

Mussorgsky's Night on Bald Mountain

Written by bluesever

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Many people have grown accustomed to hearing Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* during Halloween - it's definitely a dark piece of music. Rightfully so, the story behind *Night on Bald Mountain*

is not one of light nature. Inspired by a short story by the Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, in which witches would gather on Bald Mountain and hold sabbath, Mussorgsky was able to create a dreadfully haunting piece of music.

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While one can cite predecessors like Berlioz and Liszt for such an idea, nobody had come up with such crazy sounds before – shattering dissonance and wild cries as savage as anything in Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, more than four decades in the future.



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Modest Mussorgsky, 1865

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881) tried many times to write the music that we know today as Night on Bald Mountain, and he never got it into satisfactory form.

A sheet of paper apparently found among Mussorgsky's manuscripts contains the following statement: "*Program of the opera St. John's Night, in three acts, after the tale by Gogol, written by P. Boborykin, in the presence and with the help of Modest Mussorgsky, Yevgeny Mussorgsky, and Vasily. Witness to the proceedings: Mily Balakirev.*"



Sabbath (?)

This curious fragment, dated 25 December 1858, has been interpreted as an indication of Mussorgsky's intention of writing an opera on the subject of Gogol's short story **St. John's Eve** (Russian:

Вечер накануне Ивана Купала, Vecher nakanune Ivana Kupala

). Gogol's tale contains the elements of witchcraft common to other stories in the Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka collection, but does not, as is often claimed, feature a witches' sabbath. Although Mussorgsky may have composed thematic sketches for this project, his plans were not mentioned.

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Modest Mussorgsky by Repin