

## ***Night on Bald Mountain***

**Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)**

Written: 1860–1886

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: 12 minutes

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a group of young, self-taught Russian composers set out to invent a distinctly Russian style of music. The music critic Vladimir Stasov dubbed this group “The Mighty Handful” (or “The Five”). The result of their efforts was a musical style based upon Russian stories, folk melodies, harmonies and rhythms—a unique “Russian School” of composition.

Modest Mussorgsky was the most individual composer of the lot. He was undisciplined, had a drinking problem, and rarely finished any of the many compositions he started.

Tchaikovsky had a very low opinion of him:

Mussorgsky is a limited individual devoid of any desire of educating himself, blindly accepting by faith the preposterous theories of his circle and in his own genius. Besides, his is a low nature, rough, crude and coarse. . . . [He] flaunts his illiteracy and is proud of his ignorance. So he dashes off whatever comes, hit or miss. . . . A sad spectacle!

Mussorgsky began what became *Night on Bald Mountain* in 1860 as music to accompany a drama titled “The Witch,” but this never came to anything. Four years later, some of this material showed up in his opera *Salammbô*. This, too, remained unfinished. Then, in 1867, he actually *completed* a score which he subtitled *St. John's Night on the Bare Mountain*. It received such a harsh criticism that Mussorgsky never again attempted to have it performed. In 1872, he adapted the music from 1860 for Act III of a jointly composed opera called *Mlada*. Later, he adapted that music by adding a chorus for his—again unfinished—opera *Sorochinistky Fair*. The *Night on Bald Mountain* that most audiences know is a version of Mussorgsky’s music put together by Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov. Tonight you will hear Mussorgsky’s rarely performed original.

Mussorgsky’s own sketchy description of the piece tells of an evil night ritual: Subterranean din of supernatural voices. Appearance of spirits of darkness, followed by that of the god Tchernobog. Glorification of Tchernobog. Black Mass. Witches’ Sabbath. At the height of the Sabbath there sounds far off the bell of the little church in a village, which scatters the spirits of darkness. Daybreak.

***Concerto No. 3 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 37***  
**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)**

Written: 1800

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic Solo Concerto

Duration: 34 minutes

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Emanuel Schikaneder, the colorful impresario remembered mostly for his role as producer and librettist of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, hired Beethoven to be the music director of his Theatre an der Wien.

Beethoven wanted to make a big splash by writing an opera, but church authorities prohibited opera during Lent, so he produced a concert of his instrumental works instead. He programmed three brand-new works: the *Second Symphony*, the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, and the *Piano Concerto No. 3*. He also programmed his *First Symphony*. (It was a long concert.)

The rehearsal for the concert—there was only one!—began at 8 in the morning and ended just before the scheduled concert time. Beethoven played the part of soloist *and* conductor on the piano concerto. He played the piano part from a few quickly scribbled notes that served as an outline. Beethoven's page-turner didn't know when to turn the pages because most of them were blank! "[Beethoven] only gave me a furtive sign when he reached the end of an invisible passage," he reported. In spite of the sub-par performance, the evening was an important step in securing Beethoven's reputation and future.

Most scholars divide Beethoven's compositional style into three periods. This concerto is one of the transitional works between the first *Classical* period and the more *Romantic*, mature music of the middle period. In this concerto, there is a deeper expressiveness, a more integrated relationship between soloist and orchestra, and a more expansive, developmental style typical of Beethoven's greatest compositions.

The first movement follows the standard form for concertos of that era, beginning with a long orchestral exposition that introduces the melodic materials on which the piano solo elaborates. A development section follows, but much of the creative thematic transformations occur in the extended piano cadenza at the end of the piece. (Beethoven wrote out the cadenza, rather than leave it to the whims of subsequent soloists.) The song-like second movement contains some of Beethoven's most romantic writing. The final movement combines Beethoven's distinctive wit with an emotional depth that would characterize most of Beethoven's music from then on.

***Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Op. 54***  
**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**

Written: 1939

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 38 minutes

The last years of the 1930's were not easy ones for Dmitri Shostakovich. In 1934, his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* had its premiere. It was a big success. For two years, it played several times a week in both Leningrad and Moscow. But on January 28, 1936, Shostakovich had his life turned upside down. That day an article entitled "*Muddle instead of Music*" appeared in *Pravda*. Stalin probably dictated the article himself. Shostakovich's music was condemned as having nothing in common with "symphonic soundings." It also stated that things could "end very badly." Shostakovich became a composer living in fear for his life. Shostakovich responded to this "just criticism" with his tragic and triumphant *Fifth Symphony* of 1937.

He composed no more serious music until 1939 when he wrote his *Sixth Symphony* and this was virtually all he wrote that year. Initially, he intended to write a big tribute to Lenin, but soon abandoned the idea and instead advertised it as conveying "spring, joy, youth, lyricism." Later in his much disputed memoirs, Shostakovich says that this symphony deals with his state of mind during 1936. "It was an unbelievably hard and mean time," he wrote. "I was lonely and afraid."

You can hear that isolation in the first movement of this unusually-shaped symphony. Instead of a fast-paced movement, it is slow and almost static. The long lyrical melodies have a tragic content. The theme in the middle section, played first by the English horn, sounds like a funeral dirge. After a long time—this first movement is easily three times the length of either the second or third movement—it dies away into nothingness.

How, then, to explain the final two movements? Why the bizarre little second movement, in the style of a scherzo, containing light melodies contrasted with sardonic harmonies and menacing brass? Why the even stranger third movement, played blisteringly fast, with the typical Russian galloping rhythm? It is almost vulgar and lacks the sort of triumphant declaration to counter the mood of the first movement. In the words of biographer Ian MacDonald, "The Soviet authorities had demanded light music and they were getting it: light music with a vengeance." Was Shostakovich sticking his musical thumb in the authorities eyes or simply providing "sheer musical enjoyment?" This is the fascination of listening to Shostakovich.

©2015 John P. Varineau