

# Modest mussorgsky and his sunless song cycle

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Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky was one of the biggest innovators in Russian music during the Romantic Period. Constantly striving to achieve a distinctive Russian musical identity, he never once hesitated to defy the orthodox qualities and trends of western music. Born March 21, 1839, into a wealthy family living in Karevo, Russia, it was not long before Mussorgsky discovered his love for music. He began playing piano at the age of 6 and showed promising development. However, he was obliged to take on the family tradition of serving in the military, and was sent to cadet school when he was 13.

After 4 years, he successfully graduated and was sent to serve at a military hospital in Saint Peterburg. Here, he became close with several other composers including Mily Balakirev, who heavily influenced Mussorgsky to learn more about music. The two worked together over the next few years developing his musical intelligence. After only several months, in 1858, Mussorgsky suffered from an emotional crisis, forcing him to resign from his commission, and devote his time entirely to music composition. He began to develop as a composer but was unfortunately preoccupied as his family's fortune began to dwindle.

He was forced to accept a low-level civil service position in order to help manage his family's estate. In 1863, Mussorgsky returned to Saint Petersburg and began composing his first opera. During this time, he was exposed to a heavily creative and intellectual atmosphere where a variety of artistic and scientific ideas were brought to his attention. He soon came to embrace the ideal known as musical realism. With this mind set, Mussorgsky sought to depict life through music as it was truly lived. He rejected the

repetition of symmetrical musical forms just as life itself is completely unpredictable.

His style came to be known as erratic and exhibited a raw sense of individuality. Unfortunately, this concept of ‘real life’ hit him especially hard when his mother passed away in 1865. This was a profound moment in Mussorgsky’s life, one that may have pushed him into the downward spiral saturated with alcohol, depression, and hopelessness that would eventually follow. By the late 1860’s, his music had circulated well enough to earn him the right of being grouped with Balakirev, Cui, Rimsky-Korsavok, and Borodin as a part of Russia’s “Mighty Handful”.

However, he had yet to compose a successful opera. In Autumn of 1868, after abandoning his two previous attempts at Salammbo and Marriage, Vladimir Nikosky suggested that he compose an opera for Alexander Pushkin’s drama, Boris Godunov. Mussorgsky gladly accepted the challenge and began almost immediately. Despite the opera being rejected by the State Censor (arguably not once but twice), nearly 6 years later, his masterpiece was ready to be shared with the world. The premier took place January 27, 1874, but to his dismay, it received a number of hostile and negative reactions.

Even his good friend and fellow “Mighty Hand” member, Cesar Cui, was unimpressed and proceeded to minimize his accomplishment with a scathing review describing it as an “immature work”, and that it “trespassed against the conventional musical grammar of the time”. Mussorgsky was deeply impacted by the public reaction. It nearly destroyed his self-confidence, and

summoned what I believe to be the dark and pessimistic force that inspired his song cycle entitled "Bez Solnsta".

Literally meaning "sunless", or "without sun", Bez Soinsta was a series of 6 songs Mussorgsky composed to accompany a variety of poems written by his close friend and part-time roommate, Arseni Golenishchev-Kutuzov. As the name implies, the overall mood of Sunless is rather bleak. Its music and lyrics especially evoke a continuous feeling of loneliness, hopelessness, insomnia, and boredom. From a psychological standpoint, one could say that this entire song cycle is a direct representation of the mental state associated with depression and its symptomatic effects.

I believe Mussorgsky chose to compose these songs when he did to reflect his degrading mental state of mind, which ultimately led to his demise. The first song of the cycle, consisting of only 17 bars, is entitled "Within Four Walls". With its sparing accompaniment, this musically subtle piece tends to center around pedal D (first in the bass, later in the mid range, and then returning back to the bass). The melody blends a combination of recitative and aria with arching lines of infinite yearning and at times fierce dissonances.

These unexpected harmonies are inevitably brought back to the unyielding D, all the while saturated with irregular phrase length and fermatas to perhaps allude to the unpredictability of life. Deceptive cadences of endless misery, combined with somber poetic lyrics such as "...an impenetrable darkness, irresponsive darkness", this song seems to radiate a sense of profound pessimism that can only be explained by the mental condition of Mussorgsky at the time. Though only lasting a mere 11 bars, Mussorgsky's

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second song of the cycle, “Thouh Didst Not Know Me In The Crowd”, goes further harmonically than any other composer would be capable of.

Frequently ending in foreign, unresolved chords, this perfect blend of heightened recitatives and fervent melodies do justice to the associated lyrics provided by Kutuzof. The poetry seems to express and bewail the indifference of the world as personified in the disinterest of a former lover. The brief poetic phrasing is as follows: You have not recognized me in the crowd. Your glance did not say anything, but I felt wonder and fright when I caught it. It was only a moment, but believe me, within it I re-lived again, all the delights of past love, all the bitterness of oblivion and tears!

Details regarding Mussorgsky’s love life are sparse, but one can only assume that such words drenched in hopeless bitterness and overwhelming sorrow pertained some relevance to his current love affairs at the time. Mussorgsky’s third song in the cycle is entitled “The Noisy Festival Day Is Ended”. At the time, he was working in the forestry department of The Russian Government as a clerk. Earning little income, and being constantly preoccupied with pointless tasks, his frustration grew, as he was increasingly distracted from his real life as a composer.

One of the more expansive Sunless songs, this 40 bar piece exhibits a variety of textures and gestures. Opening with a recitative, Mussorgsky continues to a lyrical middle section, where falling modal sixths are introduced. Finishing with an aria like finale, the song seems to convey no other emotions than hopeless longing and passionate despair. He expresses yet another day wasted, “over is the idle and idle and clamorous day” and another night sleep deprived, “but sleep escapes from my eyes”. But what

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has brought about this dissatisfaction? Could it be his unfulfilling job that distracts him from his true passion of music composition?

Or perhaps it is a woman who disturbs him so, “ I am bored with this dead crowd... Only one shadow, the only one of all, appeared to me, breathing with love”. “ Boredom” is the fourth song in Mussorgsky’s Sunless song cycle. As the name suggests, throughout the 29 bars, he repeats the opening statement a total of three times (making it a strophic song). However, it would not be very stylistic of Mussorgsky to restate this initial melody without some sort of change or variation. For each repetition, he modifies the music slightly to appropriately reflect the changes in the text.

During the third repetition, the music seems to take a more fierce and tragic approach than that of the first and second phrases. The lyrics here also seem to indicate a powerful sense hopelessness and despair as Kutuzov writes, “ Be bored. From birth to the grave your path is written beforehand: Drop by drop you’ll waste your powers. Then you’ll die. ” Talk about depressing. At this point in time, Mussorgsky was drinking heavily, and seemed to idealize his alcoholism, perhaps viewing it as an ethical or aesthetic habit. This of course led to increased isolation and depression, which is undeniably presented through songs such as this one.

His fifth song, “ Elegy” appears to be related in some way to the negative reaction of the public in response to the recent premier of his opera, Boris Godunov. As discussed earlier, even his close friend and respected fellow member of Russia’s “ Mighty Handful” betrayed Mussorgsky with a brutal review of the piece. “ Elegy” begins nicely as the fluttering piano gently compliments and symbolizes the “ Silent star flickering, lonely, through the

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veil of clouds". Arguably, this represents Mussorgsky's opera at the time of its approval, waiting for the "veil of clouds" to be lifted in order to shine for all of the world to see.

Later, the music changes drastically as a series of angry, dissonant and chromatic octaves relentlessly pound away as the poetry describes what I believe to be the public's reaction to his take on Boris Godunov. "...And I hear in the distance life's discordant noise, laughter of the soulless crowd, the muttering of treacherous feuding". Mussorgsky's anger and frustration in response to the premier of his opera are clearly and effectively depicted here through his music. The last song of his Sunless cycle is entitled "By The River". Throughout the piece, a stationary bass line with its insistent half step supports a series of extreme chromatic harmonies. There is a strange contradictory sense of stability and illusion to the piece, something which becomes even more prominent when compared to its poetry. Throughout the text, the line between sanity and madness is crossed, and you find yourself at the threshold of death. The poetry seems to essentially be a suicide note. The river acts as a means to an end, possessing "...magical secrets in them" (what happens after you die). "When it calls into the depths, I want to jump without hesitation" (suicide).

The hopeless yearning and disheartening lyrics correspond with music nearly as dark and mysterious as the river portrays. In the years that followed, Mussorgsky's mental and physical decline only worsened. The inability to resist drinking, combined with a series of deaths among his closest friends caused him great pain and sorrow. In 1880, he was terminated from the governmental service, and in 1881 he declared to a friend that there was, "

nothing left but begging". It seemed as though Mussorgsky had given up: on music, on himself, on life. Sure enough, not long after the fact, he suffered from a series of seizures and was hospitalized.

An impoverished son of nobility, Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky died on March 28, 1881, just a week after his 42nd birthday. His unfortunate struggle with alcohol, and criticisms from the public eye, inspired a dark and despairing approach to music during his final years. Additionally, his interest and devotion to musical realism led to an unorthodox and controversial style, the critical reaction to which, he was unable to cope with. Sunless, with the help from Kutuzov, remains one of the bleakest works in the art song repertoire.

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