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PLAYING TO THE GALLERY

What happened when pianist Leif Ove Andsnes worked with visual artist Robin Rhode to reinterpret Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*? Daniel Jaffé travelled to Norway to find out

Leif Ove Andsnes tends to choose his performing partners with care – usually with striking results. Whether accompanying tenor Ian Bostridge in Schubert, or the violinist Christian Tetzlaff in Bartók, he has been greeted mostly with unadulterated acclaim. His latest partnership, though, promises to be controversial on several counts. Two years ago, having ‘auditioned’ several visual artists, he chose to team up with the South African artist Robin Rhode to create an audio-visual reinterpretation of Musorgsky’s famous piano cycle, *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

That Andsnes should have arranged such an unconventional partnership is not simply due to the obvious ‘visual’ quality of Musorgsky’s piano work. There have been signs for some time that he has become a little ill-at-ease with the over-rigid conventions

of classical concert performances – which may explain some of his recent appearances such as playing Mozart in an Oslo night club or, in a prize-winning documentary, playing Grieg’s Ballade in G minor on a rock high above the Hardanger Fjord. It could be argued that these were gimmicks staged for video release; but the new Musorgsky project is the main plank of his imminent world tour to 24 venues around the world. Clearly he is taking this one quite seriously.

Earlier this year I travelled to Risør, an idyllic Norwegian fishing town where Andsnes and friends regularly hold a music festival, to get a foretaste of this project. It was presented in a large warehouse in which a stage and raked auditorium had been arranged; Andsnes was – as expected – seated at a piano, but surrounded by screens on which videos and other visual images were projected, all extremely closely ▶





CLOSE TEAMWORK: (left) Leif Ove Andsnes with artist Robin Rhode; (far left and right) two of Rhode's visualisations of Musorgsky's 'Promenades'; and (above) Andsnes performs with Rhode's pictures and videos projected around him



SETTING A CHALLENGE:
Robin Rhode about to
visualise the brilliant
toccata of 'Marketplace'



coordinated with his performance. Indeed, so detailed was this coordination, down to the very ends and beginnings of phrases, that when interviewing Andnsnes and Rhode the following day I rather naively asked whether Andnsnes himself cued the visuals. No, Rhode explains, that's all down to a backstage technician, Tony Harris: 'he is able to manipulate the film – slow it down or speed it up by milliseconds according to Leif Ove's performance – he's able to get the images to end or begin on certain points. I think they call it video-jockeying, mixing visuals to music; it's a very similar process to disc-jockeying.'

Andnsnes then adds: 'It was really a condition from the start that I should not have to care about what's happening on screen; I am just playing as I would in any concert.'

But why involve Rhode in the first place? It seems clear that Andnsnes wanted to break from the conventions of a piano recital: rather than have his audience merely watch him go through the hurdles of a well-known repertory piece, he wanted to reawaken them to the actual experience of music and hear it afresh, paradoxically, by involving the further stimulus of something visual yet relevant. Certainly Andnsnes thought Musorgsky's *Pictures* an ideal work for such treatment: 'There are pieces of music where you feel everything's there, everything is said,' he

has said; '*Pictures at an Exhibition* is the opposite, making it a perfect composition to experiment with.'

Musorgsky was himself an experimenter *par excellence*. To cite just one instance, his use of non-diatonic 'bell' harmonies in his opera *Boris Godunov* impelled both Debussy and Stravinsky into their own revolutionary experimentation with harmonies. In *Pictures* Musorgsky



**'Pictures at an
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attempted to transform artwork by his recently deceased friend, Viktor Hartmann, into music: nothing new in that, one may think, but the degree that Musorgsky intended to convey Hartmann's pictures – more, to bring them to life – through his music was to remain unmatched until Richard Strauss's tone poems a good quarter century later.

Given this, Andnsnes understandably sees Musorgsky's *Pictures* not as a work whose original score is sacrosanct, but as a means to a

ORIGINAL VS REFRAMED HOW WE HEAR PICTURES



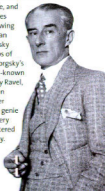
TAKE HARTMANN: 'Ballet of Unhatched Chicks'

SINCE MICHAEL TOSCHMALOFF's partial orchestration, first heard in 1891, there have been many arrangements of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, including Henry Wood's (1915) and Vladimir Ashkenazy's (1982); but the most famous is that by Maurice Ravel (below), made in 1922 to a commission from the Russian-born conductor Serge Koussevitzky. Yet it has been the Russians in particular who have been vociferous in claiming that Ravel over-prettified a quintessentially Russian creation: Musorgsky (below left), after all, was an outspoken Russian nationalist.

Against this there are two main arguments: one is that several of Hartmann's pictures are set not in Russia but abroad – 'The Old Castle' is Italian, Musorgsky even choosing to name it 'Il Vecchio Castello', while 'Tuileries' and 'Catacombs' are both Parisian.

Then there is the question whether there ever has been an authentic version of *Pictures*, though the original manuscript is held in a St Petersburg library, and as

Musorgsky scholar Michael Russ says, 'Musorgsky's ink calligraphy is clear and has few errors'. Russ notes there has been a 'rash of Urtexts over the last 30 years', but none of them are totally reliable: only one, published in 1984, follows what Musorgsky actually wrote, and even this arguably includes errors by religiously following the manuscript rather than recognising that Musorgsky himself made several slips of the pen. In any case Musorgsky's cycle has become so well-known through arrangements by Ravel, Stokowski (1938) and even Emerson, Lake and Palmer (1971) that its spirit, like a genie from the bottle, seems very much at large and unfettered by notions of authenticity.



ON SECOND THOUGHTS:
Andsnes's attempt to play
a flooded piano doesn't
make the final cut



visceral, or rather visual, end: 'The main thing isn't the notes themselves, but the composer's grand vision. For me therefore, the original version of the work remains almost as a sketch that is open for transformations and changes.'

What may make certain purists hot under the collar is that those 'transformations and changes' include what Andsnes himself is playing: he takes several liberties with Musorgsky's music, including octave reinforcements of melodies, darker bass lines, spicier dissonances, and a more liberal use of tremolo in such movements as 'Catacombs' and 'Great Gate of Kiev': 'the ending of Great Gate actually doesn't have any of these rumbling tremolos that I'm doing' explains Andsnes; 'it just has static chords, and on the piano what do you do with that when you have long chords – it just dies away. No wonder Ravel wanted to orchestrate it, because you can make it something that's so much bigger out of this fantastic composition which is not really taken to its limits. So I am also trying to do it without destroying the primitive nature of the score.'

In Andsnes's defence, it should perhaps be noted that the Musorgsky scholar Michael Russ, author of the informative Cambridge Music Handbook *Musorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition*, wrote that both Musorgsky and Hartmann were 'working in a media

only partly able to cope with what they wish to express; which is perhaps a polite way of saying their respective works were not entirely successful. It could be argued, then, that Andsnes's elaborations on Musorgsky's harmonies and his use of Rhode's work to reinforce the concrete images the music attempts to project is simply helping *Pictures*

'The main thing isn't the notes themselves, but the composer's vision'

to achieve the end Musorgsky was aiming for. But their aim goes beyond this, as Rhode explains: 'Our main goal was to also allow this masterpiece of composition to become contemporary through visuals; we wanted to allow this project to become relational, topical; so my aim visually was to see how we could create this, how we could perform this composition, and then allow the visuals to communicate or relate to the now.'

One of Rhode's most striking reinterpretations along those lines is of the 'Bydło' – Musorgsky's original Polish

title meaning 'cattle'. From this, Rhode has imaginatively, yet utterly plausibly, reinterpreted the sombrel, chugging music by pairing it with film of a scaled train mysteriously drawing in, then pulling out of an apparently empty railway station. 'I formed that footage in 2006/2007 at an old train station,' recalls Rhode, 'before my work with Leif Ove. So I had the footage already, but I never knew what to do with it. So I was carrying this footage over a couple of years before I showed it to Leif Ove; and he really responded to it, found it fascinating. So for our next meeting I made a rough cut of this film, because I felt that the film goes so strongly with 'Bydło', which is about a kind of urban poverty, and the music has such a kind of rhythm to it that it reminded me of a train with its sense of mechanical weight, the same way as the Polish ox wagon. The visuals also have a resonance in European history – the persecution of the Jews. So this train is a symbol for all our individual experiences, and we're actually telling the audience to visually go on this symbolic journey with us.' ■

Pictures Reframed is on tour from 13 November, starting at New York's Lincoln Center, and reaches London's Royal Festival Hall on 4 December. A CD and DVD of the project are out on EMI