The music on this album describes emotions in strong colors, in a passionate and unabashedly Russian way. The centerpiece, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, needs no introduction. Ravel made it famous with his incredible orchestration, but I wanted to go back to the original version, as if trying to clear my ears of the beautiful colors of the Ravel, and dig out the typically Russian colors that I think are embedded within the piano score. I was fueled by years of studying Russian piano, orchestral and chamber music and by my extensive travels all across Russia. In the process I found the original “Pictures” to be just as colorful as Ravel's re-interpretation and, at the same time, quite different. All of a sudden the piece, which I had heard through all my years of studying piano played by countless pianists, and which always struck me as very powerful but uneven, made perfect musical and pianistic sense to me. It struck me as incredibly descriptive, much more than the actual drawings and paintings that inspired it. I toured with it for a while and decided to record my own version. I have mostly stuck to the original writing, although I decided to thicken it up in a few places, to give it a richer, wider and perhaps more dramatic palette.

Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 3 is truly a masterwork: its structure is very classical, its rhythmical elements are almost obsessive, and its themes are incredibly gorgeous. It was written quite early in Scriabin's life, but we can already notice his sound world being created in a unique and unmistakable way. It is a rollercoaster ride, emotionally, but it is masterfully held together by common elements, small and large, and by a great structure.

As an encore, I have re-worked the Chernov transcription of Mussorgsky's *Night on the Bare Mountain*. The work was written in the descriptive style of *Pictures at an Exhibition* although the scene described is quite unlike any of the “Pictures”. Perhaps only ‘Baba Yaga’ gets somewhat close to it, but *Night on the Bare Mountain* really beats them all in terms of wild and truly terrifying imagery. It was a joy to work on, and to try to unleash all the sonic potential of my beloved instrument!

Alessio Bax
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But Scriabin’s eccentricities aside, his extraordinary oeuvre of piano music has endured, and, no matter the listener’s taste for the composer’s “doctrine,” these works warrant hearing on their own terms. “The cycle of ten [piano] sonatas,” writes pianist Jonathan Powell, “is arguably of the most consistent high quality since that of Beethoven.” For Russia’s greatest pianists throughout the twentieth century, Scriabin’s piano music has been essential repertoire. (Count Scriabin himself among these, who lent his exceptional virtuosity exclusively to his own music in public performance.)

This recording brings together three important early works from Scriabin’s sizable output of music for piano. The Etude in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 2, No. 1, composed in 1886 when Scriabin was fourteen years old, is his first significant composition in any genre. The Etude bears the hallmarks of late Romanticism – a rich harmonic palette, an emotionally intense melodic sensibility – that characterize Scriabin’s music during this time. The influence of Chopin and Liszt is audible here, which would combine with that of such Russian forebears (Balakirev, Glazunov) to provide the foundation of Scriabin’s early compositional language.

Scriabin’s self-importance translated into hyper-competitiveness. In 1891, while a student at the Moscow Conservatory, Scriabin followed this impulse to maniacal practice of Liszt’s Don Juan Fantasy; after straining his right hand from excessive practice and receiving doctor’s orders to rest, he continued practicing with just the left, developing a strong and sophisticated left-hand technique. Three years later came the Prelude for left hand alone, Op. 9, No. 1, one of several works demonstrating this proficiency. (Count Scriabin himself among these, who lent his exceptional virtuosity exclusively to his own music in public performance.)

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One of the signature works of Scriabin’s early years, and the masterpiece of his early piano writing, is the Sonata No. 3 in F-Sharp Minor, Op. 23, composed in 1897. This is the work that most clearly asserts Scriabin’s artistic independence from the influence of Chopin and Liszt; it is also this rapturous Sonata that captivated one Tatyana de Schlözer upon her first hearing it in 1901, two years before she became Scriabin’s mistress. The Sonata is cast in four movements (interestingly, in light of the formal experimentation that marks Scriabin’s work even during this early period, the Third Sonata is unique among his piano works in following a conventional four-movement structure). The opening movement, marked Drammatico, has, indeed, a compelling narrative quality. It betrays a Romantic (one might say Chopinesque) concept of beauty in its fluid lyricism and evocative harmonies. Scriabin’s liberal use of the piano’s bass register imbues the music with a folkloric quality. The Allegretto second movement seems a logical extension of the first. The music passes from F-Sharp Minor to the warmer key of E-Flat Major, yet remains fraught, owing largely to its rhythmic and harmonic restlessness – perhaps even more so than the Drammatico, which remains consistently and assuredly in a Minor key.

The long-breathed melodies of the heartfelt Andante, in B Major, teasingly avoid the tonic. The beguiling tranquility of this movement belies its finger-twisting passagework. The Sonata’s finale proceeds seamlessly from the third movement, as the second follows from the first. This music is infused with a new character and vitality, as if revealing a
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complementary psychic state to the Andante – indeed, the third movement’s melody reappears amidst the tumultuous Presto con fuoco – or perhaps depicting the mercurial passage from one temperament to the next.

Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky
Born Karevo, Pskov district, 21 March [O.S. 9 March] 1839; died St. Petersburg, 28 March [O.S. 16 March] 1881

Predating the first of Scriabin’s ten piano sonatas by nearly two decades, Modest Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition represents another pillar of the Russian solo piano literature. While Mussorgsky scored his greatest triumphs in the realms of song and opera, he was a skilled pianist in addition to being, as scholar Robert Oldani has credited him, “the most strikingly individual Russian composer of the later nineteenth century,” and Pictures signals his penchant for the instrument.

He was, with Mily Balakirev (with whom he studied informally for a time), Cesar Cui, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Alexander Borodin, one of the five composers known collectively as the Mighty Handful, a group that sought to create a distinctly Russian musical aesthetic. An equivalent aspiration was held by the painter and architect Viktor Hartmann, whom Mussorgsky met in 1870 through the influential critic Vladimir Stasov, and forged a bond between the two artists.

Hartmann’s unexpected death in 1873 from an aneurysm deeply unsettled Mussorgsky. (Hartmann was only 39.) “What a terrible blow!” he wrote to Stasov. “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, live on and creatures like Hartmann must die?” The following year, Stasov organized a memorial exhibition of Hartmann’s drawings and watercolors. The exhibition inspired Mussorgsky to create the present ten-movement piano suite, depicting the composer “roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and at times sadly, thinking of his departed friend.” Mussorgsky composed Pictures at an Exhibition quickly, completing the score between 2 and 22 June 1874. While at work on the suite, under the working title Hartmann, Mussorgsky wrote to Stasov:

“My dear généralissime, Hartmann is seething as Boris [Mussorgsky’s opera Boris Godunov] seethed – sounds and ideas hang in the air, I am gulping and overeating, and can barely manage to scribble them on paper. I am writing the fourth number – the transitions are good (on the ‘promenade’). I want to work more quickly and reliably. My physiognomy can be seen in the interludes. So far I think it’s well turned…”

The suite comprises ten movements inspired by Hartmann’s pictures, connected by a series of “promenades.” The sonorous melodic figure that begins the work, and recurs in the transitional promenades, alternates between 5/4 and 6/4 time and resembles a Russian folk tune.

The first of Hartmann’s pictures encountered in Mussorgsky’s suite is “a sketch depicting a little gnome,” Stasov writes, “clumsily running with crooked legs.” The second Picture, “Il Vecchio Castello,” presents another folk-like melody – this one melancholy and understated whereas the suite’s initial theme was stately – representing a troubadour singing in front of a medieval Italian castle. The fleet third movement “Tuileries” (named for a Parisian garden), depicts, per the movement’s subtitle, a “dispute between children at play” (“Dispute d’enfants après jeux”). The plodding “Bydlo” (oxcart) follows. The “Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks in their Shells,” based on Hartmann’s designs for the choreographer Marius Petipa’s Trilby, is delectably nimble.
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The garrulous seventh Picture is set in a marketplace in the French town of Limoges. Mussorgsky originally provided the following program for the suite’s seventh movement, withdrawn before publication: “The big news: Monsieur de Puissangeout has just recovered his cow Fugitive. But the good ladies of Limoges don’t care, because Madame de Remboursac has acquired handsome new porcelain dentures, while Monseur de Panta-Pantaléon is still troubled by his big red nose.”

The eighth movement comprises two distinct parts: “Catacombae,” a stoic progression of darkly voiced chords (Stasov records that “Hartmann represented himself examining the Paris catacombs by the light of a lantern”); and “Cum mortuis in lingua mortua” – “NB. Latin text: With the dead in a dead language,” Mussorgsky noted in the margin of the manuscript. “Well may it be in Latin! The creative spirit of the dead Hartmann leads me towards the skulls, invokes them; the skulls begin to glow softly from within.” Beneath quietly luminescent tremolando in the right hand, the left invokes the “Promenade” melody – inserting the viewer (Mussorgsky) into Hartmann’s scene, audibly haunted by his surroundings.

Stasov writes of the ninth movement, “The Hut on Fowls’ Legs”: “Hartmann’s drawing depicted a clock in the form of Baba-Yaga’s hut on hen’s legs, to which Mussorgsky added the ride of the witch in her mortar.” Mussorgsky’s turbulent music, marked Allegro con brio, forzato, conjures a wild ride indeed. The suite concludes in majestic fashion with “The Great Gate of Kiev.”

Mussorgsky’s enchantingly vivid music has inspired at least a dozen orchestrations, most famously by Maurice Ravel in 1922. Thanks in large part to these, while Pictures at an Exhibition was never performed in public during its creator’s lifetime, it has since endured as one of his most cherished works.

As a postscript, this disc offers Konstantin Chernov’s piano transcription, further adapted by Alessio Bax, of Night on the Bare Mountain, Mussorgsky’s earliest significant orchestral work and his only instrumental work at the time that he composed Pictures at an Exhibition. Composed between 1866 and 1867, Bare Mountain marks the beginning of Mussorgsky’s artistic maturity. Upon its completion, the composer boasted of his newest creation that it was “Russian and original, … hot and chaotic.”

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Bax’s celebrated discography for Signum Classics includes Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” and “Moonlight” Sonatas (a Gramophone “Editor’s Choice”); Rachmaninov: Preludes and Melodies (American Record Guide “Critics’ Choice 2011”); and Bach Transcribed; and for Warner Classics, Baroque Reflections (Gramophone “Editor’s Choice”).

He performed Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata for maestro Daniel Barenboim in the PBS-TV documentary Barenboim on Beethoven: Masterclass, available as a DVD box set on the EMI label. His performances have been broadcast live on the BBC (UK); CBC (Canada); RAI (Italy); RTVE (Spain); NHK (Japan); WDR, NDR, and Bayerischer Rundfunk (Germany); American Public Media’s “Performance Today”; WQXR (New York); WGBH (Boston); WETA (Washington, DC); and Sirius-XM satellite radio, among many others.

Hailed by International Piano as “a pianist of refreshing depth,” Bax’s extensive concerto repertoire has led to performances with such esteemed conductors as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Marin Alsop, Sergiu Comissiona, Hannu Lintu, Andrew Litton, Jonathan Nott, Vasily Petrenko, Sir Simon Rattle, Alexander Shelley, Yuri Temirkanov, and Jaap van Zweden. Besides giving concerts at London’s Wigmore Hall, L.A.’s Disney Hall, Washington’s Kennedy Center, and New York’s Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, he has appeared at international festivals including London’s International Piano Series; the Verbier Festival in Switzerland; the Risør Festival in Norway; England’s Aldeburgh and Bath festivals; and the Ruhr Klavier-Festival and Beethovenfest Bonn in Germany. He has also appeared many times at such U.S. festivals as Bravo! Vail, Bard Music Festival, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Great Lakes Festival, and Music@Menlo, and has given recitals in major music halls around the world, including in Rome, Milan, Madrid, Mexico City, Paris, London, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, New York, and Washington, DC.

An accomplished chamber musician, Bax has collaborated with Emanuel Ax, Sol Gabetta, Steven Isserlis, Nicholas Phan, Paul Watkins, and Jörg Widmann, among others, besides touring with Joshua Bell in Europe, Asia, and North and South America; Berlin Philharmonic Concertmaster Daishin Kashimoto in Asia; and regularly with Lucille Chung. In 2013, he received the Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award and Lincoln Center’s Martin E. Segal Award, which recognizes young artists of exceptional accomplishment.

Bax graduated with top honors at the record age of 14 from the conservatory of his hometown in Bari, Italy, where his teacher was Angela Montemurro. He studied in France with François-Joël Thiollier and attended the Chigiana Academy in Siena under Joaquín Achúcarro. In 1994 he moved to Dallas to continue his studies with Achúcarro at SMU’s Meadows School of the Arts, where, with Lucille Chung, he is now the Johnson-Prothro Artist-in-Residence. He also serves with Chung as co-artistic director of Dallas’s Joaquín Achúcarro Foundation, created to cultivate the legacy of the Basque pianist and to support young pianists’ careers.

Alessio Bax’s antecedents are Dutch, German, Belgian, and British, and include English composer Sir Arnold Bax. A Steinway artist, and an avid blogger (Have Piano, Will Travel), tweeter (@alessiobaxpiano), and self-professed food, photography and AAdvantage Miles addict, he lives in New York City with his wife, pianist Lucille Chung, and their young daughter.
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 Recording Assistant – Chris Kalcov  
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