

Mussorgsky Pictures at an Exhibition

Comparative Survey, September, 2013

(112 piano versions compared)



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Commentary

As far as we know Mussorgsky's original solo piano version of *Pictures at an Exhibition* was never publicly performed during his lifetime, and it remained an item of obscurity until Maurice Ravel had the inspiration to transcribe it for orchestra. Gradually familiarity with audiences increased its popularity until now both versions are very popular with listeners. The orchestral version is heard more often in concert halls and usually gets more radio play, but those who attend piano recitals or piano competitions will have heard it innumerable times in its original format. As for the orchestration by Ravel, it is certainly enjoyable, but I have to confess that a few other orchestrations seem to have got to the spirit of the work better than Ravel did. Comparing the different orchestrations is not the focus of this review, but as a minimum, any serious collector should have at least two or three orchestral versions in their library, my recommendations being: the Ravel, the Ashkenazy, and the Stokowski (the recording by Bamert on Chandos is a stunner). Another worthy version is that of Gorchakov (recorded by Masur on Teldec). By the same reasoning I'd say that a minimum of two piano versions are also called for: One which is more or less an accurate Urtext reading (adhering very closely to what the composer actually wrote), and one of the numerous versions from pianists who augment sonorities and reconfigure some of the textures. We'll get to the reasoning behind all these variables in a moment.

Some may cry that any tampering of the music demonstrates a lack of respect for the composer. But, by anybody's reckoning Mussorgsky was not a top-rate composer. He had a good deal of innate raw talent, but no formal musical education. Despite his talents, and keen imagination, composition was mostly just a hobby for him, while his clerical job kept him occupied by day and drinking with his buddies kept him occupied at night. He lacked both the discipline and personal temperament to develop his talents to their fullest extent. He was a waddling, overweight, red-nosed drunkard, and evidently a mean, and belligerent drunk, to boot. His intemperate lifestyle did him in by the time he was only 42 years old. Nevertheless, he did manage to scratch out a few works which show a remarkable and unique imagination; specifically, the *Pictures at an Exhibition* and the opera *Boris Godounov*. His *Night on Bald Mountain* is an interesting but flawed work which was left in a rather raw state before Rimsky-Korsakov polished it up and made it suitable for concert performance. The rest of his oeuvre remains of marginal interest only to Russian music specialists.

Regarding *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the first question to ask ourselves is: what are the pros and cons of hearing the music as a solo piano work or as an orchestral work (not to mention versions for organ, two pianos or synthesizer)? The usual reasons for advocating a piano version over an orchestral or organ work is clarity of texture which aids the listener in better discerning the structural syntax. That doesn't apply here. As a matter of fact, there are no real advantages of hearing the piano version other than to 1.) hear the work closer to how Mussorgsky conceived it, and 2.) admire the pianist's skill in evoking various colors and/or brilliant pyrotechnical display.

Truth be told, I don't listen to either version but for a couple of times each year; the piano versions not so often because it can just be so raw and downright bludgeoning with all those stark octaves, the orchestral versions because it's sort of like the over-indulgence of Thanksgiving Feast in its over-saturation of the senses. In other words, there are a lot of calories to burn, and, for me at least, not a lot of rewarding edification. However, I never tire of hearing either version in concert. For me, *Pictures* is an almost public spectacle, not something I turn to for enjoyment in my own private world at home. Just like I will put on my public face (wear my better shoes and comb my hair so I don't scare anyone) and make the effort to go to a museum exhibition where I will ponder paintings or sculptures, yet I'd never bother to get online and look at these works from the comfort of my home, even with the zoom-in feature, or the best art guides to explain what I'm seeing. *Pictures at*

an Exhibition is very much like these pictures at an exhibition. The whole issue of public versus private artistic expression has been the subject of numerous essays in aesthetics, so I won't take us all down that rabbit hole.

Hearing the solo piano work in concert seems to captivate my attention even when the rendering is not especially imaginative. Only once was I ever actually irritated by a performance in concert (Ivo Pogorelic), and only once was I truly held spell-bound (John Ogdon). Everything else has just been sufficiently interesting to hold my attention.

The bigger question we should ask ourselves is: what is the motivation behind all these different piano versions and orchestrations? There are many instances where the apparent inspiration of the work is superior to the actual realization. There are also cases where a composer must work within certain limitations, such as when Beethoven writes a passage one way in the middle register but has to leave off a note or two because of limitations of the keyboards at the time whenever he ventures to high or too low. For most listeners it is obvious that the passages should be "completed" according to the composer's established parameters when not having to deal with circumstantial limitations. There are others who are sticklers for playing only what is written even in the face of all logic. In these cases, we can say that the musical potential is higher than the manifest realizations of that work within some proscribed limitations.

Many composers write works for instruments without having firsthand expertise in that instrument's full capability. Many of these early Russian composers fall into the category of not being really accomplished pianists, even Rimsky-Korsakov who was otherwise a master of orchestration. Just look at the pianist-composer Brahms, who sought the assistance of the virtuoso violinist Joachim before finalizing many of the passages in his Violin Concerto. Dvorak would have done well to follow the same example when writing his tuneful but sometimes ineffective piano concerto. I have at least a half dozen transcriptions of the Bach Chaconne in my music library, and some of the very literal transcriptions are obviously the work of professors with a very low skill-level on the piano; the Busoni is a towering edifice because he understands how to extract color and sonority from the instrument.

By looking at the innate gestures within *Pictures*, and the crude and limited manner in which Mussorgsky sets these ideas for the piano, one recognizes strong musical conception, but limited understanding of instrument capability. Some folks say the same thing about Schumann's weak understanding of orchestration, but I say Mussorgsky is a far more extreme example. The tricky question is: exactly how much character of the work is derived from these somewhat primitive (and distinctively Mussorgskian) settings, and how much might have been "improved" with a little more polish and patience on the composer's part? In any case, even with Horowitz who was the freest of all the versions I heard (he called his version a "pianostration"), we are not talking about a differential at the level of Godowsky's re-workings of the Chopin Etudes. Without a score in hand, many of the smaller emendations would probably go without notice. In other words, they don't substantially change the innate musical character of the work.

In conducting this survey, very few versions which played the music "straight" won me over. A few did, namely Brendel (surprise!), but those proved to be a very small minority. Most of the versions that took liberties as needed to round out the implied sonority or to differentiate textures were, by and large, more convincing. Obviously, opinions are split on this issue, but I have no qualms about pianists who give us a fuller realization of the musical potential.

As for the various orchestral versions, many felt (and rightly so) that the Ravel conveyed more of a Ravel sound world where what we really want is a more distinctively Mussorgskian sound-world.

Therefore, many of these orchestrators looked closely at the orchestration of *Boris Godounov* for ideas on appropriate tone color.

Disregarding the straight versus modified question, one may wonder at the criterion involved in valuing one pianist's rendering as being better than another. For orchestral performances the results are less a matter of the conductor's particular insights than for the nature of the concert hall's acoustics, and the quality and tonal luster of the ensemble. To be as succinct as possible, let's look at just two examples.

Let's say we are comparing different performances of the movement *Tuileries* (Children Quarrelling After play). If we have no frame of reference, no available alternative version to compare, we might think that even the lowest-rated version in the survey sufficiently conveys a feeling of childish playtime drama. However, when we broaden our experience of the movement to include numerous performances, we would say that the performances which bring out a greater sense of play or of childish quarrelling is overall more characterful. And in a piece like this, it's hard to go over the top, but easy to give an impression of subdued indifference. The pianist who gives more contrast on the articulation of the slurred chords will convey a greater sense of taunting and teasing, the pianist who has a quicker and more nimble articulation of the staccato notes will convey a greater sense of play. The pianist who does both will be better still.

In the final movement, *Great Gate of Kiev*, obviously intended to convey sonority and majestic grandeur, Mussorgsky provides a quite conservatively written and not especially sonorous conveyance of such. Pianists who can orchestrate with their fingers, bringing out the bass here, the tenor here, the soprano here, and use all manner of full and half pedaling and controlled resonance effects to mimic the deep tolling bells, these 'tricks of the trade' all help elevate the music from abstract and ineffectual symbolism to very convincing and engaging realization. The pianist who does this most vividly, without pushing the instrument to the point of unpleasantness or distortion is going to be more compelling than the cautious or staid interpreter who really shouldn't be playing a work like this.

Leaving aside the matter of whether a performer plays the work exactly as written, or chooses to make some editorial changes, do we have any evidence of the type of *characterization* that Mussorgsky had in mind? Well, we can trace some of the changes that he made during the creative phase that give an idea of his thinking, and we can gather some evidence from those who heard him play. While nothing definitive can be known, we can say that with Mussorgsky the conception itself was probably based closely on his own playing style and temperament. In other words, somewhat bumptious or "rustic" and not especially finely-honed. For sure, nothing like the chiseled virtuosity of Kissin, nor the zen-like focus of Itin, nor the idealized poetic-expressive character that I look for in performances. I imagine something like what Yudina gives us is probably closest to the kind of mood and sound-world that Mussorgsky was after. But with any great creation, there are layers of potential that await revelation from many different types of performance.

Virtuosity and eccentricity were fairly easy to find in this survey. The ideal performance that I looked for was harder to find: commanding technique that doesn't get bogged down in the difficult numbers (*Limoges*, *Baba-Yaga*), color and contrast of sound—a more orchestral conception than just black and white clattery piano tone—and an expressive range that is comfortable and convincing in embracing both the introvert and extrovert elements side-by-side. The pet-peeves that set me off may not be your own pet-peeves. Therefore, in full disclosure, here are the performance parameters which I consider, in almost all cases, immediately disqualifying:

- Promenade too brisk and impatient
- Phrases that don't breathe
- Single-line melody too harsh and percussive
- Piano with harsh or garish voicing
- Lack of tonal differentiation or variety of voicing
- Complex passages insufficiently articulated
- Unimaginative (on-off) use of pedal
- Dry, un-pedaled, clattery octaves
- Dry, claustrophobic acoustic

Bottom line: characterization, technical agility, sense of color and sonority, this is what is required to bring Mussogsky's *Pictures* to life on the black and white keys.

Postscript:

All told, 112 commercial recordings of the solo piano versions were compared, plus two versions for two-pianos and seven versions for organ, which are listed in the discography. Not included in the reviews are the dozen or so radio broadcasts I have from various European concert halls and festivals; of these the only one of some interest was by Oleg Maissenberg (1987) who toward the end seemed to have discovered all the fun extra notes on a Bösendorfer Imperial and decides to make a "holy racket," as they say. As far as I know he never recorded the work commercially, but rumbly effects aside, he did seem to have some worthwhile musical ideas.

*Withheld from publication here are the 32 pages of detailed reviews I had ready; I was advised that perhaps my commentary concerning the "less favorable" performances was too forthright. I also had a separate three-page review of the various Richter recordings in which I defended my position for not including them among the final recommended versions. This in-depth analysis was prompted as a response to another critic who said that not only was Richter's (1958 Sofia) the best *Pictures* ever, but quite probably "one of the greatest recordings of anything made anytime, anywhere." Many Richter recordings will be featured as recommendations in forthcoming surveys, but in *Pictures* I honestly felt that others have done better. I would simply invite all curious parties to give the Richter a listen and compare it to the Pletnev or other versions I recommend and see where you fall on this apparently divisive issue. This fear of litigation, and treading carefully on every word committed to print, is why you generally read only positive reviews in publications (see **Relevance of Music Criticism** for further discussion of this topic)*

Discography

Solo Piano

Ader, Alice (Fuga Libra)
Arkadiev, Mikhail (Classical Assembly)
Ashkenazy, Vladimir (Decca)
Bar-Illan, David (Audiofon)
Berman, Lazar (DG)
Béroff, Michel (EMI)
Biro, Sari (Cambria)
Blumfield, Coleman (Sonoris)
Bonamy, Henri (Genuin)
Boyde, Andreas (Athene)
Brendel, Alfred (Vox, Philips)
Bronfman, Yefim (Sony)
Browning, John (Delos)
Campanella, Michele (Nuova Era)
Chen, Sa (Pentatone)
Cherkassky, Shura (Nimbus, BBC Classics)
Demidenko, Nikolai (Hyperion)
Douglas Barry (RCA)
Economou, Nicolas (DG)
Ejiri, Nami (Real Sound)
Engerer, Brigitte (Harmonia Mundi)
Entremont, Philippe (Pro-Arte)
Feltsman, Vladimir (Urtext)
Firkusny, Rudolf (DG)
Fisher, Philip Edward (Chandos)
Giltburg, Boris (MI)
Goldstone, Anthony (Divine Art)
Gothoni, Ralf (Ondine)
Hayghe, Jennifer (Centaur)
Helfgott, David (RAP)
Hollander, Lorin (RCA)
Horowitz, Vladimir (RCA)
Igoshina, Valentina (Warner Classics)
Itin, Ilya (VAI)
Ivanova, Maria (Blüthner)
Jablonski, Peter (Alta)
Jandó, Jenő (Naxos)
Janis, Byron (Mercury)
Jensen, Heine (Classico)
Kapell, William (Arbiter, RCA)
Kasman, Yakov (Calliope)
Katchen, Julius (Decca)
Kellner, Lars David (Enharmonic)
Kempff, Freddy (BIS)
Kissin, Evgeny (RCA)
Knight, Hyperion (Wilson Audio)
Lahusen, Nikolaus (Celestial Harmonies)
Leonskaja, Elisabeth (Teldec)
Libetta, Francesco (VAI)
Magaloff, Nikita (Naïve)
Marshev, Oleg (Danacord)
McCabe, Robin (Vanguard)
Merzhanov, Victor (MCA-Melodiya)
Mogilevsky, Evgeni (IMP Classics)
Moiseiwitsch, Benno (DG)
Mustonen, Olli (Decca)
Neumann, Alexandra (Coviello)

Ogawa, Noriko (BIS)
Ohlsson, Garrick (Bridge)
Ott, Sara Alice (DG)
Ovchinnikov, Vladimir (Collins Classics)
Pedroni, Simone (Philips)
Pletnev, Mikhail (Virgin)
Plowright, Jonathan (Wigmore Hall Live)
Pogrelich, Ivo (DG)
Ponti, Michael (Klavins, Marco Polo)
Postnikova, Viktoria (Olympia)
Pratt, Awadagin (EMI)
Richter, Sviatoslav (Melodiya, Praha, Philips, Naxos, TNC)
Roe, Elizabeth (DG)
Rösel, Peter (Berlin Classics)
Rouvier, Jacques (Denon)
Rudy, Mikhail (Calliope)
Saba, Geoffrey (IMP)
Say, Fazil (Naïve)
Schenly, Paul (Sine Qua Non)
Schepkin, Sergey (Northern Flowers)
Scherbakov, Konstantin (Two Pianists)
Seewann, Michael (Genuin)
Sevidov, Arkady (Arte Nova)
Slobodyanik, Alexander (A & E)
Smith, Ronald (Nimbus)
Solyom, Janos (BIS)
Sun, Yutong (Naxos)
Sverdlov, Vladimir (Piano Classics)
Tchaidze, Georgy (Honens)
Tiempo, Sergio (EMI)
Toradze, Alexander (EMI)
Tsuji, Nobuyuki (Challenge Classics)
Uehara, Ayako (EMI)
Ugorski, Anatol (DG)
Varjon, Denis (Capriccio)
Vogt, Lars (EMI)
Weissenberg, Alexis (EMI)
Wild, Earl (Ivory Classics)
Williams, Llyr (Signum Classics)
Yablonskaya, Oxana (Connoisseur Society)
Yoshizumi, Rieko (Genuin)
Yudina, Maria (Russian Disc)
Zappalà, Francesco (YouTube)
Zilberstein, Lilya (DG, Hänssler)

Two-Piano

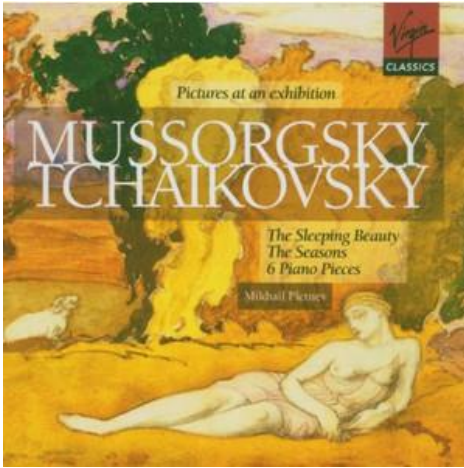
Anderson-Siprashvili (Nimbus)
Paratore Brothers (CBS)

Organ

Albrecht, Hansjörg (Oehms)
Asselin, Pierre-Yves (Denon)
Briggs, David (Lammas)
Guillou, Jean (Dorian)
Trafka, William (Pro-Organo)
Wiebusch, Carsten (Audite)
Willis, Arthur (Helios)

Recommendations

Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording



Mikhail Pletnev. Virgin Classics

In the opening Promenade Pletnev shows he is one of the few pianists to understand the need to let phrases breathe, and he also has a wonderful sense of orchestral color and how to voice his fingers to give us perceptive changes in the instrumentation. Now, purists be forewarned: he does tamper with the Holy Text. But this done in order to better exorcise the demons Mussorgsky has hidden within. The various Promenades interspersed between movements are each given a completely different feel, and what magic in those few measures! Dusty old weather-worn *Castello* seen through the distant haze of the mid-day sun; *Bydlo* is a morphologic tale of the suffering of humanity; the “Ballet of the Chicks” conveys the humor of their uncoordinated skittishness; the slurs and staccatos and off accents conveying the bickering and haggling and gossiping of the Market Place; the spooky, airless atmosphere of *Mortua*; the middle section of *Baba*—what is the crafty old witch up to?; the

jubilant peeling of bells in *Great Gate*...such story telling! The coupling of Pletnev’s own *Sleeping Beauty* transcription rounds out the program and what a *tour de force* it is. For those who only require one *Pictures* for their collection, this is it! By the way, there is also a posting on YouTube of a televised live concert from Germany which is similar to the rendering we hear on this CD; it is interesting to witness such pianism at work.

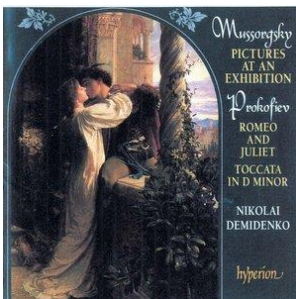
Other Noteworthy Performances



Alfred Brendel. Philips

A surprisingly effective recording from the master of Viennese classics, this is without doubt the finest of the so-called Urtext readings. Without tinkering with textures or employing effects of sonority Brendel demonstrates just how much can be communicated without wandering from what the composer actually wrote. Others have tried this approach and sounded dry, pedantic, colorless, or all of the above. Brendel manages to voice chords and lead voices so that the tone color is never monochromatic and monotonous, and always finds just the right transitions of tempo so that the work unfolds organically and unforced. *Castello*, for example, demonstrates a wonderful panoply of textures, with the incessant

rhythmic ostinato rendered as a muted and distant thrumming. A recording that has worn well in the two decades since its release. Lovely piano tone, well recorded, highly recommended.



Nikolai Demidenko. Helios (Hyperion)

This is a version I’ve had for some time, and listening again in the context of this survey I have an even higher regard for it. There is much to admire in the strong profile and characterizations which are always given the full expressive range, palette of colors and technical resources under Demidenko’s command. Nearly every movement is of the highest standard, some like *Tuileries* which flirt with perfection (if there can be such a thing) while others, such as *Limoges*, which I’ve heard done even better by a couple of other pianists, is still completely convincing in its own right. The *Catacombs* are perfectly gauged in their smoothly tapered dynamics, *Mortua* is an amazing moment of masterly pedaling and touch creating a spooky and highly evocative atmosphere. In the concluding *Great Gate*, I might

wish for a more relaxed and noble sonority in place of Demidenko’s somewhat firm and granitic tone, but there is no question of his commanding our attention until the very last note has been sounded. The recording quality is excellent, and we should consider ourselves so lucky to be able to come back time and again and enjoy Demidenko’s artistry captured in such fine sound. Even luckier now that this recording is available on Hyperion’s budget label Helios. The entire program on this disc is of the highest order, which also includes superb renderings of Prokofiev’s *Romeo & Juliet*, and the *Toccata*. Readers will know that I’m pretty conservative in giving out high praise, but this is one of those cases where my highest praise is unequivocally given.



Vladimir Horowitz. RCA

I compared two versions for the survey: the 1947 studio recording, and the 1951 live Carnegie Hall recording. Most listeners (including myself) prefer the greater color and more powerful bass in the 1951 recording. Horowitz' "pianostration" is kind of a love it or hate thing. But let's separate the arrangement from the performance. Most people who don't care for the recordings are responding to the manner in which Horowitz has "tampered" with the text, with much the same freedom as Ravel approached his orchestration. I find the transcription of some interest for its exploration of sonorities, more layered textures in movements such as *Mortua*, and the occasional bit of piquant spice added to the harmony. True, some of the fiddling such as in *Limoges* actually interferes with the flow of the music because Horowitz is changing textures and registrations too often in the context of such a frantic piece. But for the most part, I think his ideas are musically defensible. What I responded to upon hearing this again after a hiatus of nearly a decade, was not the textural changes but just Horowitz being Horowitz. Wouldn't matter if it was Beethoven or Scarlatti, it's just his highly idiomatic manner of playing which sometimes comes as a shock. In other words, his very free use of rubato, braking here, lurching there, grand pauses and sudden apoplexisms of sound that stop abruptly; it doesn't have to do with whatever particular notes he's playing, it's how he plays. In the context of this survey, I found much of it too willfully distorted for me to just to turn the cheek and invite another slap against my musical sensibilities. So I took a day off doing some other projects and came back and listened again, approaching it on its own, as if a person sitting in the audience, and not with the comparison of a hundred other versions from this survey. The result was that I quickly adjusted to his needling and nudging of the line when I put out of my mind what I expected to come next. In other words, a totally naïve and receptive state of listening (which is, after all, how 90% of the audience actually experiences a performance). So, I was able to get some enjoyment of it, but not to the same degree that I was really consumed with Pletnev, or aspects of performances from Tiempo or Bar-Illan. What I'd love to hear would be one of the modern super-virtuosos such as Hamelin or Volodos have a go at the Horowitz transcription. I have a feeling Volodos might go over the top, adding his own bass tremolos and such, but Hamelin, I think, has the sense to maintain a modicum of musicality and organic flow. That's what's still holds me back from fully endorsing the Horowitz performances (aside from the dated sound quality): spastic indulgences and manic craziness. I'd be really curious to hear what Zenpf Labs might be able to do with some of these dated, pre-stereo recordings, just like the amazing transformation that they achieved with that thin, 1955 mono-recording of Glenn Gould's Goldbergs. But until Zenpf or Hamelin give us other options, pianophiles will have to settle for the '51 as the best option for hearing this unique adaptation of the classic. I've highlighted this as a noteworthy performance because, love it or hate it, it really is obligatory listening for any serious student or collector of *Pictures*.



Ilya Itin. VAI

This was a delightful discovery for me. What an imaginative sense of characterization this pianist has! *Gnomus* had me on the edge of my seat! *Castello* is laid out in multiple layers of color and texture through masterful use of varied articulation and dynamics. *Toileries*, *Limoges*, and *Ballet of the Chicks* are all wonderfully characterized. If I wasn't such a disciplined and focused listener I would have hit the repeat button on many of these—they were that good. His rendering of *Baba-Yaga* proves that it is possible to be exhilarating without banging and bludgeoning octaves; Itin always maintains a sense of lithe and supple touch. The only thing questionable for me was the unusual sonority effects in *Great Gate*, with slow rolled chords overlaid with a lot of pedal haze. It is certainly novel the first time around, but I'm not sure how it will stand up with repeated listening. The companion work, Prokofiev's Sixth Sonata also has many stunning and revelatory moments. Vivid sounding recording. This man is definitely on my radar now. Highly recommended!

Byron Janis. Mercury

It is too bad Janis' career was cut short by crippling arthritis of the hands which made playing even the simplest music quite painful. He later underwent surgery and regained sufficient use of his hands to resume his career but was limited to mostly non-virtuosic repertoire. This recording dates from the early part of his career (1961) and demonstrates to me why he was probably the finest talent ever produced in America: innate musical expressiveness, tonal luster, virtuosic brilliance. Other pianists (Fleisher, Graffman, Wild, Pennario, Blumfield, Dichter, even Cliburn) had one or two of these characteristics, but not all three. Another of my favorites, John Browning, had all three, but to a somewhat lesser degree than Janis when it came to more intimate expressiveness. Janis was able to embrace equally both the extrovert and introvert aspects of music. Everybody assumes that as a pupil of Horowitz, Janis was mostly just a fire-breathing virtuoso, but I hear also a sensitive soul who was able to masterfully voice and taper phrases with utmost poetic communicativeness. Just listen to the magic he weaves in the second little Promenade, which is usually just a throw-away bit of excess baggage in most pianist's hands. Or the wonderful characterization in *Tuileries*. Janis does employ some subtle transpositions here and there, and in the final pages of *Great Gate*

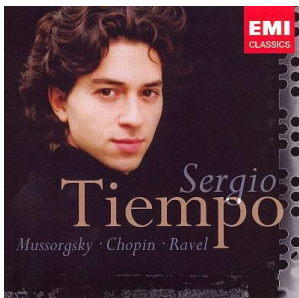
this helps better delineate the two against three effect. He also adds some pedal point ostinatos in a manner similar to Horowitz, but I like his ending better than Horowitz (Janis uses a down-up configuration instead of Horowitz who builds sonority top and bottom and then finishes in the less brilliant middle register). The only drawback of this recording is the piano that Janis used which is terribly tubby in the low bass, and generally soft and mushy in the lower register (this type of voicing was typical of the New York Steinways of the early-to-mid-sixties, witness the same sound on some of Lewenthal's recordings); given how often Janis dips down into this register, and how it makes me cringe each time, I'd say that affects my overall level of enjoyment here. On the other hand (usually the right one) there is a wonderful non-percussive tone that helps Janis draw forth wonderful legato lines. The recorded sound itself is up close and personal, close enough to hear the swish of each hammer as it moves into motion, but not as stifflingly claustrophobic as some. Good color and robust sonority are conveyed. The tubbiness in the low bass is well hidden in all the complex sonority of the final two numbers, *Baba* and *Great Gate*, so that's when I crank up the volume and enjoy.

Victor Merzhanov. MCA-Melodiya

This little known recording is actually quite engaging. Merzhanov was known primarily as a teacher at the Moscow Conservatory but he also concertized quite a bit and made a few recordings. I also have an LP of his Scriabin which is good, despite the overly-bright Bechstein he used. This recording uses a better sounding instrument and it is my favorite version of *Pictures* to put on late at night with the lights dimmed as I sit in my easy chair and let the music transport me to a bygone time and place. This isn't to say the music is all soft and dreamy, but unlike Richter's hard-hitting account, he does know how to play softly, to offer contrast in dynamics and textures, and to tap into that sense that we are no longer just listening to piano notes. I wouldn't put him at the level of Sofronitsky, who is one of my all-time favorites, but he leans more in that direction than Richter. Right from the opening Promenade he doesn't dawdle, but he doesn't push us either (like Richter), and what masterful contrasts in voicing. In this way, extensive passages, whether soft (as in *Castello*) or loud (as in *Baba*) never tire the ear because he is always changing the emphasis of weight from one finger to the other. His rendering of *Two Jews* is one of my favorites because he doesn't try for a heavy touch like everybody else; to me the sound is more expressive and evocative of a middle-eastern reed instrument. He does employ some subtle emendation in sonority in *Catacombs* and in the *Great Gate*, but nothing that draws attention away from the natural expression of the music. Track it down and give it a listen, knowing that this is not a typical in-your-face Russian bang-fest, and see if you find it as communicative and transporting as I do.

Ivo Pogorelich. DG

This is another of those love it or hate performances. Usually I come down on the side of not liking Pogorelich's conceptions, and, in fact, I heard him play this live back in about 1996, and it was one of the worst piano recitals I ever paid money to subject myself to. I suppose he was still formulating which of his eccentric ideas worked or not, but in this recording, as idiosyncratic as it is, I found myself drawn into his strange world. Let's face it, *Pictures* is a weird work, way out in left field from anything that was commonly heard in the concert halls at the time (Chopin, Schumann, Brahms) and in terms of weirdness and rustic effects, Mussorgsky can be seen as a sort of drunk Russian cousin of Alkan. This kind of over-the-top characterization suits Pogorelich quite well. True, *Castello* is really drawn out, a mini-tone poem in itself, and he transforms the heavily laden oxcart *Bydlo* into a veritable Brucknerian dirge which slowly fades off into an existential nothingness. The middle section of *Baba* is also highly original in terms of performance tradition, but if you look at the score, Pogo doesn't do anything that tinkers with what's actually written. I'm highlighting this as a noteworthy performance but I wouldn't recommend it as an only version to have of this work. Some of the other top contenders might warrant listening to a couple of times a year without wearing out their welcome, this one is really an indulgence that I wouldn't want to revisit more than every few years. Any lover of distinctive and, yes, masterful playing, should at least hear this once.



Sergio Tiempo. EMI

I'm not sure why Tiempo is not better known. Ever since I picked up his debut CD recorded when he was a young teenager, I've waited for him to emerge on the international concert scene. Evidently, much like his mentor, Martha Argerich, he does a lot of chamber music work, but really, he is a highly communicative solo artist. So now, finally a serious commercial recording. Moments of delight abound at every turn of our journey through the Exhibition. There are some highly idiosyncratic interpretations, such as the lurking Gnomes, *Bydlo*, the poor old lumbering beast, or the crushing tone clusters of the Catacombs. I've also never heard the *Two Jews* so well contrasted (Tiempo takes one of the lines down an octave which helps set it apart more from the other one). Elsewhere

Tiempo's conceptions are more traditional yet highly refined and full of expressive nuance. I was fairly incredulous at his nimbleness and breakneck pace in *Limoges*, really some incredible pianism in the service of maximum musical characterization! Good thing that sort of prepared me for *Baba-Yaga*, because otherwise my jaw would have been on the floor. Jeez! This is one fast-flying witch! After all that adrenalin he finds the composure to carefully voice and taper phrases in the *Great Gate*. The rapid scales near the final perorations in *Great Gate* sound like a glissando (this couldn't possibly have been fingered at this speed, right?). This is a superb rendition which no pianist or collector should be without.

Two-Piano Pick

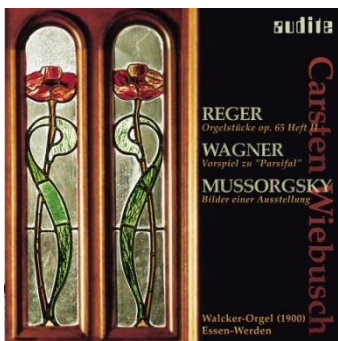


Anderson-Siperashvili. Nimbus

I've long maintained that *Pictures at an Exhibition* works well for two pianos, and as such, proven here, it is certainly more interesting than much of the lame and tame standard repertoire for two pianos. To my mind it is still closer in spirit to Mussorgsky's conception than the Ravel orchestration. If you like the original solo piano version, this is just bigger and bolder. Many of the textures and sonorities which are rather sparse in the solo version are filled-in, rounded out, made more complete, an advantage most obvious in the concluding *Great Gate*. For the most part arranger Tim Seddon has used restraint in adding any emendations to the score. The few instances where I remained unconvinced had to do with those places where Seddon's creative urge did detract from

Mussorgsky (the left-hand tremolos in *Gnomus*, and the frilly fluffery in *Ballet of the Chicks*). This recording certainly gives a much more powerful impression than the Paratore Brothers recording for CBS. The companion work here, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* makes for a pleasant, if not especially compelling listen. It would have worked better if the pianists had used pianos with a more incisive voicing to help render all the complex rhythmic figures with greater clarity and impact (for that try Dag Achatz's amazing solo transcription on BIS). What really impressed me with the overall program was the phenomenal ensemble between the two pianists. Both Mark Anderson and Tamriko Siperashvili are prize-winning virtuosos in their own right, and together they make a formidable two-piano team. The ensemble cohesion, powerful characterization, balance and tonal luster really put many other teams to shame. Bottom line, two thumbs up for the Mussorgsky, one thumb for the Stravinsky, two thumbs for the team. Let's hear more, and soon!

Recommended Organ Version



Carsten Wiebusch. Audite

Of the seven organ versions I compared this was the only that really allowed me to focus on the music, and not on the performer, the organ, or the acoustic venue (he plays on the Walcker organ in Essen if you must know). Wiebusch approaches the music as any serious concert pianist or conductor would: what makes the most sense musically. He's not out to show how many stops he can pull in an eight-bar phrase. Stops and the combinations of sounds are carefully considered to put us in the proper mood and characterization of each piece (not for the wildest sounds or most pizzazz). The trance-like ostinato and forlorn sound of the melancholy melody of *Castello* made this an effective as a piece of music, which is what I want, and what Mussorgsky intended. I appreciate how he approaches the music with humility and not self-aggrandizement. "Quarreling Children," and "Poor Jew-Rich Jew" are superbly characterized by any standard (piano, orchestra or organ). Well done! I'm not sure how organ 'fanatics' take this, but as a person interested in getting to the spirit of the music, I find Wiebusch's approach most rewarding. Capturing the loud to soft diminuendos of *Catacombs* is a real challenge on the organ, especially if one has a very limited sound palette in the swell ranks. Wiebusch does better than anybody else I've heard. *Baba-Yaga* has some awkward moments in the first part which sound like flubs, but the later return of the flying witch is played without issue; the main thing with *Baba* is how amazingly evocative the middle section is, to me this speaks of the untapped potential of an organ as a serious concert instrument. By 'untapped' I hope you realize by now I'm not talking about sounds or stops or pedal virtuosity, I'm talking about musical expression. For me, the only disappointing moment in the entire performance came in the last line, where Wiesbusch inexplicably breaks character and throws in some silly Guillou-inspired flourishes. Well, I was impressed with the Mussorgsky and the sensitive and moving rendition of the Wagner *Parsifal* (arr. Lemare) that I searched out other recordings by this artist, and promptly ordered a CD. The recording does have some distracting noises, whether mechanical, or people mulling about I can't really say, but that's a small price to pay for the overall positive and musically immersive experience.