

Sinfonia da Requiem, Op. 20
Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Written: 1940

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 20 minutes

The composer Benjamin Britten left England for America in 1939 rather than become involved in the impending war. He returned to England in 1942 and registered as a conscientious objector. While in America, Britten received a strange commission from the government of Japan to write a piece to help celebrate the 2,600th anniversary of the founding of the Mikado dynasty. Britten reluctantly agreed as long as his work wouldn't have to include any "musical jingoism." He had already been considering writing a work to commemorate his parents, so he sent a proposal back. The Japanese agreed and in very short order, Britten wrote his *Sinfonia da Requiem*. He dedicated it to his parents and wrote "as anti-war as possible." Upon seeing the final product, the Japanese rejected it and disinvited Britten. "We are afraid that the composer must have greatly misunderstood our desire . . . [it] has a melancholy tone both in its melodic pattern and rhythm, making it unsuitable for performance on such an occasion as our national ceremony," they wrote. Britten also said they accused him of "providing a Christian work where Christianity was apparently unacceptable." He provided these (here much abbreviated) comments about the piece for its premiere in 1941 in New York City:

I. *Lacrymosa*. A slow marching lament in a persistent 6/8 rhythm with a strong tonal center on D. There are three main motives. . . . The first section of the movement is quietly pulsating; the second is a long crescendo leading to a climax based on the first cello theme. There is no pause before:

II. *Dies irae*. A form of Dance of Death, with occasional moments of quiet marching rhythm. . . . The scheme of the movement is a series of climaxes of which the last is the most powerful, causing the music to disintegrate and to lead directly to:

III. *Requiem aeternam*. Very quietly, over a background of solo strings and harps, the flutes announce the quiet D-major tune, the principal motive of the movement. There is a middle section in which the strings play a flowing melody. This grows to a short climax, but the opening tune is soon resumed, and the work ends quietly in a long sustained clarinet note.

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Piano Concerto in G Major
Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Written: 1929–31

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 23 minutes

One of the complaints leveled against Ravel’s music is that it lacks “sentiment.” In spite of all the brilliant writing, the sensuous tone color, the exotic melodies, the music misses heartfelt emotion. “I am Basque,” he admitted, “and while the Basques feel deeply they seldom show it, and then only to a very few.” Here is his forthright statement on what he felt his *Piano Concerto* should really be about: “The music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be lighthearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or at dramatic effects.”

Ravel started work on a piano concerto for himself in preparation for a tour to the United States. Paul Wittgenstein, the great pianist who lost his right arm during the “Great War,” interrupted him with a request to write a concerto for the left hand only. “It was an interesting experiment to conceive and to realize simultaneously the two concertos,” Ravel conceded. He finished the *Left Hand Concerto* first and the two-hand concerto about a year later. But by then Ravel was too ill to perform it: “The concerto is nearly finished and I am not far from being so myself.” The *Piano Concerto in G Major* premiered with Marguerite Long performing and Ravel conducting.

Ravel claimed that this piano concerto “is a concerto in the most exact sense of the term and is written in the spirit of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. . . It includes some elements borrowed from jazz, but only in moderation.” The three movements of the concerto follow the standard templates that Mozart helped develop. The first and third movements both have contrasting themes with a central development section. There is the requisite solo cadenza for the piano in the first movement. The inspiration for the second movement – full of sentiment – came from Mozart’s *Clarinet Quintet*.

In terms of showcasing brilliant and facile piano technique, this concerto resembles those of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. But then the resemblances end. Mozart probably would not have started his concertos out with a whip-crack! The smears of the trombone and the shrieks of the tiny piccolo clarinet belong to the nightclub, not the salons of Saint-Saëns. All of the “blue-notes” and jazzy rhythms seem more a tip of the hat to George Gershwin than to Mozart. The raucous good time that everybody has is just plain fun.

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Pictures at an Exhibition

Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881)

Written: 1874

Movements: 15

Style: Romantic

Duration: 30 minutes

When the composer Modest Mussorgsky met the artist Viktor Hartmann, they soon became good friends. After Hartmann's death at the age of 39, Mussorgsky decided to compose a tribute to his friend. It is a series of vignettes representing various works by Hartmann that were displayed at his commemorative retrospective. Mussorgsky originally wrote *Pictures at an Exhibition* as a monumental showpiece for solo piano. Its current blockbuster reputation is a result of the French composer Maurice Ravel, who recast it for orchestra.

Pictures at an Exhibition begins with the *Promenade*, a short bit of music that returns several times between the various movements. Its constantly shifting beat patterns portray Mussorgsky himself "moving now to the left, now to the right, now wandering about aimlessly, now eagerly making for one of the pictures." *Gnomus* is Hartmann's design for a nutcracker in the shape of a gnome with huge jaws. In *Il vecchio castello*, a troubadour stands singing in front of an old Italian castle. Mussorgsky gave *Tuileries* a subtitle: "Children Quarreling after Play." The lumbering two-beat rhythm and extended tuba solo of *Bydlo* depict an ox-drawn cart.

The exhibition catalogue described the *Ballet of Chicks in Their Shells* as “Canary chicks, enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor. Instead of a headdress, canary heads put on like helmets down to the neck.” Mussorgsky based *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle* on two portraits that he owned. The string sections depict Goldenberg sumptuously dressed in fur. The nervous trumpet is the poorly dressed Schmuyle. *The Marketplace in Limoges* shows women in lively conversation in front of the cathedral of Limoges. Hartmann painted himself with a friend in a catacomb looking at a pile of skulls in *Catacombae: Sepulchrum Romanum*, and Mussorgsky himself explained *Cum mortuis in lingua mortua* (*With the Dead in a Dead Language*): “The creative spirit of the departed Hartmann leads me to the skulls, calls out to them, and the skulls begin to glow dimly from within.”

The Hut of Baba-Yaga on Fowl’s Legs is about the famed Russian witch Baba-Yaga, who ground up her captive’s bones and flew through the air on a huge pestle. This grotesque movement leads directly into the majestic *Great Gate of Kiev*, an entry into a competition for a new gate commemorating Czar Alexander II. Full of grandeur, this final movement also contains some motives from the opening promenade.

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