

Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky (1839-1881)



FAST FACTS

- Took piano lessons from age 6
- Organized a group of progressive Russian artists and musicians called the “Mighty Handful” dedicated to redefining Russian music
- Never studied music composition, but wrote music extremely quickly
- Composed a piano suite inspired by artwork portraying scenes from around the world

Born: 1839 (Karevo, Imperial Russia)
Died: 1881 (St. Petersburg, Russia)

Modest Mussorgsky was born into a wealthy, large home, and was given piano lessons by his mother starting at age 6. After a short period of service in the Russian army, Mussorgsky became friends with other composers and people involved in the arts, and formed a small group of these people called the “Moguchaya Kuchka”, or the “Mighty Handful”. None of the members of the Mighty Handful had been educated in music, but had strong opinions about the qualities of Russian music. They believed that Russian music should express the Russian soul, and should be written in a uniquely Russian way, free from the rules of European classical form and style.

Because Mussorgsky was the only member of the Might Handful who had actually grown up in the Russian countryside, the music he wrote drew influence from the serf songs that he heard every day of his childhood. He started writing a few operas, but had trouble finishing them. Eventually, he completed the opera *Boris Gudonov*, a story about the Russian tsar in the late 1500s. Although the opera had to be revised and reworked a few times before it was premiered in 1874, it received praise and placed Mussorgsky in the spotlight as *the* Russian composer to watch.

Mussorgsky composed other music at a rapid pace. Despite his lack of musical training, he used many progressive musical ideas, such as time signature changes in each measure, and an unexpected form. These were exactly what the Mighty Handful aimed to emphasize, and were featured in his suite of piano pieces *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The suite was inspired when Mussorgsky attended an exhibition of artwork created by his friend Viktor Hartmann. Hartmann, who had suddenly died when he was 39, painted scenes from his many world travels. These scenes gave Mussorgsky inspiration to recreate them with passionate and powerful music. *Pictures at an Exhibition* was so well-loved that it was arranged for orchestra by Maurice Ravel decades later.



Let's Listen!

- The Cologne New Philharmonic Orchestra performs a movement from *Pictures at an Exhibition* called “The Great Gate of Kiev” : [click here](#).
- Watch the famous and powerful “Coronation Scene” from *Boris Gudonov*: [click here](#).