

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

# Pictures at an Exhibition

## WITH AUGUSTIN HADELICH ON PROKOFIEV

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**Lera Auerbach (1973- )**

**Icarus**

We all know the story of Icarus, derived from one of 147 maxims the ancient Greeks carved into the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in the 6th century B.C. A classic of mythology, it describes how the craftsman Daedalus built wings made out of feathers and wax. This would allow Daedalus and his son, Icarus, to escape their imprisonment from the Labyrinth of King Minos on the island of Crete – not by sneaking out on foot, but by flying like birds.

The father warned Icarus against hubris and not to soar too high, as the hot sun would melt his wings. Icarus ignored his dad’s advice and plunged into the sea, where he drowned. The moral has resonated through the ages: The virtue of moderation can mean the difference between success and failure. Or, in the realm of love, the higher you fly, the harder you fall.

This ancient aphorism made an impression on Lera Auerbach, who read it as a child growing up in Chelyabinsk, a town in the Ural Mountains near the Siberian border. She was attracted to the timeless insight and candor of the maxims – such as *Know Thyself* – and applied them to her own life under strict Soviet rule.

“In some ways the two worlds blurred,” she writes on her website, referring to the mix of fantasy and reality. “The world outside made much more sense through the perspective of the ancient Greek myths.”

As a composer and pianist, Auerbach saw musical potential in the story, and in 2006 reconstructed a 10-minute tone poem based on material from her *First Symphony*. Commissioned by the Düsseldorf Symphony Orchestra, *Icarus* has since made its rounds with orchestras across the globe, for which she provides a narrative:

“What makes this myth so touching is Icarus’ impatience of the heart, his wish to reach the unreachable, the intensity of the ecstatic brevity of his flight and inevitability of his fall,” she notes. “If Icarus were to fly safely – there would be no myth.”

She drew inspiration not just from a flight on false wings, but from the tragedy of false hope.

“Daedalus’ greatest invention, the wings which allowed a man to fly, was his greatest failure as they caused the death of his son,” she adds. “Daedalus was brilliant, his wings were perfect, but he was also a blind father who did not truly understand his child.”

The music is intense, dramatic and teeming with instrumental colors. It opens in a disheveled march, with pizzicato strings and roiling horns. Soon, the calm voices of harp, solo violin and flute appear before a nervous rhythm re-emerges, takes charge and suddenly halts. Like a Hitchcock film score, the music keeps us on edge, and soon the other-worldly sound of chimes and percussion suggest the father and son ascending in the sky.

In the second section, the orchestra creates a whirling, spiraling effect that ends with a dialog between solo violin, flute and oboe. A furious climax ensues, then an eerie off-key moment as the music slowly fades away against high violin harmonics. In the final seconds, the soft but piercing sound of amplified crystal glasses fill the hall and then falls silent.

None of this is attached too firmly to the wings of Icarus. In fact, Auerbach says, her score can mean whatever you want it to be: “All my music is abstract, but by giving evocative titles I invite the listener to feel free to imagine. Just allow the music to take you wherever it takes you.”

### **Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)** **Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 63**

Prokofiev grew up in the midst of turmoil in his native Russia. Like his contemporary, Dmitri Shostakovich, his musical thinking evolved alongside artistic censorship under Stalin’s regime, which both stirred and stifled his creativity. Ironically, Prokofiev died the same day as Stalin – March 5, 1953 – so he would never test the artistic climate outside socialist realism.

Remarkably, even under such encumbrance, Prokofiev was a 20th-century original with a unique sonic signature. Proficient at the piano as a child, he entered the St. Petersburg Music Conservatory at age 13, armed with a thick folder of compositions and an ego to match. He personified the enfant terrible.

He was “a stubborn, intelligent, obstinate, and cocky young man of undeniable talent,” notes Harold Schonberg in his 1970 classic *Lives of the Great Composers*. “He disturbed everybody. Even as a student he was alienating his superiors with his sharp judgments on their music or teaching methods.” Shostakovich said Prokofiev “had the soul of a goose.”

Goose or not, his ability was precocious and sophisticated, and developed along five lines – tradition, innovation, precision, lyricism and the comic. By the time he wrote his *Second Violin Concerto*, in 1935, he was merging late romanticism with the avant-garde, engaging listeners with both dissonance and hair-raising virtuosity. Although not as popular as the Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Brahms concertos, the *G Minor Concerto* is a wonder all its own, says Augustin Hadelich, guest soloist in this weekend’s TFO Masterworks concerts.

“This is one of the most exciting and colorful concertos in the repertoire,” he says on a YouTube video about the work. “I always think of Prokofiev as being a storyteller and many of his pieces are very descriptive, so you start imagining scenes of fairy tales unfolding.”

The concerto opens with a somber five-note theme in G minor played in the low register of the violin, a motif that dominates the entire movement. The string section soon provides a blanket of support but in a contrasting key, then expands on a lyrical second tune, echoed by the horn and woodwinds. Clever dissonances tear holes in an otherwise tonal canvas, and the movement ends abruptly with two plucked notes by the soloist.

“This one in particular, starts in a very mysterious way,” Hadelich says of the first movement. “It’s not a coincidence that John Williams, when composing music for (the movie) *Harry Potter*, chose exactly the same pitches as the beginning of the Prokofiev.”

The andante is the heart of the work, one of Prokofiev's most romantic creations, which shines a warm light against the passing darkness. The long, sinuous violin lines radiate over an accompaniment of plucked strings and percolating woodwinds, and each instrument in the orchestra seems to wake as the music moves forward.

"The second movement has been a favorite of mine," says TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "It's a very soulful piece."

The finale is an energetic dance, spiced by Spanish castanets that Prokofiev thought would appease the audience at the work's premiere in Madrid. The music is full of sarcasm and wit, and the soloist wraps up in a flurry of notes that Hadelich calls "one of the most exciting endings of any concerto."

### **Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)**

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

The canon of classical music is filled with unfinished and repackaged masterworks. Some are performed as they were at the composer's death, such as Bach's *Art of Fugue*, which ends like an incomplete sentence. Others, including Mozart's *Requiem* and Mahler's *Tenth Symphony*, were fleshed out based on surviving sketches and educated guesses.

Still others are dressed in a new wardrobe altogether, most notably Mussorgsky's grandly imaginative *Pictures at an Exhibition*, written in 1874 as an extended piano suite in 10 movements. A half century later, Maurice Ravel adapted it for full orchestra, seeing its dramatic potential as a concert showpiece, which it has remained to this day.

The music found a new, younger audience in 1971, when the British art rock band, *Emerson, Lake & Palmer*, stretched an electrified version over an entire album. But listeners owe themselves the treat of hearing the original piano score in all its unvarnished truth.

Based on a series of paintings and sketches by Mussorgsky's friend Viktor Hartmann, the suite takes listeners on a tour through a museum, with a promenade – in changing keys – serving as the "walking pace" between works of art. The mood varies from somber to grotesque to triumphant as the visitor strolls through the exhibition, stopping to reflect on each sketch or watercolor.

The opening promenade leads directly into the ominous *Gnome*, and continues with the gothic *Old Castle* and the sound of an alto saxophone. Children play in *Tuileries*, a tuba portrays an oxcart in *Bydlo*, and *Ballet of the Chicks* unfolds as a short orchestral scherzo.

The combined portraits of the rich *Samuel Goldenberg* and the poor *Schmuÿle* are next, and a lively *Marketplace at Limoges* runs uninterrupted into the eerie, chord-heavy *Catacombs*. An interlude, *With the Dead in a Dead Language*, uncovers the promenade theme in chilling suspense before giving way to the percussive and brassy *Hut on Fowl's Legs*. Then, the grand finale: the *Great Gate of Kiev*, a rousing flourish for full orchestra and tubular bells designed to bring down the house.

**Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based writer and former music critic for *The Tampa Tribune*.**