

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
February 15-16-17, 2019
Subscription Concert No.5
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We open this Madison Symphony Orchestra program with a work by composer John Harbison, who spends each summer living in nearby Token Creek. Harbison's *The Most Often Used Chords* is a playful take on the basic music theory primers often included in books of music manuscript paper. Joining us as a soloist for these concerts is violinist James Ehnes, making his third appearance in Overture Hall—he previously played Bartók's second concerto (2012) and the Bruch *Scottish Fantasy* (2015) with the orchestra. At these programs Mr. Ehnes performs the great Brahms concerto. To close this program, we play the most famous of all musical depictions of visual art—Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, colorfully orchestrated by Maurice Ravel.

John Harbison (b. 1938)

The Most Often Used Chords (Gli accordi più usati)

This work was composed in 1992-93 and it was first performed by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra on October 22, 1993. This is the first performance of the work by the Madison Symphony Orchestra. Duration 18:00.

John Harbison stands in the first rank of today's American composers. He has composed in virtually every genre of art music from opera to chamber works, and he also remains active as a jazz pianist. Harbison's style is notable for its adaptability—freely adopting musical influences that suit the context of the piece, and evolving substantially from work to work—in his words, “to make each piece different from the others.” Also active as conductor, he has led major orchestras in performances of his own music, but his interest extends to *all* music, from championing neglected 20th-century works to Bach and Monteverdi. Harbison spends most of the year in Boston, and has been a member of the faculty of M.I.T. for nearly 40 years, where he is Institute Professor, the highest distinction accorded to resident faculty. But there is a clear local connection as well. Harbison holds an Honorary Doctorate from UW-Madison, and his wife, violinist Rose Mary Harbison, grew up on a farm a few miles north of Madison and is a UW-Madison graduate. The Token Creek farm has long served as a summer retreat, where Harbison finds the solitude to compose. Every summer since 1989, the Harbisons have hosted the annual Token Creek Music Festival in their barn. Harbison writes

the following about *The Most Often Used Chords*, one of his most frequently-performed pieces:

“I write most of my music in spiral-bound notebooks. I tend to buy many types to keep different pieces visually separate. Most of the notebooks contain, inside the covers, little instruction guides on the fundamentals of music. I had often contemplated them in a day-dreaming state, until one evening, in a notebook I had bought for my Third Symphony, my eye fell upon ‘Gli accordi più usati.’ This full page catalogue of the ten ‘most often used chords,’ listed first in C and then transposed up by half steps eleven times, was never meant to be played in sequence. But to my ear, it made an accidentally attractive, somewhat Italianate progression, and I realized with pleasure that these are chords I hardly ever use.

“Before I was really aware what was happening, I had composed a *Passacaglia* for small orchestra based on this Italian page, and had begun other movements based on bits from the instruction manuals, some of which I will quote below. The emerging piece seemed to express my delight in these Cagean found objects, my pleasure in rediscovering these simple patterns, and my enjoyment of the irresistible restricted vocabularies they proposed. [*The Most Often Used Chords*] is essentially a work of play, taking place in a realm where free fantasy and simple theory meet and find they can harmonize with each other.

“I. *Toccata*: 1. ‘Use these charts to form chords in any key. Major, minor, diminished, augmented. The construction of these chords involves simply raising or lowering one or more tones one half step.’ 2. ‘Here are the two scales you need: major and minor.’ 3. ‘There are seven modes; each begins on a different white key.’

“II. *Variazioni*: ‘The chord of chords is the triad (Ex. C-E-G).’ There are four variations within a frame. There is no sonority in the entire movement, except for a brief wayward bass line in the third variation, that is not a triad. In this peculiar restriction lies the voice of this brief movement.

“III. *Ciaccona*: The ten ‘most often used chords’ form a ground against which a melody takes shape. The melody presses to break free of the ground, to spin forward in historical time, which causes an interlude after the sixth chaconne statement. At the moment of greatest tension, the melody and the ground resume. The rarefied world of the exotic found object dissolves into another world of feeling, perhaps through the composer’s intervention.

“IV. *Finale*: ‘The Circle of Fifths is easy to memorize. Starting with F and moving clockwise, the keys can be learned by saying Fat Cats Go Down Alleys Eating Bread. The keys counterclockwise can be learned by repeating Boys Eat Aging Dogs Good Cold Food.’ I once learned the lines on the staff by remembering Every Good Boy Does Fine. My amusement at these newer rubrics is reflected in the tone of this movement. In addition to the increasingly crazed appearances of the Circle of Fifths, two other tables from the same notebook appear: the *Table of Contracting Note Values* (shades of Handel’s B-flat *Concerto Grosso*), and the *Table of Expanding Intervals* (which leads inexorably to the use of all twelve tones).

“The piece is, of course, intelligible without any reference to this program note!”

Intelligible indeed—and occasionally hilarious—even without any understanding of the music theory “inside jokes.” The opening *Toccata* has a restless energy that comes from the almost manic repeated scales. The *Variazioni* movement has a thoroughly sweet character that arises from Harbison’s exclusive use of triads. *Ciaccona*—a Baroque form that sets variations above a repeating harmonic pattern (in this case the “most often used chords”) is the most dramatic section, culminating in a soaring solo violin that momentarily breaks the pattern before it can be reestablished. The *Finale* has a disjointed, playful quality, as musical fragments are tossed from one instrument and section to the next—a kind of musical game of hot potato—before a tongue-in-cheek ending.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, Op. 77

Brahms composed this, his only violin concerto in the summer of 1878, and it was first performed at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, on January 1, 1879, with the composer conducting. Joseph Joachim, to whom it is dedicated, played the solo part at the premiere. It has been performed eight times by the Madison Symphony Orchestra, in 1936 (George Szpinalski), 1946 (Roman Totenberg), 1963 (Sidney Harth), 1975 (Dylana Jenson), 1991 (Itzhak Perlman), 2000 (Shlomo Mintz), and 2008 (Sarah Chang). Duration 38:00.

“One enjoys getting hot fingers playing it, because it’s worth it!”
 - Joseph Joachim

In the summer of 1878, Brahms took up residence in the town of Pörtschach in southern Austria to work on his violin concerto. (Pörtschach apparently provided a

fine creative environment for the composer—he had completed his second symphony there during the previous summer.) The concerto was dedicated to his friend and colleague, violinist Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), and the concerto was, in a limited sense, a collaboration between composer and soloist. Brahms and Joachim first met in 1853, beginning a lifelong friendship and musical association. When he had completed the first three movements in August of 1878, he sent a copy of the solo violin part to Joachim with a letter:

“After copying it, I am not sure what you can do with a mere solo part. Of course, I would like you to make corrections; I had intended to leave you no excuse whatsoever—neither that the music is too good, nor that it isn’t worth the trouble. Now, I would be satisfied if you write a letter to me or perhaps mark the music: difficult, awkward, impossible, etc. I have just started the fourth movement, so you can overrule the awkward passages at once.”

Joachim promptly replied with a marked copy of the part and a letter of his own:

“It is a great, sincere joy for me that you are writing a violin concerto (even one in four movements!). I immediately studied what you sent to me, and you will note a few remarks and notes for changes, but without the score, one cannot appreciate it. Most of it can be executed and some parts have a quite original violinistic flair. I cannot say whether everything can be played with ease in a hot concert hall until I have tried out the whole.”

Brahms incorporated several of Joachim’s suggestions into the final version of the score, and rather than providing a cadenza for the first movement, he used one written by Joachim.

The *Violin Concerto* stands as one of the largest and most challenging works in the solo violin repertoire. While his projected fourth movement was not included in the final form of the concerto (Brahms successfully used a four-movement design three years later in his second piano concerto.), the concerto’s traditional three-movement design nevertheless has symphonic proportions. Indeed, there are several close ties between the *Violin Concerto* and the *Symphony No.2*, written a year earlier (and in the same key). Brahms also makes several subtle references to Beethoven’s violin concerto, which is also in D Major. The concerto, written with the talents of Joachim in mind, presents formidable challenges for the soloist. One violinist, Bronislaw Huberman, referred to the work—only half-jokingly—as “...a concerto for violin *against* orchestra—and the violin wins!”

The orchestral introduction to the first movement (*Allegro non troppo*) presents nearly all of the movement's thematic material in a single dramatic phrase. Musical material is disengaged from this phrase—like single strands from a larger thread—as the movement continues. The violin's opening music presents a fiery variant of a melody fully introduced later in the movement above the orchestra's presentation of the lyrical main theme. Throughout the movement, Brahms restlessly develops his themes, even in the short coda that follows the cadenza.

The second movement (*Adagio*) presents a theme and several variations, a form that interested Brahms throughout his life. The theme is presented by the oboe, and then picked up by the soloist in variations that exhaustively develop the theme and its component parts. There is an abrupt contrast between the reserved close of this movement and the spirited opening of the rondo-form finale. The main theme of the third movement (*Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace*) is presented immediately by the violin: a Hungarian-flavored melody spiced with double stops. A second section, presenting a stormy dotted figure, drifts gradually back to a restatement of the main melody. A more lyrical central episode, which refers subtly to the opening melody gives way to a restatement of the second section. The movement closes with a long and dramatic coda, in which both soloist and orchestra develop the main theme.

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)

Mussorgsky's piano suite Pictures at an Exhibition was completed in June of 1874, and was published posthumously in 1886 with a dedication to Vladimir Stassov. The orchestration by Ravel dates from early 1923: it was commissioned by Serge Koussevitsky, who conducted the premiere in Paris in May of that year. The work has been performed five times at these concerts between 1979 and 2007. Duration 33:00.

When the Russian architect Victor Hartmann died at age 39 in 1873, writer Vladimir Stassov and several other of Hartmann's friends and associates arranged a memorial exhibition of some 400 drawings and paintings by the architect. One of the visitors to the gallery was Mussorgsky, who had long admired Hartmann's work. Within a few months of the exhibition, Mussorgsky had composed a suite of piano pieces based upon some of his favorites among Hartmann's drawings. The form of this programmatic suite was unusual: it portrays the composer himself walking through the gallery, standing before several pictures and forming his own musical impressions of each one.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* remained relatively obscure until 1923, when Ravel completed an orchestration of the suite for Serge Koussevitsky. Ravel's scoring was not the first attempt to transform *Pictures* into an orchestral piece, nor was it the last—there have been at least a dozen arrangements of *Pictures*, beginning with an orchestration by Mikhail Tushmalov in 1891, and orchestral versions by Sir Henry Wood, Ravel, Leonidas Leonardi, Leopold Stokowski, Lucien Caillet, Walter Goehr, and Sergei Gorchakov. There have also been scorings for other groupings of instruments, including Elgar Howarth's brass ensemble version, a guitar version by Yamashita, Tomita's electronic scoring, and even a fancifully-staged version by the 1970s prog-rock band Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. Ravel's masterful orchestration is better known than any other, including Mussorgsky's own piano suite!

Here is a movement-by-movement “walking tour” of *Pictures*:

Promenade - This most familiar of Mussorgsky melodies, appearing between several of the movements, is used to bind the work together. In Stasov's descriptive notes for the first published edition of *Pictures*, he writes: “Mussorgsky has represented himself roving right and left, sometimes hesitantly and sometimes briskly, in order to get close to pictures that have caught his attention.” The uneven 5/4-6/4 meter gives a characteristically Russian feel to this passage.

Gnomus - The first of Hartmann's drawings to be interpreted by Mussorgsky is of a nutcracker carved in the shape of an ugly, grinning gnome. Stasov's notes suggest that this contorted figure “...accompanies his droll movements with savage shrieks.” Mussorgsky's music is suitably gruesome, with awkward, limping lines.

Promenade

Il vecchio castello (“The old castle”) - This was Hartmann's watercolor study of a medieval castle, painted when he was a student in Italy. A troubadour standing by the gate gives a sense of the castle's size. This movement gives the impression of the troubadour's lute quietly strumming in support of a melancholy melody played by the alto saxophone.

Promenade

Tuileries - This sketch shows children playing in the famous public gardens of the Tuileries in Paris. There is an argument and a chase after some high-spirited play, all portrayed in Mussorgsky's light-footed music and Ravel's transparent orchestration.

Bydlo - A sketch made by Hartmann in the Polish town of Sandomierz shows a wagon with enormous wheels being pulled by oxen (*Bydlo* is a Polish word for "cattle."). In Ravel's orchestration, this evocative melody has been given to the tuba.

Promenade

Ballet of the chicks in their shells - This was Hartmann's costume design for one of the scenes in *Trilbi*, a ballet presented in St. Petersburg in 1871. In this scene, children dance as baby canaries trying to break out of their shells.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle - This movement is based upon two of Hartmann's drawings of Sandomierz: one showing a rich and well-dressed Jew wearing a fur hat, and the other showing a poor Jew in threadbare clothes. In Mussorgsky's inventive setting, the two characters have been joined in a conversation. Ravel scored the pompous tones of Goldenberg for unison strings and winds, while the whining Schmuyle is portrayed by muted trumpet. At the end, Goldenberg's music becomes even more imperious, ending with an abrupt dismissal.

The market-place at Limoges - There are several surviving Hartmann drawings made during a visit to the French town of Limoges, but the specific picture that inspired this movement has apparently been lost. According to a marginal note in Mussorgsky's manuscript, this movement shows the "good gossips of Limoges" exchanging the most important news of the day: Monsieur de Puissanceout's lost cow, Mme. de Remboursac's new false teeth, and Monsieur Panta-Pantaleon's excessively large nose.

Catacombs - This sketch shows the artist peering into the catacombs of Paris by the light of a lantern, which reveals several skulls. Ravel's orchestration brings out dark sonorities from the brasses and woodwinds.

Cum mortuis in lingua mortua ("With the dead, in the language of the dead") - This rather spooky version of the *Promenade* theme is based not upon a Hartmann picture, but rather on Mussorgsky's reaction to *Catacombs*. In the

margin of his manuscript, the composer wrote: “The creative spirit of the dead Hartmann leads me to the skulls and calls to them; they begin to glow with a soft light.”

The hut on fowl’s legs (Baba Yaga) - Baba Yaga was a witch who terrified generations of Russian children at bedtime. Her hut, hidden deep in the forest, was perched on chicken legs so that it could turn to face anyone who chanced to find it. No broomstick for this lady: she rode cackling through the woods in a huge wooden mortar propelled by an equally formidable pestle (no doubt in search of naughty children to eat). Ravel’s orchestration is at its most colorful in this section. This movement leads directly into the finale.

The great gate of Kiev - After Czar Alexander II narrowly escaped assassination in Kiev in 1866, the city council of Kiev asked Hartmann to produce a design for a monument to commemorate God’s intervention on behalf of the Czar. Hartmann’s design (which was never built) was a fanciful and immense arch surmounted by the Russian imperial eagle, and other symbols of the Czar’s authority. This picture was a great favorite of Mussorgsky’s, and he commented on it with a massive and powerful hymn of thanksgiving.