THE VMI DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND FINE ARTS

and

THE TIMMINS–GENTRY MUSIC SOCIETY

present

VICTOR SANTIAGO ASUNCION

PROGRAM

Carnaval, Op. 9 . . . . . Robert Schumann (1810–1856)

INTERMISSION

Pictures at an Exhibition . . . . . Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881)

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8, 2006

LEJEUNE HALL

VMI

7:45 P.M.

Robert Schumann, Carnaval: Little Scenes on Four Notes, Op. 9. Schumann composed his suite of Little Scenes—or, as he once called them, "masked dances"—in the summer of 1835 while briefly engaged to Ernestine von Fricken, a piano pupil of Friedrich Wieck, whose daughter Clara he would marry five years later. It is a generally light-hearted, sometimes tender, occasionally passionate musical depiction of a masked ball in carnival season. ("Carnaval," incidentally, is Schumann's idiosyncratic spelling of "carnival.") We can, of course, listen to this programmatic suite as we listen to a sonata—that is, as "pure" music. Romantic composers sometimes insisted that their listeners do so. Indeed, Schumann himself claimed that he often thought up the titles *after* composing the music. But, as Schauffler says, "in the case of *Carnaval* at least, the notes match the names so well that we wonder if he did not revise the music to conform with them." In any case, it is perhaps more rewarding to try to seize the mood of each brief piece before it vanishes than to let the music flow into one ear and out the other, and to do this we must have some idea of what meanings lie behind the sometimes cryptic titles.

Preamble, *Noble Waltz*, *German Waltz*, *Promenade*, and *Pause* identify the dances and rituals of the ball itself. *Chopin* and *Paganini* offer parodies of the styles of composers whom Schumann greatly admired but had not yet met. (Since neither Chopin nor Paganini composed music for dancing at balls, the composer's inclusion of the parodies in the suite is somewhat puzzling.) Each of the other sections of the suite comments upon the appearance or character of one of the revellers. *Pierrot*, *Harlequin*, *Pantalon* and *Columbine* identify those who came masked as the stock figures of traditional Italian stage comedy. *Eusebius* and *Chiarina* evoke the personalities of two members of the League of David, the subject of the final section—in real life an intimate circle of Schumann's friends, drawn together by their shared contempt for the philistine middle-class. *Florestan* is a tongue-in-cheek self-portrait. *Reconaissance* ("Recognition") is thought to describe Schumann's first encounter at the ball with Ernestine, the *Estrella* of the piece. *Aveu* ("Avowal") is probably his confession of love.

As his letters and diary entries suggest, Schumann was fond of riddles, anagrams, and odd allusions, which helps to explain *Sphinxes*, *Butterflies* and *A.S.C.H–S.C.H.A.* According to Eric Jensen, both *Sphinxes* and *Butterflies* were inspired by an essay by Schumann's favorite writer, Jean Paul, entitled "Twilight Butterflies or Sphinxes." Paul's thesis is that sphinxes—butterflies that appear as evening approaches—represent human souls in transition from life to death. Perhaps Schumann was commenting musically on the fragility of the lives of two of the masked revellers.The meaning of *A.S.C.H.–S.C.H.A.* is somewhat more obvious: the letters form an anagram that links the name of Ernestine's home town (Asch) with a coded abbreviation of Schumann's name. In German music theory, such letters also represent musical notes—hence, the "four notes" of the subtitle. The melody that they compose not only dominates section 10 but appears in veiled form in most of the other parts of the suite.

1. Preamble. *Quasi maestoso–Più moto–Animato–Presto*
2. Pierrot. *Moderato*
3. Harlequin. *Vivo*
4. Noble waltz. *Un poco maestoso*

5. Eusebius. *Adagio*
6. Florestan. *Passionato*
7. Coquette. *Vivo*
8. Sphinxes. *L'istesso tempo*
9. Butterflies. *Prestissimo*
10. A.S.C.H.–S.C.H.A. (Dancing letters). *Presto*
11. Chiarina. *Passionato*
12. Chopin. *Agitato*
13. Estrella. *Con affetto*
14. Reconaissance ("Recognition"). *Animato*
15. Pantalon and Columbine. *Presto*
16. German Waltz. *Molto vivace*
17. Paganini. Intermezzo. *Presto*
18. Aveu ("Avowal"). *Passionato*
19. Promenade. *Comodo*
20. Pause. *Vivo*
21. March of the League of David Against the Philistines. *Non allegro–Molto più vivo–Animato –Vivo–Animato molto–Vivo–Più stretto*

Five-minute intermission

Modest Mussorgsky, Pictures at an Exhibition. Maurice Ravel's brilliant orchestration of Mussorg-sky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is so firmly established in the concert repertoire that we are apt to forget that the piece began life as a work for piano alone. Though it naturally lacks the sheer impact of the version for full orchestra, the two-handed version brims with vitality and sparkles with color. As we are about to hear, its technical demands placed it well beyond the reach of the amateurs for whom such piano works were generally published in the Russia of Mussorgsky's day and made it a showpiece for virtuosi.

Oskar Riesemann has observed that "Mussorgsky's musical fancy had full play only when it had some objective reality to work on." In June of 1874, when the composer began gestating *Pictures at an Exhibition*, that reality was the art of Victor Hartmann. An important architect and painter and for several years one of Mussorgsky's closest friends, Hartmann had died of a heart-attack at 35 in July of the preced-ing year. "What a terrible blow!" wrote an anguished Mussorgsky on hearing of his death. "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat live on and creatures like Hartmann die!" To do homage to his dead friend—and possibly to help assuage the pangs of lingering grief—the composer re-created in music a handful of the 400 or so drawings and paintings that were put on display in St. Petersburg in the summer of 1874 to honor the memory of the artist.

"Promenade" identifies passages that describe the movements of the composer himself as he stalks or sidles from picture to picture in his imaginary gallery. ("My own face peeps out through all of the Promenades," he wrote to a friend.) So graphic are

Mussorgsky's sound-images that with the help of the titles we can generally visualize what we are hearing. "The Gnome," inspired by Hartmann's drawing of a small nutcracker, evokes the lurching and stumbling of a bandy-legged dwarf. A plaintive melody and a gently rocking rhythm easily allow us to imagine the subject of the next picture—a mist-shrouded castle before which a troubadour sings and strums his lute. According to Vladimir Stasoff, a close friend of both Mussorgsky and Hartmann, the drawing that inspired "Tuileries" shows a platoon of nannies herding their quarrelsome charges through the gardens of the Tuileries Palace in Paris. The children's shrill complaints are heard in agitated scale passages in the right hand, the nurses' brisk pace in a seesawing 2/2 rhythm.With scarcely a pause, this rhythm is transformed into the unhurried gait of a team of oxen pulling a "Bydlo"—in Stasoff's words, "a massive, cumbersome Polish farm-cart with enormous wheels." Heavy chords in the bass reinforce the steady tread of the oxen, and a gradual softening of the sound in the closing measures suggests that the cart is disappearing into the distance. In "The Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks," inspired by Hartmann's studies for some rather bizarre ballet costumes, rapid, pecking chords and long upscale runs are evidently meant to suggest the frantically balletic movements of eggs on legs. Stassov described "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle" as "an argument between two Polish Jews, one rich, one poor," the models for which, he claimed, could be found in two pencil drawings by Hartmann in Mussorgsky's own collection. The noisy bustle of "The Market at Limoges"—punctuated, as one critic claims, by the shrill wrangling of market women—is clearly meant to contrast with the muffled silence of "The Catacombs of Paris" of the following piece. Hartmann's drawing of the latter shows the artist himself, lantern in hand, making his way through a shadowy chamber whose walls are lined with faintly visible skulls. Widely spaced chords in the bass suggest the tolling of funeral bells, rapid sequences of treble notes the eerie glow of lantern-light within the skulls. (Wrote Mussorgsky, "Hartmann's creative spirit leads me to the place of skulls, and calls to them—the skulls begin to glow faintly from within.") The artist's love of fantasy is again revealed in his drawing of a clock in the shape of the witch Baba Yaga's house, a hut on gigantic hen's legs. With several harsh bass chords Mussorgsky evokes the menace and fury of the witch, and then, with some hushed, fluttering effects in the left hand, asks us to imagine her flying through the air in a red-hot mortar steered with a giant pestle as she hunts her victims. Finally, we arrive at "The Great Gate of Kiev," during the richly sonorous course of which we are asked to visualize Hartmann's intricately detailed drawing of the gate of the old city—as Stassov says, "in the massive old Russian style and crowned with a cupola in the form of a Slavonic helmet." We are evidently meant to imagine not only the gate but the traffic that passes through it—serfs, boyars, ox-carts, merchants, and, in the quiet murmur of a Russian Orthodox chant, a procession of monks. In the final measures we hear the pealing of the bells of Kiev's churches, through which the Promenade music rings out triumphantly.

1. Promenade— The Gnome
2. Promenade—The Old Castle
3. Promenade—The Tuileries—Bydlo
4. Promenade—Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks
   Samuel Goldenberg und Schmuyle
5. Promenade—The Market at Limoges—The Catacombs of Paris

6. Baba Yaga: The Hut on Hen’s Legs
   The Great Gate of Kiev