



MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Night on Bald Mountain

Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky (1839-1881) was a Russian composer, one of the group known as "The Five". He was an innovator of Russian music in the romantic period. He strove to achieve a uniquely Russian musical identity, often in deliberate defiance of the established conventions of Western music. Many of his works were inspired by Russian history, Russian folklore, and other nationalist themes. Such works include the opera *Boris Godunov*, the orchestral tone poem *Night on Bald Mountain*, and the piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*. For many years Mussorgsky's works were mainly known in versions revised or completed by other composers. Many of his most important compositions have recently come into their own in their original forms, and some of the original scores are now also available. Born into a wealthy and land-owning family, he was originally destined for military service. His meeting with Alexander Borodin and Alexander Dargomyzhsky, at that time the most important Russian composer after Mikhail Glinka in 1856 shaped Mussorgsky's fate as a composer, although he remained within the civil service. Suffering from alcoholism throughout his life, Mussorgsky lived only to see his 42nd birthday.

Inspired by Russian literary works and legend, Mussorgsky composed a "musical picture", *St. John's Eve on Bald Mountain* (Russian: Иванова ночь на лысой горе, *Ivanova noch' na lysoy gore*) on the theme of a witches' sabbath occurring on St. John's Eve, which he completed on that very night, June 23, in 1867. However, Mussorgsky revised the work several times under different names but never achieving recognition. It was not until after his death, when fellow composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov took the work and arranged it as a fantasy for orchestra titled **Night on Bald Mountain**, that the piece received lasting fame. Published alongside Rimsky-Korsakov's version is a program, which describes the piece as "Subterranean sounds of non-human voices. Appearance of the spirits of darkness, followed by that of Chernobog. Glorification of Chernobog and Black Service. Sabbath. At the height of the Sabbath, the distant ringing of a village church bell is heard; it disperses the spirits of darkness. Morning." The program closely mirrors that of Mussorgsky's first version, which likewise describes a Black Sabbath, but with witches proclaiming praises to Satan.