

Schools

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Teen artists try to capture composer's mood

Works to grace concert Sunday

By **KEN GOZE**

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It's one thing for an artist to paint or sketch a model, but Glenbrook North art teacher Lee Block recently found a meatier challenge for her advanced drawing class: She had them try to recapture the soul of czarist Russia, as filtered through folk art and the music of a composer who died nearly 120 years before they were born.

They took up that challenge, creating a series of paintings to go with Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," which will be performed at 4 p.m. Sunday by the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra in the Sheely Center for the Performing Arts at the high school, 2300 Shermer Road.

Block's class worked in collaboration with conductor Lawrence Rapchak to put their own spin on a fusion of music and the visual art. Rapchak said the orchestra looks for ways to involve students with music, and not just the music students who tend to flock to performances and workshops.

"I have a real special interest and passion for involving students in other disciplines — in history, in literature, in research of one sort or another, and art — that are not musical. And in this way, you're bringing a lot of kids" to the music, Rapchak said.

Mussorgsky composed the suite of piano pieces in 1874 to commemorate his friend, designer and artist Viktor Hartmann, who had died the year before at age 39. The music was



Students at Glenbrook North High School offer their own interpretation of artwork tied to the music of Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky. Each painting is a visual representation of a movement in Mussorgsky's music honoring the life of an artist he knew. In the back row, seniors Dani Coirier (hat), and Marni Nierman depict a French market scene, and junior Hannah Weinstein shows her take on the gates of Kiev. In the front row, Patricia Halliburton and Jamie Fischer display images of an oxcart and a French garden. The paintings will be shown during the Northbrook Symphony's performance of Mussorgsky's work Sunday.

JOEL LERNER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

inspired by Mussorgsky's strolls through a gallery full of his friend's work, and each movement paints a musical image of a particular work. Only five of the originals survive, so students had to do their own interpretations from those few works and from the wider background of what was happening in the Russia of the 1870s.

Rapchak said it was an era when art had a populist flavor: Painters, and composers were focusing on the common people and regional folk tales. Rapchak told the students everything he could about

the history of the time and the music, and then returned about midway through the month-long effort to offer suggestion on the works.

"I said, let all of this stuff settle in your mind and if you want to, just ignore it all, do — and start re-interpreting. You have the background and framework, so to speak. Now, take it and run with it," Rapchak recalled telling the class. "All I asked is that it not look current. I didn't want interpretations of these pictures in the 21st century."

The class of 19 students created 28 works,

which will be projected on a screen as the orchestra plays Sunday. The originals will be on display in the auditorium lobby. For the longer movements, students created two or three interpretations of the same work, such as "Gnome" or "Hut of Baba Yaga," Block said.

Patricia Halliburton said the sound of "The Oxcart" movement led her to choose heavy brushstrokes.

"The feel of the song is very heavy. It sounds like a man singing a folk song. I decided to paint it in a way that was very heavy and dark so it matched

the music," she said.

She also painted a cat-actomb scene, with a skull and dark underground niches as well as a ray of light at the entrance, something which she said came out of the music's brighter moments.

Students said the collaboration was a give-and-take process.

Jamie Fischer drew on both sources for her painting of Garden of the Tuilleries, a scene of children playing amid flowers in a field.

"I pictured children running among the roses. Originally I wasn't going to add the children in, be-

cause I wasn't confident I could do it, but he wanted them in," Fischer said of Rapchak.

Rapchak said he is pleased with the students' work, and the fact that they connected with a topic that people might assume only a conductor or art historian could love.

"I'm very inspired to think that young people can just catch the spirit of this sort of thing and create very cool things with it," he said.

For ticket information or more information about the orchestra, visit www.northbrooksymphony.org.