

Baron von Munchausen

Or, Munchausen's Narrative of His Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia

By Noah Brode

Program Notes:

Taking its inspiration from the collection of 18th-Century German tall-tales by the same name, the overly verbose title of this work for concert band provides the first hint at the overblown drama and, sometimes, the outright silliness of its content.

After a brief, frantic fanfare, the listener is met with the first iteration of Baron von Munchausen's theme, itself mirroring the larger-than-life character of the German nobleman with its strains of both heroism and absurdity.

As the Baron sets off on his journey to Russia, he is beset by a bitter snowstorm. He trudges through deep snow drifts and battles the swirling winds, forces of nature represented here by woodwinds lilting in a hybrid mode (Ionian-Aeolian). The Baron ties his horse to a post as the storm reaches its climax, with all four horns sounding dense, mysterious chords. When the sun finally melts the snow away, he realizes that he'd tied his horse to the steeple of a church that had been buried deep under the snow drifts.

After Munchausen retrieves his steed, he decides to go for a walk in the woods. Unfortunately, he is met by an angry wild boar, represented by another hybrid mode, Lydian-Dorian. The beast charges at him repeatedly, narrowly missing him each time; on his final charge, the boar gets his tusks stuck straight through the trunk of a tree. The Baron bends the boar's tusks and ties them in a knot, thereby securing his escape.

After spending some time with the gentry of Russia, Munchausen finds himself tasked with taming a horse so wild that every other potential trainer has given up on it. The Baron leaps onto the horse, and goes on a brief, wild ride, represented by the whole-tone scale and quick modulations. Our hero is able to use his powers of persuasion to calm the beast and make it his own.

Later, the Baron volunteers as an officer in the Russian cavalry corps in the country's war against Turkey. The brass section blares marching music as the unit rides out to meet the enemy. Then, the Turks arrive at the battlefield, represented by the "exotic" Phrygian dominant scale. After a bitter battle, the Turks prevail and Baron von Munchausen is taken prisoner.

Now a slave to the Turkish sultan, the Baron finds himself working long hours in the sun as a beekeeper. Bassoons and saxophones provide a low double pedal point of tonic and dominant as an oboe and alto sax mimic the droning of the bees bumbling lazily in the Turkish sun.

As he works, the Baron accidentally loses his grip on his hatchet, and the tool flies from his grasp. It keeps flying and flying until the Baron sees it land on the surface of the moon. Not the type to give up easily, the Baron lassoes the horn of the crescent and starts to climb, represented by the whole-tone ascension of the bassoon. He arrives on the eerie, silver surface of the moon, and searches about for a time before finally coming across his hatchet. Then, he climbs back down his rope, accompanied by a descending whole-tone scale in the flute.

When he returns to Earth, the victorious Russian army is agreeing to peace terms with the Turks. Munchausen returns home to a hero's welcome.

Composer's Note:

The tonality of the piece was planned as a journey "farther and farther" from the original tonic of E-flat. Although each section may include several modulations of its own, the overall tonal scheme is that of linear movement away from the "home" key by two sharps (the "dominant of the dominant" or supertonic modulation):

- Opening Section: E-flat major
- Snowstorm: F major
- Boar Chase: G major
- Horse Taming: A major
- Cavalry Officer: B major
- Turkish Army: C major
- Sultan's Slave: D major
- On the Moon: E major (most extreme distance from E-flat major)