

Mussorgsky – Sunless Songs and Dances of Death (Rozhdestvensky) [1989]

Written by bluesever

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Songs And Dances Of Death (Песни И Пляски Смерти) 1. *Lullaby (Колыбельная)* 4:35 2. *Serenade (Серенада)* 3:55 3. *Трепак (Трепак)* 3:27 4. *Field-Marshal (Полководец)* 5:03
Sunless (Без Солнца) (13:57)
5. *Within Four Walls (В Четырех Стенах)* 6. *In The Throng (Меня Ты В Толпе Не Узнала)*
7. *The Idle Noisy Day Is Over (Окончен Праздный Шумный День)* 8. *Boredom (Скучай)* 9. *Elegy (Элегия)* 10. *Over The River (Над Рекой)*
Evgeni Nesterenko - bas The USSR Ministry Of Culture Orchestra Gennadi Rozhdestvensky
– conductor

The most numerous works that Mussorgsky did write down are his songs for voice and piano. In this genre Mussorgsky excelled and he brought a new fusion of the Russian language and music. Mussorgsky was a cultured, well-read man and as such could be very selective in the texts he set to music. The poet that he used for his two song cycles Songs And Dances Of Death and Sunless was his distant relative Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov. The two impoverished men shared a small apartment together for about two years until Kutuzov married.

Sunless (also translated as Without Sun) was composed in 1874 at a low time in Mussorgsky's life. His opera Boris Gudonov had finally had its premiere early in 1874 after two other versions had been rejected. The opera was a success with the public but the critics were very hostile to the work. This, along with other setbacks and frustrations as well as his hatred of the boredom of his bureaucratic job, brought on depression that was made worse by excessive drinking. There are six songs in the cycle that reflect Mussorgsky's mood during this time.

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Mussorgsky wrote the song cycle Songs And Dances Of Death in 1875-1877 to poems by Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov who was distantly related to Mussorgsky. That Mussorgsky was quite taken with the poet and his works is expressed in a letter:

After Pushkin and Lermontov I have not encountered what I have in Kutuzov... Sincerity leaps from almost everything in Kutuzov, almost everywhere you scent the freshness of a fine warm morning, together with a matchless inborn technique... And how he is drawn to the people, history!

Obviously Mussorgsky was commenting on the power of Kutuzov's poetry to evoke images and feelings, in this particular case the images and feelings concerning death.

The four songs all deal with the figure of death and how death claims its victims in ways all too familiar to people in 19th century Russia. There are versions of the songs for voice and orchestra by Glazunov/ Rimsky-Korsakov and others, the latest being by Dmitri Shostakovich. But the songs were originally written for piano and voice, with the piano doing much more than simply accompanying the singer. Singer and piano combine in some of the most powerful songs ever written. As I do not understand Russian, I can only approximate the full effect of these songs in the original language. But I am enough of a musician to understand some of the musical power and drama Mussorgsky put into these songs. Music itself is a language, and Mussorgsky expresses much in these songs written for the two instruments he understood very well; the piano and human voice. I want to thank Sergy Rybin for extending his kind permission to include his translation of the Russian texts. --- muswrite.blogspot.com

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