

CONCERT REVIEW OF TPS ORCHESTRAL CONCERT ON 22 FEBRUARY 2020  
MUSSORGSKY: PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION AND SHOSTAKOVICH SYMPHONY NO.5

An excellent choice of programme ensured a full house at Tonbridge Parish Church on Saturday. Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a musical description of ten watercolours and architectural drawings, that were included in a Retrospective of the works of Mussorgsky's late friend Viktor Hartmann in St Petersburg in 1874. Originally composed for solo piano, the suite was orchestrated after the composer's death by Maurice Ravel. Some of the pictures are linked by a recurring and distinctive 'Promenade', each time played by different instruments in various styles.

From the very start we were assured of a confident orchestra in the safe hands of new Director of Music, Benjamin Westerman. His decisive beat and engagement with the musicians drew an excellent response in which they rose to the challenges of the somewhat sinister, halting *Gnome*, poignant *Old Castle* with a fine alto saxophone solo, cheery *Unhatched Chicks*, hectic and chattering market sounds of *Limoges*, gloomy *Catacombs*, menacing and frightening *Baba Yaga* and, finally, the dramatic grandeur of the *Great Gate of Kiev*, in which all sections of the orchestra were thoroughly involved.

Shostakovich's musical output was astonishing and achieved against all the odds of Stalin's oppressive reign of terror. Smarting from the regime's rejection and criticism of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* being described as 'muddle instead of music', his Symphony No.5 was composed in 1937. This time his music was approved as 'the practical creative answer of a Soviet artist to just criticism', and is considered to be a crystallisation of his thoughts.

From the opening, it is obviously highly emotional, poignant, and full of *angst*. The first movement set the scene of mourning with impressive playing from all sections, but especially the searing violins, with the movement ending quietly with the celeste. A complete change of mood to ironic joy in the *Allegretto* (Scherzo) produced beautiful playing in the Mahlerian solo by the orchestra's Leader, Susan Skone James. The brass section at times threatened to overwhelm the balance of the orchestra, but given the confines of the Parish Church with such a large orchestra this was not surprising.

The heart of the symphony lies in the third '*Largo*' movement, a true lament, in which Benjamin put aside his baton and used his eloquent hands to bring out its overwhelming melancholy. The haunting oboe solo played by Nancy Sargent was heart-rending in its intensity, as was the harp and flute duet, played by Anna Wynne and Lucy Freeman. Pianissimo moments toward the end with hushed strings were ethereal and truly moving. At its première, people wept openly in this movement, as they '*knew perfectly well what the symphony was all about*'.

The calm serenity of the *Largo* is shattered by the thrilling finale, which drew total commitment from all the orchestral sections as their conductor drove them to ever more impassioned heights. The percussion and brass sections were particularly impressive in building the tension towards the transformation from D minor to the heroic D major. This was magnificent playing from the Tonbridge Philharmonic orchestra and all the players are to

be congratulated on an accomplished performance. Benjamin's interpretation indicated careful preparation, and his innate musicality shone through. For the audience it was a memorable treat, and we are fortunate to have witnessed such superb music-making.

*Review by Ruth Langridge*