prided himself on the precision of his orchestral craft as he stretched the instruments to the limits of what they could do.

Like Debussy, Ravel was trained primarily as a pianist, and most of what he wrote originated at the keyboard. But everything was fair game for his brilliant metamorphoses, not only his own piano works which were given dual lives, but also the music of others, some of which remains unpublished. Paradoxically, though he was a master of the orchestra, only three of Ravel's own symphonic works were originally scored for orchestra, beginning with the *Rapsodie espagnol* of 1907, when he was already 32 and quite famous in France. His transformations are so compelling that it is hard to remember that the orchestral sonorities are not the originals.

Ravel: *Alborada del gracioso*

Bizet's *Carmen*, produced in the year Ravel was born, marked the beginning of the Gallic intrigue with the Iberian peninsula. But of all the Frenchmen susceptible to the smoldering rhythms that seemed to waft from across the Pyrénées, none carried on a more addictive flirtation with the idiom than Ravel, who created music bearing the imprint of his heritage. Nowhere is he more sensuous, picturesque and rhythmically seductive than in the *Alborada del gracioso*, the fourth number of his piano suite *Miroirs* of 1904-05. Once you have heard the pizzicato strings in the role of guitars and a colorfully large orchestra glinting with percussion, including tambourine and castanets, it is hard to believe that this brilliant showpiece was initially conceived for the keyboard.

Ravel: *Shéhérazade, Ouverture de féerie*

In the category of composers' unfulfilled dreams is Ravel's *Shéhérazade*, an opera destined never to be written. Under the spell of Rimsky-Korsakov's 1888 symphonic suite by the same title—a virtual manual of orchestration for those who followed—the young Ravel contemplated an operatic version of *A Thousand and One Nights*. As far as is known, he did not complete any sketches. All that he managed to produce in the year 1898 was a brief *Shéhérazade* score, subtitled *Ouverture de féerie*. Its opening oboe solo and main theme capture the heroine's seductive voice as she spins her alluring tales. Five years later, the composer unveiled three songs with orchestra, set to the poems of Tristan Klingsor, a cycle that bears the title *Shéhérazade*, but is not connected to the unrealized opera.

Ravel himself conducted the overture's premiere at a concert of the Société Nationale in 1898, a performance that "was violently whistled at," he reported to composer Florent Schmitt. Long thought to have been lost, the picturesque overture was rediscovered in time for the Ravel centennial of 1975, when it was performed at Queens College in Flushing, New York.

Debussy/Ravel: *Sarabande; Danse*

Relations between Debussy and Ravel were tenuous at best, and in their later years continued to deteriorate, partly due to their meddlesome champions. Identified as the two great musical Impressionists, both were masters of the orchestra who produced scores of subtlety and refinement. But while Debussy's instrumental palette projects a glow, Ravel's art tends more towards glitter and brilliance.

Four years after Debussy's death in 1918, the publisher Jean Jobert asked Ravel to orchestrate two Debussy piano pieces: the *Danse* of 1890 (originally known as *Danse styrienne*) and the striking *Sarabande* which serves as the central movement of the suite *Pour le piano*, a work of the late 1890s, published in 1901. In the early 1920s, apparently a lean period for him creatively, Ravel applied his energies to orchestration. The Debussy transformations came just after he completed the Koussevitzky commission for *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Following the smoothly contoured wind statement that opens the *Sarabande*, a solo trumpet offers the response, affirmed by low flute. The repetition of these ideas wears new colors.

A single horn propels the start of the *Danse*, a svelte salon piece sprung from an intricate, syncopated tune whose lively 6/8 meter betrays its origins in

the old Neapolitan tarantella, popular with piano composers of the nineteenth century. Ravel pinpoints quickly flashing strokes of instrumental color, and laces the score with splashes of percussion typical of Spain and Italy.

Schumann/Ravel: Four movements of *Carnaval*

As a boy of twelve, Ravel produced variations on a chorale by Robert Schumann that astonished his harmony teacher, Charles René. Rapidly developing his skills as a pianist, the youth was enamored with Schumann's poetic, original fantasies, which alongside the virtuosic splendor of Liszt would shape his keyboard style. Since Schumann's *Carnaval*, Opus 9, is so thoroughly idiomatic for the piano, there was a certain risk in Ravel's undertaking to orchestrate it. The request had come from Vaclav Nijinsky, the leading dancer of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, who in 1912 commanded the title role in Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. The following year, dismissed by Diaghilev after they tangled over the dancer's marriage, Nijinsky discovered that he could not take repertoire with him—namely orchestrations of two works, *Carnaval* and the Chopin-based *Les Sylphides*. For his own new company, Nijinsky sought fresh orchestrations by Ravel, which were premiered in London on March 2, 1914. These transcriptions were later lost, except for a few pages of the Chopin material and four numbers from *Carnaval*.

Chabrier/Ravel: *Menuet pompeux*

In Ravel's mind, Emmanuel Chabrier was an underrated composer—"one of France's greatest musicians," he asserted, "but he continues to be plagued by bad luck." From his student years, Ravel was inclined towards the modernists, those

independent spirits like Chabrier and Satie who functioned outside official musical circles. “If the Debussy revelation did not touch me deeply,” he said, “it’s because I was already conquered by Chabrier.” Yet his only homage to Chabrier was prompted by a request from the Ballets Russes. He orchestrated the composer’s *Menuet pompeux*, No. 9 of his *Dix pièces pittoresque* (1881), as part of a production, *Les Jardins d’Aranjuez*, choreographed by Léonide Massine, which opened at the Alhambra Theatre in London on July 18, 1919.

Mussorgsky/Ravel: *Pictures at an Exhibition*

No work has attracted more orchestrators than Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a suite of ten piano pieces, separated by interludes depicting the gallery goer, that evoke vivid scenes and the characters who inhabit them. When Serge Koussevitzky contemplated a new orchestration of these vignettes, he could not have chosen a more likely candidate than Ravel, the indefatigable remodeler of music—his own and others’. Ravel seized the opportunity, having always held Mussorgsky in high regard, admiring the daring conceptions and bold harmonic strokes of this most original voice of the Russian nationalists. On May 23, 1923, Ravel’s colorful transcription—pure Ravel yet faithful to Mussorgsky—was introduced at the fashionable Concerts Koussevitzky in Paris.

Instead of issuing a commission, Koussevitzky had had the option of programming an earlier transcription: Sir Henry Wood’s 1915 version, frequently played in the 1920s but which Wood himself banned in the 1930s in deference to Ravel’s superior work. Or he might have retrieved an orchestration prepared by Michael Touschmaloff in 1886, while he was in the classroom of Rimsky-Korsakov, who five years later conducted a performance of the score. Even later,

the worldwide success of Ravel's consummate transcription did not deter others from applying their hand to the *Pictures*.

Plagued by alcoholism and declining health, Mussorgsky grieved at the loss of his friend Victor Hartmann, a designer, painter and architect who had died suddenly of an aneurism on August 4, 1873, at the age of 39. Having won a medal at the Vienna World's Fair for his model of a National Theatre in Moscow, he had been on the verge of success. Within months, Vladimir Stasov, Mussorgsky's early champion who was then engaged in the art department of the St. Petersburg Library, organized a Hartmann memorial exhibition featuring some 400 works, of which only a hundred or so have come to light. Half the drawings were not typical of an architect, but were lively, sketches by a genre-painter, the majority depicting figures out of everyday life. Mussorgsky was so inspired by this mixture of place and personality that in a burst of inspiration spanning only twenty days in the summer of 1874, he produced a piano suite which requires the utmost virtuosity and stamina to perform. In the course of his work, he addressed Stasov: "Hartmann is boiling as *Boris* [Godunov] boiled: sounds and ideas have been hanging in the air and now I am gulping and overheating; I barely have time to scribble them down on paper." His own profile is detected in the links between the numbers, for he depicts himself as the stroller in the gallery.

PROMENADE: Mussorgsky's signature theme, which Ravel awards to the solo trumpet, has an unmistakable Russian profile. Shifting between 6/4 and 5/4 meters, the robust introduction depicts the meandering of the gallery goer, moving now to the right, then to the left, as yet another picture captures his attention. Each time the theme recurs, Mussorgsky varies its character, and Ravel takes this cue for his instrumentation.

THE GNOME: Scurrying about on misshapen legs, the gnome—Hartmann’s design for a nutcracker—appears in a spasmodic figure, moving awkwardly in a jolting rhythm.

PROMENADE: Now the refrain is varied—softer and full of nostalgia, as if pervaded by melancholy thoughts of the departed friend.

THE OLD CASTLE: For the voice of a troubadour singing before an ancient castle, Ravel chooses the distinctive and characteristically French sound of an alto saxophone. The ballad is delivered over a drone.

PROMENADE: Real people inhabit these pictures, including the composer, who, from the weight of the lower regions of the orchestra, seems to be walking with a heavy tread.

TUILERIES. What had been a conventional piano caprice becomes a miniature orchestral tone poem, as the voices of children at play in the famous Parisian park are etched in colorful woodwind timbres.

BYDLO: Choosing from the vast exhibition of drawings and watercolors, Mussorgsky preferred images that reflect the daily lives of common people—here a peasant who, driving a Polish oxcart known as a Bydlo, sings a folk tune in an old Slavic mode.

PROMENADE: Scored for high winds, this variant of the wandering tune establishes a reflective mood.

BALLET OF CHICKS IN THEIR SHELLS: The exhibition catalogue describes the costume sketch Hartmann had provided for children dancing as unhatched fledglings in the ballet *Trillby, or The Demon of the Heath*, produced by the Bolshoi in 1871: “Canary chicks, enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor. Instead of headdress, canary heads, put on like helmets down to the neck.”

SAMUEL GOLDENBERG AND SCHMUYLE: This powerful vignette is based on two expressive portrait sketches Hartmann had given to the composer, who loaned them to the memorial exhibition. On a visit to Poland in 1868, Hartmann recorded the sight of two ghetto residents arguing on a street corner in the small town of Sandomir. One, wearing a fur hat, was rich; the other, shabbily dressed, was poor. The dialogue between pompous low strings, partnered with low winds, and the whining response of a muted trumpet in a highly virtuosic passage dramatizes their tense encounter.

LIMOGES: Hartmann’s scene of the bustling china market depicts women gossiping by their pushcarts. The chatter and squabbling, with everyone talking at once, is reinforced by Ravel’s orchestration, a composite of all the sections, with incisive percussion strokes. Suddenly, without a break, the mood turns doleful.

THE CATACOMBS (SEPULCHRUM ROMANUM): The artist depicted himself exploring the catacombs of Paris, while Mussorgsky’s piano score, citing Roman tombs, alludes to an Italian setting. Except for the gloomy tones of the contrabass, Ravel dispenses with the strings altogether. A somber brass chorale prevails in the murky setting.

WITH THE DEAD IN A DEAD LANGUAGE: The contact with the dead continues, as a note in the autograph score explains: “A Latin text would be suitable—the creative soul of the dead Hartmann leads me to the skulls, invokes them, the skulls begin to glow faintly.” The reminiscence of the Promenade theme with which Mussorgsky begins this haunting number is scored by Ravel for two oboes and English horn, playing expressively. A high tremolo accompaniment, eerie in muted strings, conjures up the glimmering of the lighted skulls.

THE HUT ON FOWL’S LEGS: Hartmann designed a clock in the form of the hut of Baba-Yaga, the witch of Russian folklore who grinds human bones to feed her captives. Mussorgsky focuses not on the clock but on the witch, whose hideous cackle pierces the ferocious music as she rides off to commit another foul deed.

THE GREAT GATE OF KIEV. When the architect-painter Hartmann entered a design competition for a gateway to Kiev, his concept was an extravagant fantasy: a portal capped by a cupola in the shape of an ancient Russian helmet. Mussorgsky imagined a splendiferous procession entering the gate, marching to a majestic, hymnic version of the Promenade—more sonorous than a lone piano might be expected to deliver. Ravel responded with appropriately massive instrumentation, assuring a grandiose conclusion, complete with pealing bells.

— Mary Ann Feldman

Recorded: October 1 - 3, 1996 at Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis, MN

Producer: J. Tamblyn Henderson, Jr.

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Editing / Mastering: Paul Stubblebine, JTH

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Special Thanks To: David J. Hyslop, President;
Robert R. Neu, Vice President and General Manager;
Asadour Santourian, Director of Artistic Planning; and
Akira Mori, Acting Assistant Conductor,
The Minnesota Orchestra

This recording was produced in part with assistance from
the Steven J. and Rita W. Zellmer Chair for Recording.

Studio Reference Monitors designed by Neil Patel and Keith Johnson,
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THE MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

The Minnesota Orchestra, founded in 1903 as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, has long been recognized as one of America's leading symphony orchestras. Since 1995 the Minnesota Orchestra has been guided by Eiji Oue, who carries on the tradition embodied in the ensemble's roster of celebrated music directors: Edo de Waart (1986-95), Sir Neville Marriner (1979-86), Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (1960-79), Antal Dorati (1949-60), Dimitri Mitropoulos (1937-49), Eugene Ormandy (1931-36), Henri Verbrugghen (1923-31) and Emil Oberhoffer (1903-22).

The Minnesota Orchestra's radio history began in 1923 with a national broadcast under guest conductor Bruno Walter and continues today with a broadcast series produced by Minnesota Public Radio for the Public Radio International network and carried on 160 stations in the United States as well as on the cable system of WFMT, Chicago's commercial fine arts radio station. Historic recordings of this orchestra, which date back to 1924, include releases for RCA Victor, Columbia, Mercury "Living Presence" and Vox Records. In recent seasons they have been augmented by discs on the Telarc, EMI/Angel, CBS, Philips and Virgin Classics labels.



Eiji Oue (AY-jee OH-way) became the ninth music director of the Minnesota Orchestra in 1995. Before joining the Minnesota Orchestra, Eiji Oue served as music director of Pennsylvania's Erie Philharmonic from 1991 to 1995. For four years prior to the Erie post, Oue was associate conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic. He has guest conducted widely throughout the United States, Europe and Japan, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the National Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra. In 1996 Oue became music director of the Grand Teton Music Festival.

A native of Hiroshima, Japan, Eiji Oue studied at the Toho School of Music, where he began his conducting studies with Hideo Saito, who had been the teacher of Seiji Ozawa. Oue first came to the United States in 1978 when Ozawa invited him to spend the summer studying at the Tanglewood Music Center. He subsequently studied at the New England Conservatory of Music where he was awarded an artist diploma in conducting. While at Tanglewood, Oue became a protégé of Leonard Bernstein. During the summer of 1990, Oue assisted Bernstein in the creation of the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan, serving as resident conductor for the Festival Orchestra.

Eiji Oue has won numerous honors and awards, among them the Koussevitsky Prize at Tanglewood in 1980 and both first prize and the Hans Haring Gold Medal in the 1981 conducting competition at the Salzburg Mozarteum. And some honors are unofficial: the family of Leonard Bernstein presented Oue with the baton and concert jacket from the maestro's last concert.



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