Program Notes, by Frederick Noonan

“After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own.” -- Oscar Wilde

This quote, from a writer famous for his cynical wit and surface brilliance, is a rare and serious tribute to the power of music. And it sums up the journeys we are about to take with this program. First of all we travel a chronological journey from the politely contained 18th century, through the emotionally intense Romantic period, to the vivid tone-painting of the late-nineteenth century. Simultaneously we traverse other foreign worlds: a modest gentle home in imperial Austria, glittering salons of Paris, tumultuous Poland, gruff and forceful Russia. On the journey, the impressions unfold, new views rising up as the piano wanders through an almost formless narrative landscape.

And, as always, we wander through our own personal interior landscape as we listen. Oscar Wilde's remark points the way to why music is important: it takes us outside ourselves and into ourselves. And though this particular quote is weighted with weeping and mourning, surely if taken to court after hearing "The Great Gate at Kiev", Wilde would have admitted to the experience of feeling elation and grandeur as well.

FRANZ SCHUBERT
Born January 31, 1787, in Vienna
Died November 19, 1828, in Vienna

The son of a schoolmaster, Franz Schubert began humbly and ended humbly, never wandered far from Vienna, led an uneventful life among friends, published little, died tragically young, and bestowed upon the world an incomparable treasure of melody --- so begins every program note on Schubert. Sometimes the sly frisson of syphilis appears, the word "vast" may show up to marvel at his out-put, or perhaps a reference to "short and fat, with spectacles" to re-emphasize the ordinary quality of his life. But it all comes down to one idea: the "incomparable treasure of melody" -- which is inevitably re-affirmed when the reader puts down his or her own spectacles and settles to listen to whatever the artist of the evening offers. The 'incomparable' Schubert offered tonight are the six *Moments Musicaux,* gussied up with a faux French name, deceptively simple, but imbued with his specialty, the subtle complexity of life itself. Austria of Schubert's time was reveling in the new phenomenon of an educated, musically aware middle class, which gave him an appreciative audience of friends, both professional and amateur, who gathered to play his works in evenings now known as Schubertiads. Vienna was a magnet drawing talent and fortune-seekers from the entire Hapsburg empire and it never took long for new musical influences to circulate and attract the attention of the middle-class amateurs. The model for these *Moments Musicaux* derives from Bohemia, where the idea of short piano pieces circling around an unpretentious fluid melody began with Jan Vorisek, migrating to Vienna with his pupil Vaclav Tomasek. Beethoven himself ventured into the genre of short piano solos, self-contained but not self-important, with his *Bagatelles* in 1802. Schubert added subtle shifts of harmony, extending the emotional range of these episodic modest pieces -- sometimes happily contemplative (#1 in C), other times hinting at the turmoil of Sturm and Drang (#5 in f). Each piece has its own character and somewhat wandering shape: the thoughtful and dreamy #2 in A flat is more or less a rondo; #3 in f (air russe) unifies itself not by form, but with a dance-like rhythm. The calm, contemplative "plainte" of # 6 in A-flat rummages through memory and might claim to have influenced Mendelssohn's genre of *Songs without Words* or Schumann's *Scenes of Childhood*. Academics these days find these apparently simple pieces fair game for the complex harmonic analysis 'enjoyed' by Schubert's later work, but the main way to approach them is the way Schubert's own friends did: by sitting back and relishing each fresh musical moment.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Born February 22, 1810, in Zelazowa Wola, Poland
Died October 17, 1849, in Paris

On November 2, 1830 Chopin fled Warsaw for Paris, ahead of invading Russians who by trampling the Polish identity ushered in years of nationalistic turmoil. Chopin was intensely Polish, having absorbed from the cradle the native folksongs laden with emotional content and flavored with poetry. He had no idea that he would never live in Poland again, but Poland inhabited him all the years he was an *emigrè* in Paris. It was a curiously full-circle journey. His father was a sturdy French *emigrè* who had left his unpretentious peasant family to find a better life in Poland, which indeed he did find, becoming a teacher of French, marrying a dreamy, sensitive, religious Polish lady. His parents' characters, Paris, and Warsaw melded together to stamp Chopin and his music with an identity he would never shake. Robert Schumann wrote: "Chopin might publish anything without his name; one would nevertheless immediately recognize him....His music possesses such remarkable original power that it is impossible even for a moment to be uncertain as to its source."

Paris was the center of the European artistic world and a swirl of geniuses -- Bellini, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Rossini -- poured their brilliance into the reigning inherited forms for expression. Chopin had brought with him his own national forms, the mazurka and polanaise, but the challenging environment spurred his creative impulses and, relying on his affinity for improvising, he left the classical sonata form in the dust, composing four works in a new genre he somewhat misleadingly called 'ballade.' Wholly original and unique, these ballades were not programmatic or narrative in the conventional sense, but freely unfolding pieces which disdained the prose narrative of a literal literary ballade, preferring to follow instead the poetic impulse. For Chopin, the "form" was created by its emotional content, with dramatic sweep as the riveting shape of the composition.
This Ballade in F Minor was composed during the summer of 1842 at Nohant, the country estate of his lover George Sand. (They were not a same-sex couple ahead of their time; she was Aurore Dudevant, a celebrated writer who had figured out, between cigars, that her novels sold better under a man's name.) A fantasy saturated with passion and drama, the ballade is a series of musical events, each sweeping advancement sounding inevitable, though never predictable. The once-upon-a-time introduction, seven

measures long, quietly sets the mood for the opening theme, a lyric melody soon subjected to a number of transformations. A contrasting second theme joins in with expressive chordal harmonies and then these two subjects entangle lyricism and passion with a sense of brilliant improvisation until, just before the end, some tranquilly sustained chords announce a formidable coda and conclusion. When the sound dies down, the listener, though at a loss to analyze the structure or retell the story of what happened, nevertheless knows for sure it was a helluva trip.

The Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor has the same impressive emotional sweep and final triumphant arrival. Originally a scherzo was a witty interlude in a larger piece -- as the name implies: 'scherzo' means 'joke'. Then Beethoven, never much of a joker, got hold of it and told the joke in a serious way. With Chopin, the name is retained but the joke is basically gone. What is left is the underpinning of triple meter -- a waltz on a grander scale, no longer danceable, syncopated, interrupted, and transformed by speed and fire, *presto con fuoco, non joko,* one might say. A calculated discontinuity of form is felt in the very opening as pauses are inserted in the first few notes and the waltzing scherzo thereafter surrenders to the sweep of emotional content. The traditional tri-partite form of the scherzo remains too, but the separate dignity of the central trio is usurped when Chopin slows nearly to a halt, then takes off with a new melody which builds in intensity until the coda assumes that breath-taking Chopinesque life of its own.

MODEST MUSSORGSKY
Born March 9/21, 1839, in Karevo, Pskov district, Russia
Died March 16/28, 1881, in St. Petersburg, Russia

Mussorgsky was born to country gentry with a large estate, where his early years afforded him the privileged life of piano lessons from his mother as well as a profound exposure to the dark superstitious misery of the peasant life. Following family tradition he trained as an officer in the military, allowing him the leisure to pursue his musical studies where he acquired two important mentors: the art and music critic Vladimir Stasov and the composer Balakirev whose own mentor had been Mikhail Glinka. This luck placed him firmly in the newly emerging world of Russian nationalism as it turned confidently away from Western European influence.

When Alexander II emancipated the serfs in 1861, the family lost its money and stature and Mussorgsky was reduced to taking a civil service job. A series of emotional crises ensued, exacerbated by alcoholism and severe depression. His life spiralled down into disjointed alternations of pure misery and occasional success as he tried to work on his operas *Boris Godunov, Khovanshchina,* and *Sorochintsy Fair*, which were all left incomplete upon his death from alcohol at 42.

In spite of his troubles Mussorgsky had many friends and admirers, many of whom sompleted and rearranged his work. Among these friends was the eminent Russian painter Victor Hartmann who died in 1873. Soon afterwards, the critic Stasov organized a posthumous exhibition in St. Petersburg of Hartmann's work. Moved by this exhibit, Mussorgsky resolved to set for piano his impressions of some of the Hartmann pictures. In a matter of weeks, he had completed his homage.

Pictures consists of ten vivid musical characterizations, each with the title of one of Hartmann's drawings. They are prefaced by a Promenade that recurs four times in different ways during the progression of the work and serves as a connecting device, representing Mussorgsky strolling through the exhibition. The pictures themselves are each brought alive by forceful insinuating fragments of melody, a unique distillation of folk idiom into sound, irregular rhythms, the eerie summoning of darker aspects of the Russian psyche, and finally the pure accumulation of majestic noise.

Mussorgsky's tone-painting is unself-conscious, unfiltered by personal sensibility, simply presented to the ear: the darting, pausing, limping rhythms of the Gnome; the heavy trundling progress of the Bydlo; the squabbling noise of children in the Tuileries; the chattering of the Limoge women erupting into quarreling. The two Polish Jews -- one fat, pompous, and rich, the other poor, begging and whining -- are clear portraits drawn without words. Hartmann's drawings come alive, and at the end one is no longer peering at a small sketch on the wall, but finds oneself standing back before the Great Gate overwhelmed by an awesome, giant structure and cowed by the deep tolling of the bells.

For many years the original piano compositions were considered simply too complicated to perform, but the exotic melodies drew several composers to orchestrate the work. Ravel's orchestration put the work firmly on the map. In the 1950's pianists began to reassess *Pictures* and Richter's performance in 1958 proved finally that the challenging masterpiece could actually be played. Now this work of bold originality has become a favorite of virtuoso pianists, "The Great Gate at Kiev" often bringing the audience to its feet.