SCHOOL OF MUSIC
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

Robin McCabe, piano

7:30 PM
March 9, 2017
Meany Theater

UW MUSIC
2016-17 SEASON

NonCirc CD# 17,707

PROGRAM
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1 Arabesque, Opus 18 ..... 7:05 ..... Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Third Grand Sonata, Opus 14 (Concerto Without Orchestra) ..... 29:28 ..... Robert Schumann

2 Allegro brillante
3 Scherzo
4 Quasi Variazioni: Andantino de Clara Wieck
5 Prestissimo possibile

INTERMISSION

6 "Pictures at an Exhibition" ..... 37:03 ..... Modeste Mussorgsky (1835-1881)

Promenade
Gnomus
Promenade
Il Vecchio Castello
Promenade
Tuileries (Children Quarrelling After Play)
Bydlo
Promenade
Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells
Two Polish Jews, One Rich, the Other Poor
Promenade
Limoges, The Market Place
Catacombae: Sepulcrum Romanum: Con Mortuis in Lingua Mortua
The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga)
The Great Gate of Kiev

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Although the "real world" was unkind to Robert Schumann, bringing mental derangement and untimely death, his "inner world," the world of enchantment and creativity, the world he bequested to posterity, remains with us today: harmonious, infinite, Romantic.

--Donald H. Crosby, *"Robert Schumann and German Romanticism"*

Arabesque, Opus 18

The little Arabesque of Schumann is sometimes dismissed as a mere "confection." But although modest in scope, it offers mystery as well. (Vladimir Horowitz certainly thoughts so –he was fascinated by the piece!) With intermittent darker episodes set in contrast to the curvaceous C Major refrain, the piece, for me, is beguiling. And the final coda, marked "In Closing," has an enigmatic intimacy which speaks of a private and meaningful journey, just taken.

Concerto Without Orchestra, Opus 14

Schumann's piano sonatas, often composed in installments, have suffered some negative assessments over the years. Usually examined under the shadow of Beethoven, one popular text (the author is Paul Henry Lang) declared that "Schumann could not find his bearings on the road." But such judgments are short-sighted. Schumann's large forms need not be set against Beethoven's, because they reinterpret the form for distinctly new ends. And they pose completely different structural problems than do the sonatas of Beethoven.

The sonata form, whether in solo format, string quartet or in the symphonies, proved fertile ground for Schumann, in which he created a range of compelling and cogent relationships between thematic, tonal and other processes. The long, stable tonic section of the classical sonata was of no interest to Schumann, as the musicologist Joel Lester affirms. Schumann was much more drawn to the psychological narrative, an assortment and progression of musical "ideas."

The Third Grand Sonata, also called "Concerto Without Orchestra," was written in 1835 and revised in 1853. It may be seen as a protracted *cri de cœur,* conceived at the height of his ordeal with Clara. After agonized doubts and multiple hesitations, Clara has signed a legal complaint (prepared by Schumann) against her despotic father, Friedrich Wieck, demanding legal permission for their marriage. Four torturous years of separation would follow before Robert and Clara would finally marry. Passion, turbulence, tumult, mental anguish, jealousy and bliss--the landscape of this courtship and marriage had it all!

The sonata is dedicated to Ignaz Moscheles, who did not much care for the work. Schumann's dedicatory letter comments, "What mad inspirations one can have." Schumann had some reluctance about displaying this very personal music, and the piece was never publicly performed during his lifetime. Brahms, who admired it greatly and used it as inspiration for his own F minor sonata, Opus 5, gave the first concert performance six years after Schumann's death.

A descending five-note theme permeates the piece, suggesting Clara's name, beginning with the note C, and having A^b as the third note. The theme is sometimes tempestuous, as in the stormy opening of the first movement. It is also heard in exquisite tenderness, forming the little theme of Clara's upon which Schumann fashions the *Andantino*. It is at the heart of the boisterous *Scherzo*, in displaced five-note gestures. Finally, it creates the chaotic cries of the finale, as the five-notes are unleashed into surging, turbulent lines!

The first movement, *Allegro Brillante*, begins with a catapulting statement of the "Clara" five-note figure. The energy here is molten, with ingenious use of voice leadings and linear relationships. The melodic suspensions heard throughout the movement become hyper-expressive as they play against each other. There are also contrasting episodes of delicacy and playful flirtation.

In the *Scherzo*, Clara's theme is heard in both ascending and descending patterns, rhythmically displaced in tantalizing ways. Is there any key that Schumann doesn't pass through??!! It is truly an audacious romp.

The *Andantino* is a set of variations on Clara's stately, elegiac theme. Schumann plays with the five notes in various characterizations. The final, fourth Variation is a dramatic outpouring. It is not by chance that the two most exquisite passages are brief murmurings in C Major. Here, again, is Clara--never far from Robert's thoughts.

The *finale*, marked "prestissimo possibile," is a virtual cyclotron of obsessive fission and histrionic repetition. Schumann often became so deeply absorbed in the musical ideas themselves that he lost sight of the aspects of symmetry and key relationships. There is a dervish quality to everything, and yet there is also unbounded bliss. I am reminded of that wonderful Kundera title, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. And what are we to make of that amazing violent moment of climax: a shuddering tremulous diminished-seventh harmony, repeated and bone-chilling? Is this a final plea for triage, for the easing of Schumann's doubts about his future with Clara?

We are not to know the answer. The journey we have taken is something akin to emerging from an emotional crucible. But there is genuine catharsis in the closing passage of this mammoth work, where the pianist traverses the keyboard in a clangorous anthem in the luminous key of F Major. Perhaps this, in the end, is the defining and redemptive moment.

Pictures at an Exhibition

From time to time in all sectors of creative activity there will appear some unique figure who invents a world of stunning novelty, yet who creates no school because, his genius being so largely instinctive, his style proves elusive and recycling it virtually impossible…

David Brown, *Mussorgsky*

Mussorgsky's "*Pictures,*" composed in 1874, is a cycle of short pieces, free from the strictures of sonata form, and demonstrating the power of folk music to transform, rather than decorate the musical language. In the spirit of progressive Russian realism, artists and writers of the day believed that true

beauty resides in life and that the primary purpose of art is to represent reality. This music evokes a panorama of scenes. The realistic depiction of character types populates the cycle: the shouts of playing children, the contrasting speech patterns to the two Jews in "Goldenberg and Schmuyle," the querulous calls of haggling women at market, the patriotic masses surging at Kiev--all this comes to vivid life in musical canvas.

Mussorgsky pays tribute here to his friend, the Russian painter Victor Hartman, who died of a heart attack at age 39, in 1873. In some senses, *"Pictures"* is a cyclic composition because of the returns and transformations of the Promenade theme. This theme represents Mussorgsky himself, moving his considerable bulk through the exhibition hall, observing Hartman's drawings. And the Promenades become more personal as Mussorgsky is drawn into the pictures, and is no longer viewing them from the outside. Following is a brief synopsis of each piece in the cycle.

Promenade: a folk-inspired melody, with metric shifts and elements of choral antiphony. One hears links between this and the coronation scene in *Boris Godunov.*

Gnomus: We are plunged into the world of a fantastic, lame figure on crooked little legs. Drawn as a design for a nutcracker, the piece depicts the gnome darting about, with droll, convulsive movements and savage shrieks.

Promenade Two: a delicate reflection, an intermezzo.

The Old Castle: a medieval castle in front of which a troubadour sings, accompanied by a strumming lute. A musical "siciliano."

Promenade Three: a strange and dark interlude.

Tuileries: Disputing Children at Play: A tiny scherzo –we hear children, alternately bantering, then mockingly contrite(!) A final tease and the fracas is over.

"Bydlo": A Polish Cattle Cart: We hear a clumsy oxcart rumbling down a muddy, rutted path. The cart driver sings a melancholy tune (actually of Ukrainian origin) as his oxen lumber on.

Promenade Four: brooding in an uneasy atmosphere. "The Chicks" are anticipated in a final gesture.

Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells: Here is a ballet scene where boys and girls are dressed as eggs and half-hatched canaries. A "scherzino," all play and delirious whimsy. The peasant's toil and lot in the previous picture is erased here in a world of privileged children.

Two Polish Jews, One Rich, the Other Poor: A portrait of Goldenberg, rich, pompous and blustering; and Schmuyle, poor, whining almost uncontrollably in a high pitched, bleating voice. After hearing them separately, Mussorgsky combines the speech patterns and voices in a creepy cacophony.

Promenade Five: Restates the opening promenade with doubled voices to add to its pomp and ceremony.

Limoges, The Market Place: A congregation of garrulous French fishwives quarrel and haggle in the market.

Catacombae: We are cast into the Parisian catacombs: Lantern light, glowing stacks of skulls, echoes of *Dies Irae*. Mussorgsky creates a mortuary chorale marked in Latin, *For the Dead, in a Dead Language.*

The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga): Popular in Russian fairy tales, Baba-Yaga lives deep in the woods in a hut built on hen's legs. She lures lost children there to eat them, crushing their bones in the giant mortar in which she rides through the woods, propelled by her pestle, covering her tracks with a broom stick.

The Great Gate of Kiev: A magnificent collage of bell-like harmonies, hymns, the chanting of priests and monks, evoking the majesty and pomp of czardom. The tolling of the bell in the (never erected) cupola of the tower becomes massive as the entire piano keyboard is called upon to evoke the grandeur of Mother Russia.

It is often debated whether "*Pictures*" fares best in its original solo piano format. Certainly the opulent orchestration of Ravel (done in 1922) is colorful and engaging. The piece has even been arranged for electronics by the Japanese composer, Tomita! But I would argue that no orchestra can produce the nimble gestures, incisive textures and infinite inflections of the piano. Perhaps "The Great Gate" is better conveyed through a full orchestra. But for the most part, as David Brown asserts, "in entrusting "*Pictures*" to the two hands (and feet!) of the perceptive pianist, Mussorgksy knew what he was doing."

"*Pictures*" will always be a work close to my heart. It was the centerpiece for my debut recording, commissioned by Vanguard Records. I will not forget the thrill of holding that newly-birthed album in my hands!