

**Sunday February 19 - German Society of Pennsylvania**

**EStrella Piano Duo: Svetlana Belsky and Elena Doubovitskaya**

Claude Debussy (1862 - 1918) - from *Petite Suite*:

En Bateau

Minuet

Claude Debussy / arr. Gustave Samazeuilh - from *Nocturnes*: II. Fetes

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 - 1847) - From *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 61

Scherzo

March of the elves

Intermezzo

Notturmo

Finale

Franz Schubert (1797 - 1828) - *Lebenssturme*, Op. 144

Franz Schubert / arr. Greg Anderson - *Der Erlkönig*

-----INTERMISSION-----

Edward Grieg (1843 -1907) arr. by composer- from *Peer Gynt*

Morning Mood

Anitra's Dance

In the Hall of the Mountain King

Modest Mussorgsky (1839 - 1881) arr. M. Tushmalov -A. Shaefer - K. Tchernov - E. Doubovitskaya -  
*Pictures at an Exhibition*

*Promenade*

*Gnomus*

*Promenade*

*The Old Castle*

*Promenade*

*Tuileries (Children's Quarreling at the Play)*

*Bydlo*

*Promenade*

*Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*

*Samuel Goldberg and Schmuyle*

*Promenade*

*Limoges. The Market Square ( The Big News)*

*Catacombs ( A Roman Sepulchre)*

*With the Dead in a Dead language*

*The Hut on Hen's Legs (Baba-Yaga)*

*The Great Gate of Kiev*

## Program Notes

Musicians derive inspiration from many sources, often from other works of art. A composer may start with a painting, or a poem, or a play, and, through the alchemy of his genius, transfigure and ennoble it, creating a masterpiece which is greater than the sum of its parts.

Claude Debussy's **Petite Suite for piano four-hands** is no exception. The work of a very young man (composed between 1886-1889), it carries only subtle hints of the Impressionist style for which Debussy would become renowned among musicians. But already, this is music that implies rather than declares. *En Bateau* refers to the eponymous poem by Debussy's favorite poet, Paul Verlaine (from his 1869 volume *Fêtes galantes*). Here, revelers, their minds on romantic pursuits, sail in a boat at dusk. There is wistfulness to the poem, of a promise unfulfilled. The Minuet evokes the era of 18th-century aristocrats on country outings, the world depicted in the fanciful paintings of Fragonard and Watteau.

Composed a decade later, **The Nocturnes**, inspired by a set of paintings from the 1870s by American artist James McNeill Whistler, are the work of a mature composer, with a language all his own. There are shades of J. M. W. Turner, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Gauguin here, as well, in Debussy's reliance on light and shadow, mystery and impression. According to Debussy's introductory note: "Fêtes' (Festivals) gives us the vibrating, dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with sudden flashes of light. There is also the episode of the procession (a dazzling fantastic vision), which passes through the festive scene and becomes merged in it. But the background remains resistantly the same: the festival with its blending of music and luminous dust participating in the cosmic rhythm."

\* \* \*

Felix Mendelssohn composed the overture to his beloved Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1826 for performance at home, to be played as a piano duet. It is an astonishing masterpiece for a 17 year old. Nothing Mozart wrote at this age even comes close. In August of 1843, the King of Prussia, Frederick William IV, who liked Mendelssohn's music, asked him to write incidental music for a new production of the play. These new movements, designed to be performed as entr'actes or short melodramas all borrowed from the Overture. Mendelssohn died only 3 years later, so this music serves as the book-ends of his tragically short life.

The **Scherzo** is the first musical interlude in the play. It comes between Acts I and II, and shifts the mood from the human world of the former and the fairy world of the latter. It is the most celebrated example of the magical light style for which Mendelssohn is known. The **March** heralds the entrance of Oberon and his court. The passionate **Intermezzo** serves as a transition between Acts II and III, as Shakespeare's Hermia, suddenly abandoned by her bewitched lover, anxiously sets off into the woods alone to find "either death" or him. The **Nocturne** comes at the end of Act III, when Puck finally has each of the four lovers sleeping where he or she will wake up and fall in love with the right person. The **Finale** revisits all the music in a new light, and ends by taking the listener, one final time, into the magical fairy world.

\* \* \*

Franz Schubert died before he turned 32. There are no words that can fully express the tragedy of this loss. He wrote his Allegro in A Minor for piano duet only months before his final illness. Although the fanciful title of *Lebensstürme* was not original (it was added by Anton Diabelli), it wonderfully captures the emotional energy of the work's polyphonic density, harmonic harshness and sheer power of its symphonic texture.

*Erlkönig*, arguably Schubert's greatest art song (on the text of J. W. von Goethe), is another astounding achievement by a man barely 18. Goethe's poem tells the story of a boy riding home on horseback in his father's arms. He hears the voice of the Forest King who cajoles and entices him. The father, however, cannot see or hear the creature and tells the boy that his imagination is playing tricks on him. The Forest King grows increasingly creepier, and the boy more terrified, but still the father sees and hears only the sounds of a stormy night. The father spurs on his horse, but when he arrives home, the boy is dead. Schubert gives each of the characters his own voice – the boy's voice is rising, the father's is steady and even, the King's is sickly sweet, and the continuous piano chords suggest the pounding of the horse's hooves. The transcription by Greg Anderson for piano four-hands is a masterpiece in its own right, missing none of the excitement or the richness of the original.

\*\*\*

Edward Grieg wrote incidental music to Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* for its premiere in 1876. The play chronicles the life journey of the hero from roughish youth to broken-down old age, to all corners of the world, alternating between the realistic and the surreal. The premiere was a triumphant success, but Grieg complained bitterly about being severely limited to the number and duration of each number by the theater management. Perhaps the true difficulty might have been the creative gulf between the sarcastic, modernistic hard-edged Ibsen and the soft-hearted Romantic Grieg. Which *Peer Gynt* has best stood the test of time, Ibsen's anti-hero who merely survives, ever following the path of least resistance, neither good nor evil, or Grieg's lovable scamp?

The music, arranged for piano duet by the composer is divided into several concert suites, not in the order of the drama. The most beloved selections are the dreamy **Morning Mood**, the seductive **Anitra's Dance**, and, of course, the ever-popular In the **Hall of the Mountain King**.

\*\*\*

When Victor Hartmann died at the age of thirty-nine in 1873, he was a fairly an undistinguished artist and architect. His fame today rests entirely on the monument to his art raised by Modest Mussorgsky in his **Pictures at an Exhibition**. The critic The Vladimir Stasov organized a posthumous showing of Hartmann's drawings, paintings, and architectural sketches in Saint Petersburg, and Mussorgsky, deeply moved by the death of his friend, set out to commemorate his experiences of walking through the gallery "now leisurely, now briskly, in order to come closer to a picture that had attracted his attention, and at times sadly, thinking of his departed friend."

The result is a suite of 11 “pictures” connected by “walking interludes” called Promenades. Mussorgsky referred to *Pictures* as “an album series,” implying a random collection of miniatures, but the score is a coherently designed whole, organized around a recurring theme and judiciously paced to progress from short pieces to a longer, majestic finale.

The opening Promenade leads to

1. **Gnomus.** Hartmann’s picture is reported to be of a wooden nut-cracker, a child’s plaything – but Mussorgsky’s little monster is characterized by wild leaps, bizarre harmonies and savage shrieks.
2. **The Old Castle.** A troubadour singing in front of a ruined castle. By way of another Promenade, we reach
3. **Tuilleries.** Children playing and quarreling in the park.
4. **Bydlo.** A lumbering wooden Polish ox-cart. Another promenade takes us to
5. **Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks.** One of the cleverest movements of the suite is based on a sketch Hartmann produced for a ballet scene where “a group of little boys and girls, pupils of the Theatre School, dressed as canaries, scampered on the stage. Some of the little birds were wearing over their dresses big eggshells resembling breastplates.”
6. **Samuel Goldberg and Schmuyle.** Mussorgsky reportedly owned these separate sketches, of the rich Jew, who is commanding and vain, and the poor Jew, who whines and wheedles. He combines the two pictures into one, in an amazing feat of counterpoint.
7. **Limoges. The Market Square.** In the margin of his score, Mussorgsky brings the scene to life: “Great news! M. de Puissanceout has just recovered his cow . . . Mme de Remboursac has just acquired a beautiful new set of teeth, while M. de Pantaleon’s nose, which is in his way, is as much as ever the color of a peony.”
8. **Catacombs (A Roman Sephichre).** The picture shows the interior of a catacomb in Paris with Hartmann, a friend, and a guide with a lamp.
9. **Cum mortuis in lingua mortua (With the Dead in a Dead Language),** a ghostly transformation of the Promenade.
10. **The Hut on Hen’s Legs (Baba-Yaga).** Hartmann sketched a clock of bronze and enamel in the shape of the hut of the witch Baba-Yaga. Mussorgsky concentrates not on the clock, but on the child-eating Baba-Yaga herself, who flies in her stoop and concocts some witch’s brew in the middle section.
11. **The Great Gate of Kiev.** Hartmann entered this design in a competition for a gateway to Kiev that was ultimately never built. His rather lackluster design is a brick building modeled on the traditional headdress of Russian women. Mussorgsky’s majestic vision, with its magnificent climaxes and pealing bells, seems a great improvement.

Mussorgsky never attempted to orchestrate the *Pictures*, but many others have. The best version for orchestra by far is by Maurice Ravel – it respects the original, but adds immeasurable extra dimensions of rich color and texture. The original version for piano duet is a group effort by several of Mussorgsky’s contemporaries, of uneven quality. Elena Doubovitskaya uses their work as a foundation but also incorporates Ravel’s masterful enhancements which are only possible for EStrella Duo’s twenty fingers.

-Svetlana Belsky