

Pictures: Music for 8 Horns & Percussion

The deliberately lowercase octet german hornsound 8.1 consists of a quartet with added horn and percussion. The core members were classmates at Stuttgart University. I wonder how many top-ranked ensembles formed when their members were undergraduates who slogged their way through music theory classes together.

The heart of this album is Moussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, which most of us know best in Ravel's colorful orchestration, but which was first a piano piece. Lest we lament this monochromatic setting for horns, the notes make the point that mutes and other effects actually make it more colorful than the original.

Interspersed between Pictures movements—this exhibition evokes more than just artworks by Victor Hartmann—are other Russian favorites: Night on Bald Mountain, two movements from Shostakovich's Jazz Suite 2, three from Prokofieff's Romeo and Juliet, and five from Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker.

A large horn ensemble needs strong high and low players, plus beef yet clarity in the middle. This terrific group has all that—it's spectacular. The most impassioned playing is heard in 'Bydlo' and 'Juliet's Death', the most expansive sound in 'Great Gate of Kiev'. Percussion is heard only in the Prokofieff and 'Great Gate' (chimes).

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**GEN 15340
American Record Guide
7/8/2015**