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Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Subscription Program No. 2: Radiance
November 21-22-23, 2025

Guest conductor Robert Moody leads our November program. It opens with a luminous work by American composer Christopher Theofanidis, *Rainbow Body*, based upon a chant by the 12th-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen. Cellist Alban Gerhardt, making his fifth appearance with the orchestra, plays a fine classical concerto by Haydn. Previous appearances were in 1999 (Strauss, *Don Quixote*), 2008 (Elgar, *Cello Concerto*), 2013 (Prokofiev, *Sinfonia concertante*), and 2018 (Walton, *Cello Concerto*). To close, we turn to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, in the wonderful orchestration by Ravel, a work that clearly illustrates the visual artworks upon which it is based: from the grotesque *Gnomus* through the majestic *Great Gate of Kiev*.

Rainbow Body draws its name from a concept in Tibetan Buddhism.

Christopher Theofanidis

Born: December 18, 1967, Dallas, Texas.

Rainbow Body

- **Composed:** 2000.
- **Premiere:** April 2000, by the Houston Symphony Orchestra, under Robert Spano.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 2005.
- **Duration:** 13:00.



Background

Award-winning composer Christopher Theofanidis composed this work in 2000. It has since become one of the most popular and often-played pieces of contemporary American music, featured by well over 150 orchestras.

Christopher Theofanidis was born in Dallas, and currently teaches at Yale University, and at the Aspen Festival. His works have been performed by many of the world's leading orchestras. Theofanidis's recent projects include an opera for

the Houston Grand Opera, a ballet for the American Ballet Theater, and a work for the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus based on the poetry of Rumi. He has garnered an impressive number of awards (including a Grammy), prizes, and fellowships over the past decade; most relevant to these concerts is the 2003 Masterprize for *Rainbow Body*, an award associated with the London Symphony Orchestra, and one of the most prestigious international awards for composition. Several of his works (including *Rainbow Body*) are available on CD, on the Albany and Telarc labels.

What You'll Hear

The main theme of this work is drawn from a chant by Hildegard of Bingen.

The nearly eighty chants written by the 12th-century visionary and mystic Hildegard of Bingen (1089-1179) have inspired many musicians in recent years. Her musical style, and often ecstatic Latin poetry set her chants apart within the enormous repertoire of surviving medieval music: her wide-ranging and melismatic melodies are among the most distinctive and expressive chants that survive from the Middle Ages. It was Hildegard's music that provided the raw material for *Rainbow Body*. Theofanidis writes:

In the past few years, I have been listening to the music of the medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen a great deal, and as simple and direct as this music is, I am constantly amazed by its staying power. Hildegard's melodies have very memorable contours which set them apart from other chants of the period. They are very sensual and intimate: a kind of communication with the divine. This work is based on one of her chants, *Ave Maria, O auctrix vite (Hail Mary, source of life)*

Rainbow Body begins in an understated, mysterious manner, calling attention to some of the key intervals and motives of the piece. When the primary melody enters for the first time about a minute into the work, I present it very directly in the strings, without accompaniment. In the orchestration, I try to capture a halo around this melody, creating a wet acoustic by emphasizing the lingering reverberations one might hear in an old cathedral.

Although the piece is built essentially around fragments of the melody, I also return to the tune in its entirety several times throughout the work, as a kind of plateau of stability within an otherwise turbulent environment. *Rainbow Body* has a very different sensibility from Hildegard's chant, with a structure

that is dramatic and developmental, but I hope that it conveys at least a little of my love for the beauty and grace of her work.

“The title comes from a concept in Tibetan Buddhism...that when an enlightened being dies, that person is absorbed as light and energy back into the universe rather than decaying in a physical way. For me, this had parallels with the ‘perfect’ music of Hildegard.”

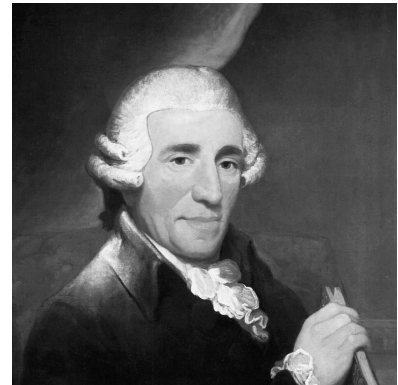
Listening to the work, you will be struck by its clear dramatic arch. Hildegard’s melody emerges in all its beautiful simplicity after a brief chaotic introduction. Theofanidis’s sonic “halo” becomes gradually more complex, until a turbulent central section, where the melody disintegrates into small motives. Strings reestablish large sections of the original melody and the original sense of calm at several points, but there is an almost inexorable heightening of tension until a climactic statement of the chant by full orchestra.

One of two fine cello concertos by Haydn, this is one of Haydn’s last essays in the form. (Only the *Trumpet Concerto* of 1796 is later.)

Franz Joseph Haydn

Born: March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Austria.

Died: May 31, 1809, Vienna, Austria.



Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in D Major

- **Composed:** 1783.
- **Premiere:** Probably 1783. The intended soloist was almost certainly Anton Kraft.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is the sixth time this work has been programmed by the MSO: previous soloists include Ennio Bolognini (1942), Jenska Slebos (1949), Leslie Parnas (1970), Warren Downs (1976), and Janos Starker (2002).
- **Duration:** 26:00.

Background

Most of Haydn’s concertos were written to feature members of the private orchestra of the Esterházy family, which he directed for decades. In this case, it was written for Anton Kraft, a Czech cellist who played in the orchestra under Haydn for several years.

Though Haydn is best known as a composer of symphonies—104 in all—he produced a vast number of works in other genres. Laboring for decades as *Kapellmeister* to the Esterházy family, Haydn produced a staggering number of operas, Masses, chamber works, and concertos that were performed at Esterháza, near Vienna. Concertos were always a great favorite, and they were usually designed to showcase a specific member of the prince’s orchestra. His C Major cello concerto, for example, was written in the 1760s for his friend Joseph Weigl, principal cellist in the Esterházy orchestra. Most of Haydn’s solo concertos date from the 1760s and 1770s, when he was building the orchestra into one of the finest ensembles in Europe, a group that included virtuoso players on every instrument.

Haydn was particularly adept at tailoring his works to suit his players, most of whom he had recruited himself. One of his biggest recruiting *coups* was the Czech cellist Anton Kraft. Kraft remained in Esterházy service from 1778 until the orchestra was dissolved in 1790. Some years later, he and his son Nikolaus—also a first-rate cellist—joined the orchestra of Prince Lobkowitz in Vienna. It was here that he became associated with Beethoven, and, in all likelihood, served as the inspiration for the virtuoso cello part in Beethoven’s *Triple Concerto* of 1804. Haydn’s D Major concerto was written for Anton Kraft in 1783—in fact, for nearly a century, it was assumed that it might be a work *by* Kraft, who was a skilled, if not-quite-first-rate composer, who had studied composition with Haydn. It wasn’t until the discovery of an autograph score in 1950 that the concerto could definitively be credited to Haydn. Though Kraft was not in the same league as Haydn as a composer, he was clearly one of the most talented cellists of the day: he seems to have had a particularly beautiful high register, which was utilized to great effect in Haydn’s D Major concerto, Beethoven’s *Triple Concerto* and in his own cello concerto (1792). There is no record of the first performance, but one biographer has suggested that this particularly large and impressive work might have been part of the sumptuous wedding celebration of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy and Princess Maria of Liechtenstein in September of 1783.

What You’ll Hear

The concerto is in three movements:

- An opening movement in sonata form, with a solo cadenza near the end.
- A lyrical *Adagio* with two contrasting episodes.
- A lively rondo with virtuoso flourishes by the soloist.

The concerto is cast in the conventional three movements. The first movement (*Allegro moderato*) is in sonata form. After the opening orchestral exposition, the cello is exposed throughout and develops two contrasting and equally relaxed themes: the first opening in the high register, and the second relying on deeper, middle-register timbre. True to form, Haydn leaves space for a solo cadenza at the end of the recapitulation. The *Adagio* is in a simple five-part form, carried throughout by the solo line. It begins with a lovely main theme, stated by the cello above sparse string accompaniment. The cello introduces a contrasting, though equally lyrical idea before returning to a decorated version of the main theme. A minor-key orchestral passage momentarily changes the mood, before a final return of the main theme and a brief cadenza round off the movement. The final movement (*Rondo: Allegro*) is filled with Haydnesque good humor, and the relative simplicity of its form—the lively opening theme returns several times in alternation with contrasting ideas—gives the cello space for its flashiest music of the concerto, with lightning-fast passages and frequent double stops.

One of the most famous musical works inspired directly by visual art, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* was originally composed as a piano suite in 1874. We will hear the colorful orchestral version arranged by Maurice Ravel in 1922.



Modest Mussorgsky

Born: March 21, 1839, Karevo, Russia.

Died: March 28, 1881, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

***Pictures at an Exhibition* (orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)**

- **Composed:** Mussorgsky's piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition* was completed in June of 1874, and was published posthumously in 1886 with a dedication to Vladimir Stassov. The orchestration by Ravel dates from 1922.
- **Premiere:** Ravel's orchestration was commissioned by Serge Koussevitsky, who conducted the premiere in Paris on October 19, 1922.
- **Duration:** 33:00.

Background

When architect Victor Hartmann died in 1873, his friends arrange a retrospective exposition of his drawings and sketches. One of the admiring attendees was Mussorgsky, who paid tribute to Hartmann in a series of musical impressions of the artwork.

When the Russian architect Victor Hartmann died at age 39 in 1873, writer Vladimir Stassov and several other of Hartmann's friends and associates arranged a memorial exhibition of some 400 drawings and paintings by the architect. One of the visitors to the gallery was Mussorgsky, who had long admired Hartmann's work. Within a few months of the exhibition, Mussorgsky had composed a suite of piano pieces based upon some of his favorites among Hartmann's drawings. The form of this programmatic suite was unusual: it portrays the composer himself walking through the gallery, standing before several pictures and forming his own musical impressions of each one.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* remained relatively obscure until 1922, when Ravel completed an orchestration of the suite for conductor Serge Koussevitsky. Ravel's scoring was not the first attempt to transform *Pictures* into an orchestral piece, nor was it the last: there have been at least a dozen arrangements of *Pictures*, beginning with an orchestration by Mikhail Tushmalov in 1891, and orchestral versions by Sir Henry Wood, Ravel, Leonidas Leonardi, Leopold Stokowski, Lucien Caillet, Walter Goehr, and Sergei Gorchakov. There have also been scorings for other groupings of instruments, including Elgar Howarth's brass ensemble version, a guitar version by Yamashita, Tomita's electronic scoring, and even a fancifully staged version by the prog-rock band Emerson, Lake, and Palmer in the 1970s. Ravel's masterful orchestration is better known than any other...including Mussorgsky's own piano suite!

What You'll Hear

Ravel has effectively fleshed out, Mussorgsky's original music in imaginative orchestrations, culminating with the stirring, brassy, *Great Gate of Kiev*.

Here is a movement-by-movement "walking tour" of *Pictures*:

Promenade - This most familiar of Mussorgsky melodies, appearing between several of the movements, is used to bind the work together. In Stassov's descriptive notes for the first published edition of *Pictures*, he writes: "Mussorgsky has represented himself roving right and left, sometimes hesitantly and sometimes briskly, in order to get close to pictures that have caught his attention." The uneven 5/4-6/4 meter gives a characteristically Russian feel to this passage.

Gnomus - The first of Hartmann's drawings to be interpreted by Mussorgsky is of a nutcracker carved in the shape of an ugly, grinning gnome. Stassov's notes

suggest that this contorted figure “...accompanies his droll movements with savage shrieks.” Mussorgsky’s music is suitably gruesome, with awkward, limping lines.

Promenade

Il vecchio castello (The Old Castle) - This was Hartmann’s watercolor study of a medieval castle, painted when he was a student in Italy. A troubadour standing by the gate gives a sense of the castle’s size. This movement gives the impression of the troubadour’s lute quietly strumming in support of a melancholy melody played by the solo saxophone.

Promenade

Tuileries - This sketch shows children playing in the famous public gardens of the Tuileries in Paris. There is an argument and a chase after some high-spirited play, all portrayed in Mussorgsky’s light-footed music and Ravel’s transparent orchestration.

Bydlo - A sketch made by Hartmann in the Polish town of Sandomierz shows a wagon with enormous wheels being pulled by oxen (*Bydlo* is a Polish word for “cattle.”). In Ravel’s orchestration, this evocative melody has been given to the tuba.

Promenade

Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells - This was Hartmann’s costume design for one of the scenes in *Trilbi*, a ballet presented in St. Petersburg in 1871. In this scene, children dance as baby canaries trying to break out of their shells.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle - This movement is based upon two of Hartmann’s drawings of Sandomierz: one showing a rich and well-dressed Jew wearing a fur hat, and the other showing a poor Jew in threadbare clothes. In Mussorgsky’s inventive setting, the two characters have been joined in a conversation. Ravel scored the pompous tones of Goldenberg for unison strings and winds, while the whining Schmuyle is portrayed by muted trumpet. At the end, Goldenberg’s music become even more imperious, ending with an abrupt dismissal.

The Market Place at Limoges - There are several surviving Hartmann drawings made during a visit to the French town of Limoges, but the specific picture that

inspired this movement has apparently been lost. According to a marginal note in Mussorgsky's manuscript, this movement shows the "good gossips of Limoges" exchanging the most important news of the day: Monsieur de Puissanceout's lost cow, Mme. de Remboursac's new false teeth, and Monsieur Panta-Pantaleon's excessively large nose.

Catacombs - This sketch shows the artist peering into the catacombs of Paris by the light of a lantern, which reveals several skulls. Ravel's orchestration brings out dark sonorities from the brasses and woodwinds.

Cum mortuis in lingua mortua (With the dead, in the language of the dead) - This rather spooky version of the *Promenade* theme is based not upon a Hartmann picture, but rather on Mussorgsky's reaction to *Catacombs*. In the margin of his manuscript, the composer wrote: "The creative spirit of the dead Hartmann leads me to the skulls and calls to them; they begin to glow with a soft light."

The hut on fowl's legs (Baba Yaga) - Baba Yaga was a witch who terrified generations of Russian children at bedtime. Her hut, hidden deep in the forest, was perched on chicken legs so that it could turn to face anyone who chanced to find it. No broomstick for this lady: she rode cackling through the woods in a huge wooden mortar propelled by an equally formidable pestle (no doubt in search of naughty children to grind up and eat). Ravel's orchestration is at its most colorful in this section. This movement leads directly into the finale.

The Great Gate of Kiev - After Czar Alexander II narrowly escaped assassination in Kiev in 1866, the city council of Kiev asked Hartmann to produce a design for a monument to commemorate God's intervention on behalf of the Czar. Hartmann's design (which was never built) was a fanciful and immense arch surmounted by the Russian imperial eagle, and other symbols of the Czar's authority. This picture was a great favorite of Mussorgsky's, and he commented on it with a massive and powerful hymn of thanksgiving.

LEARN MORE: [Click here](#) for an orchestral performance of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, coordinated with images of Hartmann's drawings and paintings.

Program page info, with spelling, etc. regularized with the program notes.

Christopher Theofanidis (b.1967)

Rainbow Body

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in D Major

Allegro moderato

Adagio

Rondo: Allegro

Mr. Gerhardt

INTERMISSION (Please confirm!)

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)

Promenade

Gnomus

Promenade

Il vecchio castello

Promenade

Tuileries

Bydlo

Promenade

Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle

The Market Place at Limoges

Catacombs

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The Great Gate of Kiev