



Glinka Tchaikovsky Mussorgsky

Valse-Fantasie

Serenade Op.48

Pictures at an Exhibition

ARCO Chamber
Orchestra

Levon Ambartsumian, conductor

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Feature Article by [David DeBoor Canfield](#)

A New Version of Pictures at an Exhibition with Conductor Levon Ambartsumian

Formerly Professor of Violin at the Moscow Conservatory, Levon Ambartsumian founded the ARCO Chamber Orchestra in Moscow in 1989. However, upon coming to the United States, the violinist-conductor gained a position at the University of Georgia's Hodgson School of Music, and refurbished ARCO at that institution, bringing over from Russia five of its most important members to assist him. Ambartsumian was quite thoroughly interviewed regarding his

development as a violinist and conductor, and on his impressions of various schools of violin playing, in the fascinating interviews done by my colleague Jerry Dubins in 43:1 and 42:3, so in the interview below, conducted in November of 2020, I attempted to explore facets of this versatile musician's career and work not already covered.

First of all, I'd like to explore your tenure at the Jacobs School of Music in Bloomington, an institution that happens to be my own alma mater. Could you tell us anything about your experiences here?

I came to Indiana University in the fall of 1993 to fill in for an ailing Joseph Gingold. After one academic year Mr. Gingold seemed to have recovered and returned to teaching, but in the following academic year, another IU Professor of Violin, Nelli Shkolnikova, asked me to replace her while she went on sabbatical. After that, I left the U.S. for a few months in 1995 but then received three invitations from the universities of Kansas, Houston, and Georgia. The University of Georgia in Athens became my choice when they "made me an offer I couldn't refuse." Thus I came to Georgia in the fall of 1995 with five of my best players in my Moscow string orchestra, ARCO, and these formed the foundation of a new string orchestra in residence at UGA.

Did you get to know Gingold? What were your impressions of him?

Yes, I did, and was even teaching that year in his studio. On two occasions, he came to my recitals and we spoke many times. His Russian was pretty good and he was the nicest person one could imagine. He often told anecdotes in Russian, but sometimes they did not make any sense, since he was translating them from English, which often changed the meaning.

Indeed, Gingold had a reputation for never saying anything unkind about another person. Did you find any challenges in teaching students here in a language other than your mother tongue?

Not at all. I have been studying English since childhood, but by the time I moved to the U.S. I had also gained substantial experience of teaching masterclasses in English. Actually, my capability in English was one of the reasons I was invited to IU. When Gingold got sick they needed an immediate replacement, so they looked to the Moscow Conservatory and I was the only one who met all criteria, including being young enough, a performing violinist, an experienced teacher, and someone who spoke English.

Was the comparative ignorance about music (to which you referred in your earlier interviews) of the American students compared to their Russian counterparts a shock to you? How did you have to change your style of teaching from what it had been in Moscow to accommodate them?

It wasn't any shock since I was ready for it. As I said earlier, I had been teaching abroad quite a lot (in Canada, France, Korea), and had had American students as well. As for changing my style, I was advised by some of my older colleagues about adjustments I need to make. They warned me to always smile, always encourage, always say that everything sounds great, and most importantly, not to touch even as much as a finger of the student.

I am curious about your award of a gold medal from the Moscow Composers' Union for your contribution to the development of contemporary music. Are you also a composer, or was it perhaps that you have featured many contemporary works in your programming? If the latter is

the reason for the award, who are some of your favorites among those in the newest generation of Russian composers?

I am not a composer; however, I have one opus: I composed a solo violin piece when I was 11 years old. I have not continued for good reasons. I have always been interested in contemporary music, including music of living composers, an interest that began during my high school years. Very often I had been approached by student composers, asking me to help them with violin technique or to play their music. Often, they had been sincerely surprised at how good their music was. This continued during my Conservatory years, when I met Aram Khachaturian, and played a violin concerto by one of his students (now quite a famous composer living in Finland). After this, I gained a reputation as someone who could play anything, so young Russian and Armenian composers started to seek me out. I have lost count on how many premieres I played and (later) conducted in my life. If you look at my discography, you will see that almost half of my CDs are dedicated to the music of living Russian composers. From 1992 to 2019, I have also played regularly at the Moscow Autumn festival, in which composers present their new works, a tradition that goes back to the time when Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and other giants of music often had their works premiered.

As to the contemporary composers that I've performed often, these would include Alfred Schnittke, Mikhail Bronner, Efrem Podgaitis, and Alexander Tchaikovsky, and I have recorded works by many of them as well.

I read with interest the description you gave earlier of Leonid Kogan as a rather severe teacher. As I got to know his recordings (I never heard him live, as I was able to for Oistrakh and Milstein), I came to believe he was unsurpassed (even by Heifetz) in his playing. Was he also "severe" in his personal life and relationships? Do you have any interesting anecdotes about him?

Yes, he was a fantastic violinist but a severe teacher and also a vindictive person, as I found out when I left his class (an action that likely cost me a major performing career).

There have been some stories about him, most of which concern his relationship with the Soviet government. The most mysterious story was about his sudden death in a train at the age of 58. As for his personal life, I know for sure he was a faithful husband and a dedicated father.

I enjoyed meeting his son, Pavel, when I had him to my house for dinner on one occasion. Were there other famous Russian or Soviet musicians you got to know?

I was lucky enough to live during a time when legendary musicians of the 20th century were still with us on this planet. I once had an amusing encounter with Shostakovich. At the Moscow Conservatory, there are stairs around the elevator from the first through fourth floors, with the men's room on the third and the ladies' on the second. One day, I was standing nearby on the second floor with my violin warming up before my lesson when all of a sudden, right in front of my eyes, a small man ran down the stairs from the above floor directly into the ladies' room. There were quite a few people around, so there was a theatrical pause. A few seconds later, the man leapt out of the restroom, completely red-faced. He stopped, scratched his cheek—a typical

gesture for him—and said, “No, this is not what I wanted to say!” Obviously, he was thinking he had descended from the fourth floor and was entering the men’s room on the third.

Stories about Rostropovich would require a full-length book, but I can relate one of them. I had been attending his lessons, and at one of them, a student asked if he could use a certain finger in a particular phrase. Rostropovich replied, “You can use your nose as long as it sounds good!”

Perhaps my best story is one from the U.S., on an occasion that Isaac Stern played the Bruch Concerto in Greenville, South Carolina, with Maxim Shostakovich conducting. During the intermission, I went to greet the performers in the dressing room. Only Maxim was there, and as I was about to explain who I was, he stopped me by saying, “Hello Levon.” I was amazed, since we had never met in person. Only on the next day did I recall that a long time ago he had invited me to join his orchestra, the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra, as concertmaster on his upcoming trip to Germany, during which he defected. He had certainly familiarized himself with me prior to this offer. Anyway, I found Stern in another dressing room and had a nice conversation (in Russian) with him. I decided that the first half of the concert was enough of an emotional experience and went out to the parking lot to drive home. There I was in the parking lot, and there was Isaac with his Guarnerni del Gesù, his wife, and a bodyguard, all looking at their rental car that had been blocked by another car and wondering what to do. I approached them and offered them a ride, if they did not want to wait until the end of the concert. And then, Isaac, with his \$40 million (or so) instrument, got into my car, and we drove to his hotel. The best happened after that—I will be quoting this for the rest of my life. I was driving and Isaac was navigating me from the backseat—turn left, turn right, etc. His wife, sitting next to him, asked, “Isaac, how do you know this?” The answer was, very matter of factly ... “Honey, I know everything.”

My friends have been urging me for years to write a book on the musicians I knew and anecdotes about them. I’m not sure I’ll ever write it, but I do have a title, *The Witness of an Epoch*.

Tell us a bit about Igor Kholopov, the composer who made very effective arrangements of two of the works on the present CD. Did you commission him to write these arrangements?

Igor is a rising star now, in huge demand in Moscow as a composer and arranger. He receives commissions from Moscow-based musical theaters and various orchestras, composing in different genres. He was a student of my friend, one of the most famous living composers now, Efrem Podgaitis, mentioned earlier. I got to know Kholopov’s music through a work for violin and orchestra I performed at a Russian festival (as well as here in the U.S.), and at that time he offered me some of his arrangements of popular Russian works, including *Pictures* and the *Valse* by Glinka. I was very happy to include these in our ARCO repertoire.

I note that your *Promenades* in Kholopov’s arrangement are unusually quick in tempo. What conception do you have of Mussorgsky portraying himself strolling through the gallery of works by his deceased friend?

I am not sure if my tempos are unusually quick. There are a huge number of performances in the original piano version and various orchestral arrangements. Some of them have *Promenades* slower than mine, but some are close to my tempi. As you see in the score, two of the

Promenades are marked *Allegro giusto*. All of the slower performances are not even close to that, so I believe my approach simply follows Mussorgsky's markings. The slower ones reminding me more of a funeral than a Promenade.

As you doubtless know, Mussorgsky's iconic *Pictures at an Exhibition* is likely the most-arranged piece of classical music (there exist more than 660 arrangements for varying combinations of instruments, including 15 for string orchestra by Atar Arad, Ilya Ioff, Agnieszka Duczmal, Jacques Cohen, Simon Bouveret, and others). What do you think there is about this work that has contributed to its enduring popularity and attracted so many arrangers to it?

Whenever I am working on a work that is new to me, I do not listen to any existing recordings before I develop my own feeling of the piece, so that my interpretation is based entirely on my reading of the score and my feeling and knowledge of its composer's style.

As soon as I read it, your question made me analyze my thinking about this. Of course, I have heard this work many times before now, but I remember only three performances. One was the performance about 40 years ago of an old pianist friend, someone quite famous. A second memorable performance was that of Evgeny Svetlanov conducting the USSR State Orchestra, and the third was by (hold your breath) Emerson, Lake, and Palmer.

I consulted with Kholopov about his transcription a good bit. Despite the fact that Mussorgsky was a very fine pianist, this work is not 100 percent "pianistic." My strong belief is that Mussorgsky unconsciously looked for orchestral sonority in *Pictures*, almost as if he were writing a piano reduction of some kind of a symphonic/choral work. In his piano score you can see typically orchestral markings such as tremolo and *fp*. In the opening Promenade, one can hear how the soloist starts the phrase and a "choir" continues it, which is the style of traditional folk Russian choir singing.

Have you heard any of the other string arrangements, and if so, what makes the one by Kholopov special to you?

It is special for the same reason that Ravel's orchestration of *Pictures* is special. Ravel was a great composer himself, and not just an arranger, such as have been most of the others who have orchestrated the work. In my opinion Kholopov is an outstanding composer himself, and beyond that a Russian composer, who grew up on the traditions of Russian composition, going back to Glinka.

One of the first things that jumped out at me in this arrangement was the change of key downward by a semitone in many of the movements. This is understandable, given that keys such as G# Minor are not nearly as string-friendly as G Minor, and one can also gain the increased resonance of open strings and harmonics in the more suitable string keys. However, I'm not sure how Mussorgsky would have viewed these, given the careful relationships he designed between the key of one movement and the next. Most of Kholopov's changes are subtle enough that they might not be noticed by most listeners, but the transition between the Fifth Promenade and the following "Limoges" movement, might be, given its sudden shift of a semitone upward. Do you have any thoughts on the new key relationships that Kholopov has created?

Yes, you are right—changes of key have been made for the sake of sonority. Speaking of Mussorgsky, he was a pianist, and black keys are pretty comfortable for piano technique. I would imagine that had he done his own arrangement, he would most definitely have reconsidered the keys of the various movements, and perhaps even their tonal relationships. The transition you mentioned is a relation by tritone, which is common for Mussorgsky. I asked Igor about the semitone shift you mention, and he cited me an example from Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*, namely the transition from "Trepak" to "The Field Marshal" which also jumps by a semitone. I can cite a further example of a change of key for an orchestration. Debussy's *La plus que lente* in its piano version is in D \flat , but the key was changed to D in its orchestrated version. I have also asked some musicians if the key changes in *Pictures* bothered them. Most of them have not even noticed them. Only pianists who have played the piece, have generally noticed the new keys, but they have not been bothered by them.

I found in this arrangement the "Ballet of Unhatched Chicks in their Shells" particularly interesting, as I heard some sounds (apparently from the lower strings) that I couldn't identify (especially measures 13–20). It almost sounds as though some of the players were tapping their instruments. Can you clarify what it was that Kholopov has called for here?

That sound was *col legno*.

As a string player myself, I generally immediately recognize *col legno*, but this sounded to me quite different from what I usually hear! The string orchestra is capable of many colors, certainly appropriate for any orchestration of *Pictures*, but cannot produce the power of a full orchestra containing brass, woodwinds, and percussion. How do you feel that Kholopov has compensated for this fact in his arrangement?

When Mussorgsky composed this work I don't think he had in his imagination anything close to Ravel's sonority, but simply had Hartmann's pictures as an inspiration. When I consider Kholopov's setting, the last thing that comes to my mind is Ravel's music. I love that gorgeous arrangement, but I believe the string version is stylistically closer to the original—closer to the original color palette used by Hartmann. I don't believe that Kholopov tried to compete with a full-size symphony orchestra, but rather simply translated this music to the language of strings—and very successfully in my opinion.

Your approach to the Tchaikovsky *Serenade for Strings* seems very chamber music oriented to my ears, given the clean delineation of lines and lighter-than-normal textures I hear in your recording. Is my impression of your conception correct?

You are exactly right. Originally this work was intended for the string section of a full symphony orchestra, meaning it required at least 50 players. ARCO had about 15 people in the live performance preserved on this CD, captured with two microphones just above the stage and without any post-production sound engineering. It was also my intention to take advantage of this smaller ensemble in regard to phrasing, dynamic flexibility, and achieving of a refined sound.

GLINKA 1 *Valse-Fantaisie* (arr. Kholopov). MUSSORGSKY 2 *Pictures at an Exhibition* (arr. Kholopov). TCHAIKOVSKY 3 *Serenade for Strings* • Levon Ambartsumian, cond; ARCO CO •

CENTAUR 3800 (71:03) Live: Hugh Hodgson Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia
14/2019, 210/2018, 311/2012

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This is a celebration of all things Russian. It begins with an arrangement by Igor Kholopov of a Valse-Fantaisie by Glinka. It was originally for solo piano, and Glinka himself orchestrated it for full orchestra twice; Kholopov scores it for chamber orchestra. There is more than a whiff of Gallic sophistication running through the piece, and yet the accent is unmistakably Russian. Lovers of Tchaikovsky's ballets will adore this piece, especially in this fine-honed version (listening for the first time, it was only the appearance of applause that alerted me to the fact that it is taken down live).

The link to Tchaikovsky seems a valid one, given that straight after we hear a much more famous work: the Serenade for Strings. The performance by the ARCO Chamber Orchestra attempts to maintain the lightness and transparency we heard in the Glinka. This is not, it has to be clearly stated, at all a challenger to any classic performances you might have on your shelf; my particular comparison was the recent Bychkov/Czech Philharmonic performance as part of The Tchaikovsky Project (rightly, in my estimation, given a rave review by my colleague David Reznick in *Fanfare* 43:4). From Karajan and his Berliners to Neville Marriner and the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, every collector will have his or her favorite. As so often with Centaur, a little more depth to the recording would have helped, but this remains a fervent reading, active and texturally alive; the level of detail here is the most ear-catching element. The "Valse" is light on its feet; the "Élégie" nicely profound, its gossamer textures almost ghostly, and conductor Levon Ambartsumian ensures tight rhythmic control in the finale. This is a fine, energetic, and above all enjoyable performance.

Arranging Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition for anything resembling orchestral forces inevitably means sitting in the shadow of Ravel. And yet Ravel's is a very individual take (he was a composer with his own voice, after all, and one that was some way from Mussorgsky's), and so there is a real argument for other avenues; and, indeed, over the years, many have been put forward. Scaling it down to string orchestra size is a good idea: It allows for a real transparency, and there is a congruence in going from piano to all strings. There is character here, too, in Kholopov's arrangement: Note the string glissandos in "Gnomus" (The Gnome, here), and the way that movement's penultimate gesture seems to link back in the disc to the opening of Tchaikovsky's Serenade. There are real challenges here; the sheer velocity set by Ambartsumian plus the solo exchanges in "Tuilleries" are well negotiated. Again, I would like to hear more heaviness, deeper and more focused bass, in "Bydło," but to balance that, one has to appreciate the rather zany "Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks." This is a live performance, so not everything is mishap-free by any means (the upper strings nearly come unstuck in "The Hut on Fowl's Legs,"

and there are moments of ragged ensemble); but there is a real feeling of triumph at the arrival of “The Great Gate of Kiev.”

The Glinka and the Tchaikovsky are the real gold here, and Russophiles should not hesitate: the first for rarity value, the second for the zest of the performance. There are too many tatty ends in the Mussorgsky to enable it to qualify as recommendable for anything past interest value, though. Colin Clarke

This article FEATURE REVIEW by [Ken Meltzer](#)

GLINKA 1 Valse-Fantaisie (arr. Kholopov). MUSSORGSKY 2 Pictures at an Exhibition (arr. Kholopov). TCHAIKOVSKY 3 Serenade for Strings • Levon Ambartsumian, cond; ARCO CO • CENTAUR 3800 (71:03) Live: Hugh Hodgson Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 14/2019, 210/2018, 311/2012

A new Centaur release features performances of Russian works by the ARCO Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Levon Ambartsumian. Ambartsumian founded the ensemble in 1989 while he was at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory. In 1995, Ambartsumian joined the faculty at the University of Georgia’s School of Music. At that time Ambartsumian, artistic director and conductor of the ARCO Chamber Orchestra, relocated the ensemble’s home base to UGA in Athens, GA. This Centaur disc features three Russian works, all recorded in performance at UGA’s Hugh Hodgson Hall. The ARCO Chamber Orchestra is an accomplished ensemble, one that plays with admirable precision, transparency, and balance of instrumental voices. In the performances preserved on this disc, Ambartsumian favors a lean sonority, supported by dark, incisive lower strings. Rubato and portamentos are subtly and sparingly applied. If you are seeking performances in an older, more Romantic tradition, these may not be your cup of tea. But I found the playing admirable throughout, and musically compelling. The disc opens with Mikhail Glinka’s Valse-Fantaisie. Glinka originally composed the work for solo piano, and later arranged the work for full orchestra. Here, the work is performed in an arrangement for chamber orchestra (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and strings) by Igor Kholopov, professor of composition on the faculty of Moscow’s Ippolitov-Ivanov Academy. In Kholopov’s reduced orchestration, Glinka’s work retains its beguiling colors, and it receives a charming, well-sprung performance. Likewise, the Serenade for Strings admirably captures Tchaikovsky’s grace and lyricism, all within the context of pacing that strikes a fine balance between moments of repose and forward momentum. Again, this is not the most Romantic version of the work, but it is lovely and satisfying in its own fashion. The disc concludes with Kholopov’s arrangement for string orchestra of Modest Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition. Of course, the most famous version of Mussorgsky’s Pictures is the glorious technicolor 1923 orchestration by Maurice Ravel. But Mussorgsky originally composed Pictures at an Exhibition for solo piano, and there have been many other arrangements of the work. Kholopov’s string orchestra arrangement strikes me as faithful to Mussorgsky’s vision, and effective in this performance (Kholopov restores Mussorgsky’s reprise of the Promenade before “The Market Place in Limoges,” omitted by Ravel). The lower strings are given frequent prominence, enhancing the Russian atmosphere. The only disappointment for me was the concluding “Great Gate of Kiev.” For all the vigorous, concentrated string writing, and committed playing by the ARCO Chamber Orchestra, the impact

falls short of the Ravel orchestration, or for that matter, the original Mussorgsky when thundered by the likes of Sviatoslav Richter. But I am glad to have heard Kholopov's version, especially when played with such accomplishment and passion by the ARCO Chamber Orchestra and conductor Ambartsumian.

The in-performance recordings provide ample definition, impact, and instrumental color, along with a notable left-right stereo separation. Some audience applause is included at the end of each performance. Kevin Kelly's liner notes are both informative and engagingly written. This is an engaging disc, one I am happy to recommend. Ken Meltzer

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Twice interviewed and reviewed, Levon Ambartsumian makes another appearance here, but this time not as violin soloist or as violinist playing and conducting, but strictly as conductor of the ARCO Chamber Orchestra, the ensemble he originally founded in Russia at the Moscow Conservatory in 1989. When Ambartsumian joined the University of Georgia's School of Music faculty in 1995, he remained the artistic director and conductor of the orchestra, moving its home base to the Hugh Hodgson School of Music, where the ensemble has now become a talented international blend of musicians. The release at hand has been compiled from three separate recordings, all made "live" in the Hugh Hodgson Hall. As indicated in the above headnote, the Glinka and Mussorgsky are both given here in arrangements by Igor Kholopov.

In 1839, the 35-year-old, unhappily married Mikhail Glinka composed his Valse-Fantaisie and dedicated it to a 22-year-old innamorata with whom he was carrying on an affair. The eight-and-a-half-minute piece was originally written for solo piano, but Glinka twice orchestrated it himself, once in 1845, and again as late as 1856, a year before his death, which suggests his fondness for it and the significance he attached to it. Apparently, following Glinka's death, others had a hand in further editing, arranging, and orchestrating it as well, namely Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, and Lyapunov. With a number of orchestral scores at the ready, one wonders why Kholopov felt the need to contribute his own version, or why Ambartsumian chose Kholopov's scoring for strings, flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon over another of the available editions. Perhaps it was because the ARCO Chamber Orchestra simply didn't have the instrumental resources needed to take on a large-scale orchestration. Be that as it may, Kholopov, according to the album note, is a winner of the International Dvořák Composers Competition, and a successful composer of symphonic and chamber music, as well as of opera and music for film. Since 2016, he has served as professor of composition at the Ippolitov-Ivanov Academy in Moscow. His arrangement of Glinka's Valse-Fantaisie heard here has a lightness and delicacy of touch, which Glinka's own 1856 version for a much larger orchestra surely does not.

It's an interesting piece, one in which the ear detects an atmosphere of something askew and surreal, a swirling undercurrent that threatens to engulf the waltz in a demonic danse macabre. There's a bit of Berlioz's "Un bal" movement from the *Symphonie fantastique*, but with its minor-mode harmony constantly pulling at its seams, its chromatic undertows upwelling to the surface from deep within bass, and its dissonant outcries, Glinka's *Valse-Fantaisie* sounds almost predictive of the grotesquerie in Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* and the toxic brew in Ravel's *La valse*. Before its time, Glinka's piece inhabits a realm of surrealist distortion that would come to characterize a number of later composers' approach to the waltz genre. The central section of the piece slides and glides with such slithering, ingratiating smarminess that it may actually qualify Glinka's *Valse-Fantaisie* as a masterpiece of the morbid. It's hard to know if that's what Glinka intended, but the fact that he returned to the piece, not once but twice, to orchestrate it suggests that he regarded it as an important entry in his catalog. Even with the reduced forces of Kholopov's orchestration, the fantastical element of the music comes through in this vivid performance by Ambartsumian and his ARCO Orchestra.

Tchaikovsky's ever-verdant, ever-popular *Serenade in C Major*, op. 48, is given here as written with no need to transcribe or arrange it, since it was originally scored for strings only. An album photo shows Ambartsumian leading a string ensemble of 16 string players. It should be noted, however, that Tchaikovsky envisioned an even larger number. In his own hand on the second page of the autograph he wrote, "The larger number of players in the string orchestra, the more this shall be in accordance with the author's wishes."

The four-movement work was but one of Tchaikovsky's efforts to capture in spirit, if not exactly in letter, the atmosphere of the 18th-century serenade in general and that of his musical idol, Mozart, in particular. Another, even more explicit example, because it uses direct musical quotations, is the *Orchestral Suite*, op. 61, that Tchaikovsky titled "Mozartiana."

It's hard to do anything that would spoil a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade*. But there's a difference between doing nothing wrong and doing everything right. Ambartsumian and the ARCO Chamber Orchestra fall into the do-everything-right column. Their performance finds the ideal balance between those touches of wistfulness and the unforced ebullience of some of Tchaikovsky's most charming, sun-drenched music.

Readers of a certain age are almost certain to have learned Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* from the masterful Ravel orchestration. That was my experience, to be sure. In fact, it was quite some time before I discovered that the work was originally conceived for solo piano; but once I did, little by little, over the years, I found myself liking the piano version more than Ravel's orchestral realization, though I still appreciate what a brilliant ear for color and gift for scoring Ravel brought to the task.

Since then, there have been more orchestrations and arrangements than a conductor can shake his stick at, most of them with one or more segments—mainly the *Promenades*—omitted. Igor Kholopov's version is not the first for string orchestra. Coincidentally, in fact, David DeBoor Canfield, who has managed to collect virtually every recording of the piece ever made and has established himself as an authority on the work, reviewed just such another string orchestra

arrangement in 44:2. That version by Simon Bouveret, performed by Camerata du Léman, was, according to Canfield, the 17th such string arrangement he was familiar with.

This one by Kholopov is my first, and I'll admit that I was rather skeptical of just how effective a strings-only version would be. Some, but by no means all, of doubts were dispelled as early as "The Gnome," the first number following the opening Promenade. Ambartsumian gets his string players to make the most unnatural, unnerving sounds that perfectly depict the crippled little fiend as he leaps and lurches about, unable to coordinate his crooked little legs.

But then, I have to admit that many of my initial doubts were reinforced. I miss the kvetching sounds of Ravel's Schmuyle played by a muted trumpet in "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle"; the prenatal chirping of "The Unhatched Chicks" hatching perfectly poached; the gossiping yentas at Limoges; the visceral percussion smacks in "The Hut on Hen's Legs"; and the sheer volume and weight of "The Great Gate at Kiev." "Catacombs," on the other hand, is more than creepy enough for the Halloween goblins and ghosts. But my overall impression is that a strings-only arrangement of Pictures at Exhibition—at least this one by Kholopov—isn't all that convincing. Perhaps Canfield, with his access to 17 other such versions, may have found one of more of them to his liking.

My first preference continues to be Mussorgsky's original piano score, but for an orchestral Pictures, I personally continue to favor Ravel's version. There are too many instrumental colors and effects missing from Kholopov's strings-only score to make it a fully satisfying realization of the work. But that's a subjective opinion. Objectively, I can say that Ambartsumian and the ARCO Chamber Orchestra acquit themselves with high laurels in this technically very tricky and difficult piece to bring off. So, kudos for the effort and the accomplishment. Jerry Dubins

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GLINKA 1Valse-Fantaisie (arr. Kholopov). MUSSORGSKY 2Pictures at an Exhibition (arr. Kholopov). TCHAIKOVSKY 3Serenade for Strings • Levon Ambartsumian, cond; ARCO CO • CENTAUR 3800 (71:03) Live: Hugh Hodgson Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 14/2019, 210/2018, 311/2012

The most unusual and interesting portion of this recording is Igor Kholopov's arrangement for string orchestra of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. While the piece is best known in Mussorgsky's original version for solo piano and Ravel's Technicolor orchestration, there have been a wealth of other orchestral adaptations as well as some for other instruments (solo organ, brass ensemble, jazz trio, etc.). For Kholopov's version, the listener must put aside Ravel's brilliant achievement, and if you do, this new version turns out to be a refreshing take.

One might expect the limitations in variety of color from a string ensemble to be a problem, but Kholopov has solved this issue with a keen imagination. There is his use of the upper register of the violins to represent the quarrelling children in "Tuileries," for example, and his imaginative use of pizzicato for the "Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks." In general he takes full advantage of the basses and cellos at one end of the color spectrum and violins at the other. I am sure that

neither Kholopov nor conductor Levon Ambartsumian would claim that this is a replacement for Ravel's version. Rather, it is a unique take on the music, and one that I found very agreeable.

I am less persuaded by the arrangement of Mikhail Glinka's Valse-Fantaisie. This chamber orchestra version adds nothing to the colorful original, even though Kholopov does add a quartet of winds to supplement the strings. The one positive aspect of such an arrangement is that it becomes possible for chamber orchestras to program the work, giving it greater exposure than it has managed to achieve from symphony orchestras. The Valse-Fantaisie is a delightful miniature and merits this opportunity.

The performance of Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings is quite good. Ambartsumian has a nice light touch in the "Valse" and "Elégie," taking great care with balances and chord voicing; rhythmically the music never drags. The players in the ARCO Chamber Orchestra convey a lovely delicacy where that is appropriate, and conversely an energetic rhythmic snap where it is called for. This reading is competitive in a field that includes a host of vivid performances (I've never given up my allegiance to the old Charles Munch/Boston Symphony recording on RCA).

The ARCO Chamber Orchestra was founded in 1989 when Ambartsumian was a professor of violin at the Moscow Conservatory. In 1995 he joined the faculty of the Hodgson School of Music at the University of Georgia, and moved his ensemble there (obviously with some personnel changes). The orchestra is of high quality and responds to his leadership with alertness and a sense of commitment. Natural, warm recorded sound (with no audience noise) and helpful program notes by Kevin Kelly round out the disc. Henry Fogel

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