

INTERNATIONAL PIANO

KARL ULRICH

The unsung story of Schnabel's son

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No.66 November/December 2009

FREE MUSIC
**Jazz on a
Winter's Night**

By Nikki Iles
Oxford University Press

LEIF OVE ANDSNES

HIS DRAMATIC RETELLING
OF MUSSORGSKY'S *PICTURES*

THE IP INTERVIEW

'It's a perfect piece of music,
but it's also a piece in evolution'

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PIANO
AWARDS

2009

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our judges this year



PICTURES TRANSFORMED

A drowned piano, piano keys made of chalk, and an animated figure juggling abstract geometries – pianist Leif Ove Andsnes and artist Robin Rhode tell **Michael Church** about their experimental re-imagining of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*



The 'Drowning Piano' illustrates Mussorgsky's final movement of *Pictures*, known as 'The Great Gate of Kiev'. The stunt took place at a dock in Bergen, Norway. 'The drowned piano becomes an object embodying our own desires and histories, now submerged at the bottom of the ocean,' says Robin Rhode



© BERKLEY/Brand
 South African artist Robin Rhode (left) and Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes. 'We need to constantly think of new ways of presenting music,' says Andsnes



NHK photographer Toru Zauassen

Two years ago Leif Ove Andsnes made a film about Edvard Grieg, in which he played a Steinway on a snowy Norwegian peak. In the film that accompanies his new presentation of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, that same piano gets drowned in a swirling torrent. But before we ask what it is about pianos – or that particular one – that arouses such instrument-sadism, we must ask how this new stunt originated. No mystery, he replies: the Lincoln Center in New York invited him to devise an arresting musical event, and he found himself suggesting that he be allowed to take Mussorgsky's *Pictures* back to its visual-art beginnings. Not to the actual pictures that inspired it, because many of those are lost: to freshly created images from the present, which in cinematic form would make a moving back-drop to his musical performance

Performing music against a visual-art background is of course nothing new: it was always the essence of opera, it continued with pianists backing silent films, and it goes on (clunkily) today with conductors delivering Debussy in front of projections of the Impressionist paintings and Japanese block-prints which inspired him. But Mussorgsky's ambulatory masterpiece had a more symbiotic relationship with the art that originally inspired it. Viktor Hartmann was a painter, stage designer, and architect, with whom Mussorgsky forged a close bond as he embraced the folk-roots movement fashionable in 1870s Moscow. 'Russianness' was all, as found in everything from icons and costumes to church facades and folk tales: Mussorgsky's decision to base his songs on vernacular speech-rhythms was his partisan response to the European classicism still prevalent in the musical world. His rejection of the symphonic conventions, as practised by Mozart and Haydn, was expressed in a letter to Rimsky-Korsakov: 'The German, when he thinks, first theorises at length, and then proves; our Russian brother proves first, and then amuses himself with theory.' He dedicated a song from his cycle *The Nursery* to Hartmann, and was devastated when the painter died suddenly and prematurely in 1873. 'Woe to the orphaned Russian art!' he lamented on hearing the news; the drinking bouts which eventually led to his own death started at that time.

The St Petersburg Society of Architects organised a big memorial exhibition of Hartmann's works, one of which was his fanciful design for the Kiev city gate with the tower in the form of a warrior's helmet, ▶



NHK photographer Toru Zauassen



NHK photographer Toru Zauassen

The work is too thinly written – it reminds me of a series of sketches. The vision is weightier than the notes themselves, so I have taken liberties

LEIF OVE ANDSNES

and the arch in the shape of a traditional women's head-dress; another design was for a clock in the form of the witch Baba Yaga's hut, surreally walking on chicken's legs. Flushed with the success of his new opera *Boris Godunov*, Mussorgsky embarked on a personal tribute to his dead friend, in the form of a piano suite. 'Hartmann is boiling as Boris boiled,' he wrote excitedly as *Pictures at an Exhibition* took shape, 'sounds and ideas have been hanging in the air.' Thus gestated the work which more than any other defined the new Russian style. The 'Promenade' itself had a village-song quality; the grotesque and tempestuous 'Baba Yaga' shifted violently between keys; taking its cue from an ancient Russian hymn – and embroidering it with the clangour of bells – 'The Great Gate of Kiev' became an evocation of Mother Russia in sound.

Yet the early fortunes of this suite were inauspicious. It was neither published nor publicly performed during its composer's lifetime, and its later popularity was thanks to a series of orchestral versions, of which Ravel's in 1922 was the best known; later reworkings have been made by Duke Ellington and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. But even Andsnes's love for the work is not unconditional. 'It's a perfect piece of music, but it's also a piece in evolution,' he says carefully, after enumerating the pianists who have left their mark on it. 'Horowitz in effect re-orchestrated it for piano, and when I heard his version, it completely altered my view of it. The piece sounded much bigger, much fuller of character.' Andsnes

believes Mussorgsky's pianistic imagination didn't measure up to his musical vision, that it didn't reflect its essence. 'I think the work is too thinly written – it reminds me of a series of sketches, or working drawings. Look at the last chord of "The Great Gate of Kiev". You play it on the piano, and the sound instantly starts to decay. But with an orchestra you can keep the sound alive, and the excitement going. It's there in the vision, but the execution on the piano was inadequate – so I am adding tremolos.' And improving the piece? He laughs: 'Yeah. But I am also trying to underline its primitive nature, its deep Russian roots, and its echoes of Russian Orthodox singing. To take another example, the original version of the two Jews Goldenberg and Shmuyle has no weight in the bass – and that's what Horowitz adds. A lot of the time one feels that the work is written too much in the middle of the piano's range, that its full resources aren't called upon.' He quickly adds that he would never dream of treating a Schubert sonata in this way. 'It's just that in this piece the vision is weightier than the notes themselves. So I have taken liberties.'

The liberty of putting a film on top turned out to be a surprisingly simple matter. Andsnes was shown a series of animations by different artists, and was instantly intrigued by Robin Rhode's. 'There was already something very musical, as well as poetic, in his work. I also liked the fact that it wasn't too bright, that it didn't bombard you with too much colour – it wouldn't obliterate the effect of the music.' The condition he laid down before starting the project was that the pace of his playing would in no way be dictated to by the visuals: 'It would have been ridiculous if I had to slow down, or speed up, to fit the pace of the film – the film will adapt to my pace. I will just play.' Luckily, Rhode was instinctively on the same wavelength. 'There is always something musical in the process of drawing, as I do it,' Rhode explains. 'It's always related to tempo and rhythm. When I create a sketch, I am already functioning within a silent soundtrack.' The title they hit on – *Pictures Reframed* – expresses the underlying idea perfectly.

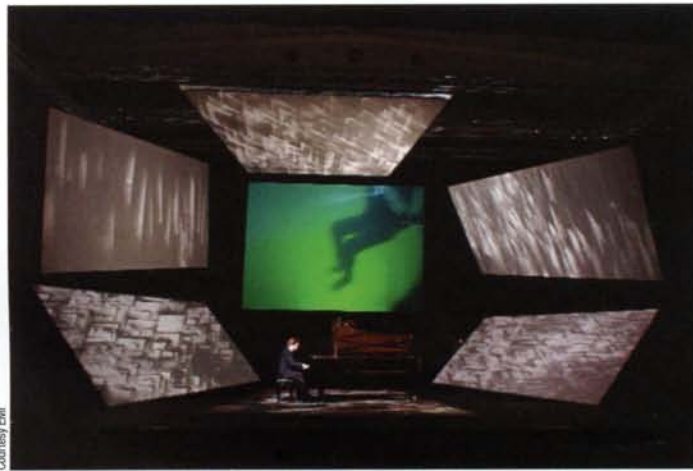
Whose idea was it to drown the piano? Another laugh from Andsnes: 'That was Robin's idea.' And what was Andsnes's reaction? 'I said OK. I guess pianists don't have the same personal attachment to their instrument ▶



Left: Viktor Hartmann, the artist with whom Mussorgsky formed a close bond, and whose artworks, including the fanciful design for the Kiev city gate (far left) formed the inspiration behind *Pictures at an Exhibition*



Pictures Reframed in action: Andsnes performs Mussorgsky's masterpiece surrounded by seven screens: five showing abstract images by Robin Rhode, another image under the piano, and the centre screen behind the pianist playing out Rhode's filmed animation



Courtesy EMI



as violinists do to their Strads, and I knew it wasn't going to be a brand-new Steinway we were going to murder. This one was already destined for the knacker's yard.' The drowning took place in a dock in Bergen in Norway, with the floodgates gradually being opened. 'It actually felt appropriate, after the Baba Yaga piece,' says Andsnes. 'You couldn't have any higher or more barbaric virtuosity than that – so the sacrifice coming immediately after it felt right.' In fact, after a dramatic life in Germany and Poland in the early part of the 20th century, this venerable 1908 instrument has been resurrected and painted, and is now on show in the lobby of Norway's main radio station.

But the key question can't be evaded any longer: is this whole exercise not essentially redundant? Shouldn't music be allowed to paint its own pictures? Andsnes looks wary: 'Yes, and it does, I think. I know this show will get a wide range of reactions, some of which will be hostile, particularly from people who know the music well. But those who don't know it may be drawn into it by the pictures. Some people have alleged that I don't believe in normal concerts any more, but of course I do. But we need to constantly think of new ways of presenting music. I love the holy feeling you get in the normal recital, the ritual, as at the Wigmore Hall, where everybody knows how things work. But when I tour small towns in Norway I realise how important it is to draw people in. So I talk to them about the music first, to break down the barriers.'

Rhode, who began as a street artist in his native South Africa, also wants to break down barriers: his visual starting point for this project was the Russian Constructivist movement. 'But I first had to decide what the "Promenade" means,' he says. 'I needed to develop a visual language for it, so I devised a character engulfed in an abstract landscape which

overwhelms him. I had him walking upside down to alter the sense of gravity – the promenade is in a fictional space in one's imagination, so I turned the world on its head, to create a wonderland effect.' This was the genesis of the little cadet-figure in the opening sequences, whose legs build inverted castles of ice-cubes in the air. Andsnes adds his own view: 'I feel that the character walking into Mussorgsky's exhibition is rather naive – a child maybe, walking so optimistically into this space, with no idea of what awaits him. And then he's completely overwhelmed by this very adult world. And when the promenade theme appears in the actual picture of the catacombs, the spectator enters the frame and becomes part of the picture. Here you can't separate reality from fantasy – and I find this thought fascinating.'

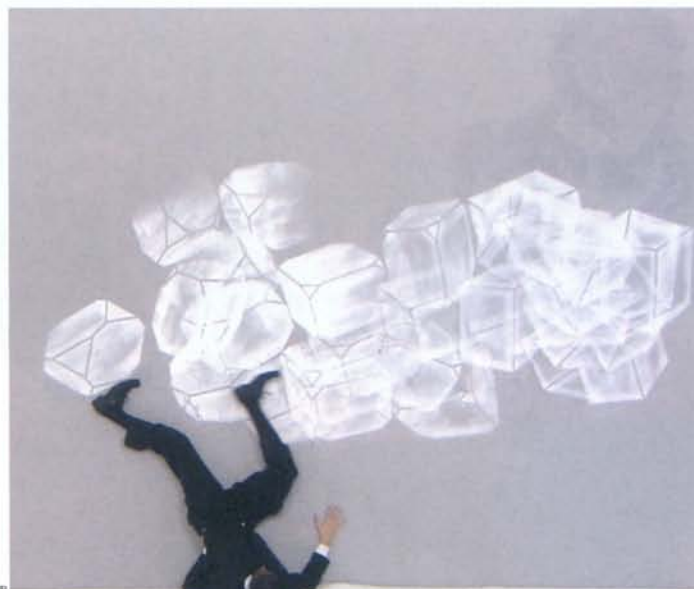
For the explosive 'Gnomus' Rhode presents tangled piano wires falling from the ceiling to create what he calls an 'abstract ballet' inspired by Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, but he also wants to evoke an original sketch by Hartmann of a gnome waddling on bow legs. Then it's back to the promenade, with the cadet juggling a cube with his feet before stopping at the medieval castle, which first appears as a copse of trees which, when viewed from above, gradually assumes a pentagonal shape. And about this Rhode has a lot to say. He was specifically thinking of the pentagonal Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town, he explains, 'which was designed by the colonialists in the 1660s as a way of preventing attacks. Gradually we see metallic spheres beginning to appear among the trees, as if human construction is challenging the natural order. Hartmann's placing of a troubadour in his painting of an old Italian castle was his way of restoring true humanity to the situation.' And that is indeed the effect of the music as Andsnes plays it, with a ringing melodiousness.

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ROBIN RHODE

Some of Hartmann's key paintings were done in response to what he saw in the ghetto of the Polish town of Sandomir, and Rhode has sought to capitalise on this – if at times perilously skirting Pseuds Corner. He uses a quick succession of bank logos to illustrate 'Two Polish Jews' – one rich and self-important, the other apprehensive and timid – then arbitrarily extends his argument to claim the sequence as a metaphor for our present economic climate. With 'Bydlo', whose chugging music was intended to suggest oxen pulling a cart, Rhode offers us a black and white film of a sealed train pulling out of an empty railway station. He'd shot it years before this project materialised, and was delighted to find a use for it. 'The dried grass blowing in the wind, the metal fence with its barbed wire and a black bag caught on it – all this depicts social decay,' he says, adding that for him it evokes South Africa's dark political past, with migrant workers moving around the country en masse. 'It also indicates' – inevitably – 'the deportation of Jews in Hitler's Germany.'

But with Hartmann's architectural drawing of the Great Gate of Kiev, Rhode has a more arresting fact to trade on. For the design was sent in as an entry to a competition at the precise moment when – though the Russian censors suppressed the news – the Tsar narrowly escaped assassination. As Rhode explains: 'Hartmann's design – an arch resting on two columns with the intention of its subsequent collapse – could



Rhode's 'little cadet-figure, whose legs build inverted castles of ice-cubes in the air' in the opening 'Promenade' sequence



© HRV/Tom Zehrmann

be seen as a critique of the Russian imperialists' abuse of power.' And this is the moment when the piano drowns: 'The relentless flow of water acts as a metaphor for purging history. Once totally submerged, the piano becomes a kind of lost treasure beneath the ocean.' Well, it makes a kind of sense. But my trouble, at this point in the film, is that my instinctive horror at the fate of the instrument occludes any thoughts about the music, which gets completely upstaged.

What status will Rhode's cinematic creation now have? 'My artwork won't have an existence separate from the music. I am willing to sacrifice these works of art for the project. But I feel the whole thing could exist as a separate piece, provided the music was included.' As we go to press, he is apparently in discussion with EMI Classics, who have not yet agreed to let him present a recording of the music in that way.

'I want the rights to use it,' he says, 'but they aren't sure. But really it's all one single work of art.'

Showing his video with Andsnes's playing as its soundtrack would obviously work perfectly. And as Rhode observes, museums are already expressing interest. This echoes a growing trend, as many museums now present film programmes as well as graphic art, and they are exploring new ways of bringing in music as well. Rhode would love to give his film a life outside the realm of classical music, and why not? To speak beyond the classical audience – to film buffs and art enthusiasts – would be to bring Mussorgsky's work back into the realm that originally gave rise to it. 'I am now fighting for this,' he says. 'It's so relevant to our time. Classical music people have shown too much resistance to what I have created; they don't realise its potential for new contexts.' Meanwhile the show plus Andsnes will get six performances in the US and Canada and fifteen in Europe, though some audiences will just get the movie without its five attendant screens (no great loss, since their imagery doesn't change). And the concert will contain two other elements, to be

performed without visuals: Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, and a new work by the Austrian composer Thomas Larcher. 'As we were making a lot of child-animations, Thomas suggested that he should write a piece connected to them,' says Andsnes. 'It's actually hard – I hope I can prepare it in time. But we had talked from the beginning of starting the concert with *Kinderszenen*, which is one of the most intimate things ever written for the piano.'

Andsnes's CD, *Pictures Reframed*, includes *Pictures*, Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and Mussorgsky's *From Memories of Childhood*, and is released this month by EMI. It is reviewed on page 66. *Pictures Reframed* will be performed at Queen Elizabeth Hall, London on 4 December as part of the Southbank Centre's International Piano Series.