

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks  
**Mozart & Sibelius**  
Dec 7 - 9

**MODEST MUSSORGSKY (1839-1881)**

**NIGHT ON BALD MOUNTAIN**

**(orchestrated by Rimsky-Korsakov)**

Duration: ca. 12 minutes

Two of the composers on tonight's program, Mussorgsky and Sibelius, slipped into the abyss of alcoholism. While Sibelius ended his musical career early but lived a long life, Mussorgsky died at age 42, his talent hewn in self-destruction, and many of his works left unrealized or unfinished.

Mussorgsky was part of a group of Russian musicians known as the Mighty Handful, five young men seeking a distinctive style of music removed from Western European influence. As the core of the Russian nationalist school, they stressed folk themes, raw sonorities, primitive structures and quasi-oriental melodies. Anything that Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were, the Mighty Handful was not.

Mussorgsky seemed an odd choice for such a fraternity. Although he showed an affinity for the piano at an early age, he was by comparison with his colleagues a poorly trained amateur who patched together works in fragments and relied more on imagination than theory. Although born into a noble family with estate land, the Peasant Reform of 1861 deprived the family of half their acreage, forcing the young Mussorgsky to support himself. He opted out of an opportunity to join the Russian Imperial Guard and took minor jobs as a civil servant, with little pay. But it offered him time to compose, and soon Mussorgsky was developing a highly original style.

Two important influences shaped Mussorgsky's thinking. At age 20, he joined the production crew of Mikhail Glinka's opera, *A Life for the Tsar*, which opened his imagination to the possibilities of the theater. About the same time, he embraced the writings of the philosopher and revolutionary Nikolay Chernyshevsky, who rejected the marriage of form and content. Mussorgsky began reading voraciously and formed aesthetic doctrines of his own, as well as a compassion for the poor and downtrodden.

Music, he rationalized, must reflect the undercurrents of life, not the high and noble. This would be seminal to his work as a composer, and he set out to apply radical innovations to his writing. Drink, however, derailed him from developing more than a handful of major pieces. The bulk of his work was left to others to orchestrate or complete, including three of his best-known pieces: *Pictures at an Exhibition* (both the original piano score as well as Ravel's orchestration), the opera *Boris Godunov*, and what you will hear tonight, *Night on Bald Mountain*.

A Mighty Handful colleague, Rimsky-Korsakov, greatly admired Mussorgsky but felt the need to improve on his scores, which he felt revealed "disconnected harmony, ugly part-writing, and unsuccessful modulation." So Rimsky-Korsakov — a master of orchestration — took it upon himself to paint over *St. John's Night on the Bare Mountain*, as it was originally called, a depiction of an all-night witch's Sabbath held atop a mountain near Kiev.

Most performances and recordings today use Rimsky-Korsakov's 1886 arrangement, although scholars have debated how much is Mussorgsky and how much is Rimsky-Korsakov. But it was this version that stuck, a blockbuster of sound, full of stirring emotional color and grotesque portrayals of dancing ghouls. It gained a wide audience in Leopold Stokowski's arrangement for Walt Disney's 1940 animated classic, *Fantasia*.

The music is based on Nikolai Gogol's story *St. John's Eve* and can be summarized as follows: "Subterranean sounds of non-human voices. Appearance of the spirits of darkness, followed by the Chernobog (Slavic god of evil). Height of the Sabbath and distant ringing of village church bell, which disperses the spirits of darkness. Morning."

"It is a delightful outing of mock diabolism," notes the musicologist and author Jan Swafford, "with whizzing violin effects for spirits, orgiastic writhings, and lots of demonically braying trombones."

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**  
**SINFONIA CONCERTANTE**  
**FOR VIOLIN, VIOLA AND ORCHESTRA IN E FLAT, K. 364**  
Duration: ca. 30 minutes

Mozart never hired a marketing firm and didn't need one. His talent, and history, did it all for him. By the time most of his 626 published compositions began trickling through Europe, his posthumous reputation was as solid as the marble statues that today honor him the world over.

Mozart's genius and reputation as a *wunderkind* are common themes that don't need repeating here. What isn't always discussed is the apparent innocence and simplicity of so much of his music, although Mozart was anything but innocent. Nor was he simple.

A good example unfolds tonight with the *Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola and Orchestra*, a work of skillful construction cloaked by a deceptive charm. Written in 1779, this three-movement, half-hour piece is a marvel of refinement and taste, and one of the more joyful creations in Mozart's treasure chest.

A *sinfonia concertante* is much like it sounds: a small orchestra in which soloists appear, all wrapped into one, usually with a lighthearted dialogue between the soloists. While hundreds were written in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century — many by a union of court composers in the German town of Mannheim — Mozart left us one that outshines everything else in the genre. He also knew a thing or two about the violin and viola (the latter tuned a half tone higher to give it more prominence), as he played both with fluency.

The opening movement, marked *allegro maestoso* (lively and majestic), opens abruptly with a full orchestra chord on which the string section sets the stage for spirited duets by the soloists. For the remainder of this long, march-like section, violin and viola weave in and out of the orchestra with seamless ease.

Things turn darker in the second movement, cast in C minor, and the soloists sing a lament that seems stolen right out of one of Mozart's operas. A tinge of sorrow and seriousness grounds the music and reflects Mozart's assurance in balancing his material. Things turn festive in the finale, taken at a *presto* clip by an energized orchestra with plenty of white-knuckled fiddling and high, aerobic E flat leaps by the two protagonists.

"This *Concertante* is a proud, deeply expressive masterpiece, in which the somber glow of passion so broods over Mozart's creative imagination," wrote A. Hyatt King, the British Library's first music librarian. "Yet he does not allow deep feeling to disturb the unity or balance, and reconciles perfectly the demands of the soloists with the work as a whole."

Listening to this sublime music, it becomes obvious that Mozart enjoyed the banter between these two related string instruments. He returned to them again four years later in his *Duos for Violin and Viola*, again striking gold with the conversation he drew from a pair of fiddles.

### **Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)**

#### **Symphony No. 1, Op. 39**

Duration: ca. 38 minutes

One of the most gifted composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sibelius lived a life stretching from the end of the Civil War and opening of the Suez Canal to the year Elvis released *Jail House Rock* and the Soviets launched *Sputnik*.

Quite a span. But just as Sibelius had thrown down the gauntlet as a giant among late-romantic symphonists, following Mahler and Strauss, he quit composing. With the completion of his symphonic poem *Tapiola* in 1926, he stopped writing the major works that had brought him fame. The question was, and for many still is, why?

"For one of the most long-lived major composers, Sibelius's mature career was extremely short," writes Guy Rickards in his 1997 biography on the composer. "All of the major utterances on which his reputation was founded were created in just over one-third of his life."

Sibelius was essentially a romantic composer who bridged the 19th and 20th centuries, and whose best work is perfumed with the mists of his Finnish homeland. Like Wagner, he was fascinated by myth and legend, and wove ancient characters into many of his dark and powerful tone poems.

One of those, *Finlandia*, evokes the struggle of the Finnish people and became a symbol of nationalism. His seven symphonies, which he called "confessions of faith," share the composer's concentrated and tonal expressions, soaring crescendos, and stalled climaxes. The world waited for an eighth symphony, but it never came. Historians and biographers have posited a number of theories about the silence. Some point to the composer's hypercritical attitude toward his work, or conversely, a sense of accomplishment and completion. Others cite creative exhaustion, depression, and alcoholism.

Some biographers attribute the end of his creative energies to the last suggestion, which he battled most of his life. "My drinking has genuine roots that are both dangerous and go deep," Sibelius once wrote. "In order to survive, I have to have alcohol. And that's where all my problems begin."

The *Symphony No. 1* offers no hint of the troubles and despair that would soon plague Sibelius. It opens with an extended clarinet solo over a roll of timpani and builds on the scaffolding of classical sonata form. Soon, the orchestra unleashes a flood of autumnal colors in complex meters so characteristic of the composer's emerging style. An army of brass follows, laying the harmonic groundwork for the rest of the movement.

The lyrical slow section bears the influence of the *Pathétique Symphony* of Tchaikovsky, whom Sibelius admired, and the short scherzo, with its monolithic drive, sounds like a page torn from Bruckner. Sibelius described the finale as *quasi una fantasia* (“like a fantasy”), and tips its hat to the opening clarinet theme, this time between strings and brass. Alert rhythms punctuate the rest of the section, creating tension until the strings unleash a choral-like theme and rolling kettledrums bring the work to its dramatic finish.

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***