"Behind the Words of Pictures of an Exhibition" by Mussorgsky.

The fusion of Modest Mussorgsky's Exhibition of Paintings with Russian and French poetry.

Mussorgsky based most of his work on human speech.

Fascinated by man's ability to communicate, and above all fond of language and literature, Mussorgsky was more interested in the conversation of linguists and literati (and painters, for that matter) than that of musicians, who seemed to him to endlessly repeat the same meaningless musical lines.

Mussorgsky has been called a "naturalist" because of the way he based his music on natural human speech: he copied the inflections of the spoken voice into his melodic lines. This is how it has long been done in opera, in the recitatives.
But more delicate is to capture the thought behind the word; the thought of "making music"

In line with the latter notion, appropriating this masterpiece for the purpose of "poetizing" or "parolizing" the music poses some notable problems.

First, although there are numerous orchestral or instrumental versions of these Paintings, a version that invites a mezzo soprano voice, Russian poetry in the original and French languages (translated here into Russian), all adapted to the admirable contours of this music and its melodies in a chamber music setting.

Moreover, I wanted to create a sound close in sonority to the repertoire of the great Romantics, with all the modernity of Mussorgsky's writing and my own conception of musical writing and sound.

The texts chosen are from Russian poetry from the 19th century to the present; Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Nekrassov, Nikolai Gumilev, Anna Akhmatova, and from French poetry; Aloysius Bertrant and Colette.
For The Hut on Chicken's Legs, I chose, as Mussorgsky himself suggested, the Russian folk tale Baba Yaga in a version, shortened here, which will be spoken in the language of the country where the work will be performed and sung in Russian.

The text A childhood included in the Ballet of chicks in their shells is a short "children's scene" I wrote for the occasion.
It is a conscious and humble reflection of Colette's writing and refers directly to the world of the child and the author's aphorisms.

The choice of texts was motivated by the desire to find more or less close correlations with each painting, for example:

Gnomus - La chambre gothique; a prose poem from Gaspard de la nuit by Aloysius Bertrant in which the terrible gnome Scarbo appears; Tuilerie - La maison de Claudine by Colette in which, in both cases, children's games appear;
or the choice of Alexander Pushkin's poem Exigi monumentum for The Great Gate of Kiev, in which the Russian poet takes stock of his life and his work and declares that the people will love him because on his lyre "he will have sung of good feelings, because in a cruel century he will have celebrated freedom, because he will have asked sympathy, compassion for fallen people."

Still in this pursuit of correlations, the presence of Maurice Ravel in this project seems a watermark.

We know of his collaboration with Colette (L'enfant et les sortilèges), or indirectly with Mussorgsky with his famous orchestration of Pictures at an Exhibition, not to mention Ravel's admiration for the Russian composer and the influence that the music of the composer of the opera Boris Godunov had on his own music.

One can also make a closer connection by thinking of the cycle of piano pieces entitled Gaspard de la nuit that the Franco-Basque composer inspired and composed on the famous poems of Aloysius Bertrant; a text which, I recall, was partly chosen for the Gnomus mentioned above....

Lastly, you will be able to notice and hear that certain paintings and certain walks have undergone transformations on my part, guided by personal inspiration of the moment and also in an effort to adapt to the texts.

This new cycle of melodies for voice and chamber ensemble is both dramatic and pragmatic. She allows music to flourish in new and diversified domains without falling into the excess and brilliance of a purely instrumental project.

Joel Mérah