SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Benjamin Grosvenor: Pictures at an Exhibition

Friday 24 October 2025, 7pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Chopin Piano Sonata No.2 in B flat minor, Op.35 (Marche funèbre)	24'
Ravel Gaspard de la nuit	22'
Interval	
Mussorgsky Pictures at an Exhibition	32'

Performer

Benjamin Grosvenor *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours. There is a 20-minute interval.

Fryderyk Chopin (1810–49)

Piano Sonata No.2 in B flat minor, Op.35 (Marche funèbre)

1 *Grave – Doppio movimento*
2 *Scherzo*
3 *Marche funèbre: Lento*
4 *Finale: Presto*

A funeral cortège and a hanged man, a malevolent goblin and a skull-filled catacomb: there's a thread of macabre darkness that runs right through all three works in tonight's programme. That sinister theme draws deeply on the fascination that the supernatural and the devilish held for many 19th-century Romantic composers – even if it is offset in today's music by glittering colours and dazzling virtuosity.

That funeral cortège is the setting for what is undeniably Fryderyk Chopin's most famous creation, the slow third movement – specifically titled *March funèbre* – of his Second Piano Sonata, which he completed in 1839. The deathly processional actually comes from two years earlier: Chopin essentially wrote the rest of the Sonata around it, to provide it with a semi-conventional musical home. That said, he seems intent on defying convention in many ways across the Sonata, bending traditional forms and swerving sideways to embrace the styles of more familiar character pieces he had written so many of – ballades and nocturnes, for example.

Chopin created the piece while living in Nohant, the country manor in central France that was home to the celebrated novelist George Sand, his lover, muse and to some extent carer. The composer's fragility was notorious, and Sand was keen to allow him space and time to immerse himself in his music, free from other cares. Even that wasn't straightforward, however, as Sand explained in a letter to a friend: 'Chopin is still up and down, never exactly good or bad. He is gay as soon as he feels a little strength, and when he's melancholy he falls back onto his piano and composes beautiful pages.'

Chopin does indeed channel copious emotion into the Second Sonata's music, but it is far from a diary of his moods. Instead, in just over 20 minutes, this taut, focused creation wrings maximum power from its material. After the menacing gesture that opens the first movement, Chopin collides together two deeply contrasting themes – one galloping forward, the other more settled and hymn-like. His second movement is a brilliant but dark scherzo that's full of fearsome technical challenges for its performer. The sombre funeral march of the third movement may have been written in commemoration of those slain in Poland's 1830 November Uprising against the Russian Empire (it surely looks ahead, too, to both the tolling bell of Ravel's 'Le gibet' and the relentless tread of Mussorgsky's 'Bydlo', both of which we'll encounter later). Chopin concludes with a ghostly finale that spins out in scampering parallel lines across the entire piano keyboard, rarely clear in its harmonies until its outspoken ending.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Gaspard de la nuit

1 *Ondine*
2 *Le gibet*
3 *Scarbo*

If an arguably real-world funeral march served as the basis for tonight's opening piece, then Maurice Ravel delved deep into the darkness of the imagination and the subconscious

in the concert's second offering. Or, rather, writer Aloysius Bertrand did in his 1836 collection of prose poems *Gaspard de la nuit*, three of which served as the inspiration for the trio of vivid sound pictures that Ravel created in 1908. 'Gaspard' is a name of Persian origin (similar to Jasper or Casper) that means 'treasurer': *Gaspard de la nuit* is therefore literally 'treasurer of the night', implying devilish connections that fit comfortably with the spirits and sprites that both Bertrand and Ravel describe. Bertrand alleged that the tales were recounted to him by a dark, mysterious figure in a Dijon park, while Ravel continued the infernal attribution, explaining: 'Gaspard has been a devil in coming, but that is only logical since it was he who is the author of the poems.'

That devilishness might also extend to a description of the music's technical challenges, which Ravel specifically designed to be diabolically tricky: he described the pieces as 'three Romantic poems of transcendental virtuosity', and said he had intentionally written the closing 'Scarbo' to be more technically difficult than Balakirev's *Islamey*, at that time one of the pinnacles in the keyboard repertoire.

'Ondine' is a shimmering, splashing and seductively sensuous portrait of its eponymous water nymph, who seduces unwary travellers to her realm in the depths of a pitch-black lake. Like the immovable repeated notes in Chopin's earlier funeral march, a distant bell tolls from beginning to end of 'Le gibet', a desolate portrait of a featureless desert, a blood-red setting sun, and the decaying corpse of a hanged man swinging gently from a gallows. Ravel's closing 'Scarbo' is a grotesque portrait of a malevolent nocturnal goblin that bursts from the darkness only to scurry back into the shadows, its rapid repeated notes, lightning-quick figurations and stop-start shifts in direction conveying mischief and threat, but also a sense of sinister playfulness.

Modest Mussorgsky (1839–81)

Pictures at an Exhibition

1 *Promenade*
2 *Gnomus*
3 *Promenade*
4 *The Old Castle*
5 *Promenade*
6 *Tuileries*
7 *Bydlo*
8 *Promenade*
9 *Ballad of the Chicks in their Shells*
10 *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuÿle*
11 *Promenade*
12 *Limoges: the Market*
13 *Catacombs*
14 *Cum mortuis in lingua mortua*
15 *The Hut on Fowl's Legs*
16 *The Great Gate of Kyiv*

From Ravel's trio of musical portraits, we leap back in time about three decades for a whole gallery of images in tonight's closing work. Composer Modest Mussorgsky was devastated when his close friend, painter, designer and architect Viktor Hartmann, died suddenly in 1873 following a heart attack, aged just 39. The composer was moved by a memorial exhibition the following spring – and immediately inspired, rushing to work on a set of piano pieces based on Hartmann's images, which he completed on 22 June that year.

There are plenty among Mussorgsky's extravagant musical images that continue tonight's fascination with the macabre and the grotesque, even if his more sinister illustrations are leavened by others that are more humorous, or even movingly majestic. Mussorgsky's masterstroke is to introduce a reflective 'Promenade' theme representing himself strolling between the artworks. Hartmann's first picture is *Gnomus*, a gnome-shaped nutcracker that he designed as a children's Christmas present, and which Mussorgsky depicts in bad-tempered outbursts alternating with passages of ominous calm (and which offers distinct memories – or, perhaps more accurately, premonitions – of Ravel's 'Scarbo').

Following another, more reflective, 'Promenade', Mussorgsky transports us to 'The Old Castle', based on a Hartmann watercolour of a troubadour serenading his loved one by moonlight at an ancient edifice he visited in Italy. Another 'Promenade' seems to break off in mid-flow, leading straight into the miniature scherzo 'Tuileries', depicting children playing and squabbling in the famous Parisian gardens. With barely a break, Mussorgsky moves on to 'Bydlo', a depiction of a lumbering Polish ox cart that begins in the distance, before building to a mighty climax as the cart draws nearer (its relentless tread might prompt memories of Chopin's similarly inexorable funeral march).

A quiet, rather hesitant 'Promenade' finds Mussorgsky somewhat in shock after the monumental power of 'Bydlo', but he soon finds solace in the chirruping figurations of the delicate 'Ballad of the Chicks in their Shells', based on Hartmann's costume designs for the 1870 St Petersburg ballet *Trilby*. Mussorgsky owned two drawings by Hartmann, one entitled *A Rich Jew Wearing a Fur Hat* and the other *Poor Jew: Sandomierz*. He seems to have imagined the two figures together in 'Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuÿle', which describes an argument between the two men, the first wealthy and pompous, the second poor and querulous – depictions whose troubling antisemitism we no doubt recognise in 2025.

After a further, more confident 'Promenade', Mussorgsky moves on the bustle and gossip of 'Limoges: the Market', before plunging us into the sepulchral darkness of the Parisian Catacombs, ancient underground bone-filled tombs that Hartmann had visited while living in the French capital. The subsequent 'Cum mortuis in lingua mortua' (With the dead in a dead language) transfigures the 'Promenade' theme into an eerie invocation.

The piece reaches its macabre climax with the terrifying child-eating witch of Russian folklore, Baba-Yaga, who breaks the calm with the fierce, unpredictable music of 'The Hut on Fowl's Legs', based on Hartmann's elaborate design for a clock inspired by her chicken-footed home, before even she is halted in her tracks by the grand, majestic vision of 'The Great Gate of Kyiv'. Hartmann's picture is a design for an entrance gate to the Ukrainian capital that he submitted in an architectural competition in 1866 (he won, though it was never built). As well as two brief, quiet chorales based on orthodox chant, Mussorgsky brings back his 'Promenade' theme as part of the movement's grand culmination.

Find out more

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