

Program Notes

Text by Robert Markow

Fauré: Suite from Pelléas et Mélisande, op. 80

Maurice Maeterlinck's finely-wrought Symbolist drama, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, set in the mists of time, was given its premiere performance in Paris on May 17, 1893. Five years later, the famous actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell commissioned Fauré to write some incidental music for a production in London in English. The complete set of incidental music consisted of nine separate pieces of varying lengths. Although Debussy's opera was in effect finished at this time, it was not performed until 1902, leaving Fauré's score as the first music inspired by Maeterlinck's drama to be heard in public. The conductor of the first performance of the four-movement Suite (Paris, December 1, 1912) was André Messager.

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Fauré's delicate, pastel-colored music admirably evokes the veiled atmosphere and mood of Maeterlinck's play. Fauré captures the flavor of this world perfectly in the pensive, lyrical "Prélude." "Fileuse" introduces Act III, where we see Mélisande at her spinning wheel in a castle room. Again Fauré presents a magical evocation, this time of the gentle Mélisande in an exquisite oboe solo, which unwinds over a spinning accompaniment figure in the muted violins. The "Sicilienne" forms the Prelude to Act II, the scene where Mélisande is playing with her wedding ring (from Golaud) and accidentally drops it into the well by which she and Pelléas are playing. "La Mort de Mélisande" (The Death of Mélisande) also introduces an act – the final one where Mélisande is seen on her deathbed. The grief expressed in the elegiac funeral music is restrained, yet intensely poignant and deeply felt.

GABRIEL FAURÉ: Born in Pamiers, France May 12, 1845; died in Paris, November 4, 1924

Work composed: 1898 **World premiere (complete incidental music):** June 21, 1898, at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London conducted by the composer **World premiere (the four-movement Suite):** December 1, 1912, the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire in Paris conducted by André

Messenger

Instrumentation: 2 flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, harp, strings

Ravel: *Daphnis et Chloé*, Suite No. 2, Fragments symphoniques

For sheer opulence of orchestral color, for orgiastic rhythms and for ravishingly sensuous harmonies, Ravel's ballet score *Daphnis et Chloé* remains one of the glories of twentieth-century music. The work was commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev for the 1912 Paris season of his Ballets russes. The choreography was by Michel Fokine, the sets by Léon Bakst, and musical direction by Pierre Monteux. Nijinsky and Karsavina danced the title roles at the premiere on June 8, 1912. The revolutionary element of this "Symphonie chorégraphique" lay in its perfect fusion of music and the poetry of motion, so that the whole meaning of the story was expressed visually as well as aurally. Fokine's inspiration came from his reading of the pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe* by the early (second or third century) Greek writer Longus.

The Second Suite is really not a "suite" at all, but simply the final scene intact – about fifteen minutes – of the hour-long ballet. (The far-less-often-heard First Suite is a similar extended episode.) Dawn breaks over the sleeping Daphnis, estranged from his beloved Chloe, who has been abducted by pirates. Rippling woodwinds, cascading glissandos in the harps and celesta, and a slowly rising melody in the strings combine in one of the richest, most sumptuous and magical sounds ever drawn from an orchestra. Birds are singing, shepherds are piping, brooks are bubbling, dew is glistening in the fresh, pure morning air. Daphnis searches for and, aided by the god Pan, finds Chloe. Daphnis and Chloe then mime the love story of Pan and the nymph Syrinx as a tribute to Pan's help in reuniting them. The languorous flute solos portray Pan's courtship of Syrinx. Daphnis and Chloe declare their love, and everyone joins in a sensuous dance that grows to almost unbearable intensity and frenzy.

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MAURICE RAVEL: Born in Ciboure, Pyrénées-Atlantiques, March 7, 1875; died in Paris, December 28, 1937

Work composed: 1911-12 **World premiere:** June 8, 1912, at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris conducted by Pierre Monteux (complete ballet)

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes (2nd doubling on piccolo), alto flute, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, E \flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, snare drum, military drum, bass drum, castanets, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel), 2 harps, celesta, strings

Debussy: *La Mer*, Trois esquisses symphoniques pour orchestre

An irresistible fascination with the sea has impelled almost countless composers and songwriters to evoke it in their music. Debussy's *La Mer* is surely the best known work of this title, and few works so richly and evocatively portray the sea as Debussy has done. Oddly enough, however, this composition was not written anywhere near the sea, but rather in various inland locations, including the Burgundian mountains and Paris. In *La Mer*, Debussy portrays the sea in its varied moods but does not attempt explicit images in sound; rather, through sonorities he seeks to stir the memories, emotions and imagination, permitting each listener a personal perception of the sea. The first performance took place on October 15, 1905 at the Concerts Lamoureux in Paris, Camille Chevillard conducting. Hokusai's famous woodblock print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, served as the cover for the first edition of the score.

The first part, "From dawn to noon on the sea," begins very quietly with slow, mysterious murmuring. Through sonority itself, Debussy evokes the sensation of peering into the very depths of the dark, mysterious sea. As the sea awakens, the orchestral colors brighten and motion quickens. Eventually a noble, chorale-like passage appears and slowly grows to paint a majestic picture of the sea under the blazing noonday sun.

"Play of the waves" is full of sparkle and animation. The range and delicacy of Debussy's scoring fascinate at every turn; even the "ping" of the

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triangle has evocative power. Biographer Oscar Thompson describes this music as “a world of sheer fantasy, of strange visions and eerie voices, a mirage of sight and equally a mirage of sound.”

“Dialogue of the wind and the sea” opens restless, gray and stormy, the music suggesting the mighty surging and swelling of the water. Melodic fragments from the first movement return. The activity subsides, and out of the mists comes a haunting, distant call, like that of the sirens, high in the woodwinds. The music again gathers energy. Finally we hear once more the grandiose chorale motif from the first seascape, and *La Mer* concludes in a frenzy of whipping wind and dashing waves.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY: Born in Saint Germain-en-Laye, August 22, 1862; died in Paris, March 25, 1918

Work composed: 1903-05 **World premiere:** October 15, 1905, in Paris

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, glockenspiel), 2 harps, strings

Ravel: La Valse, Poème choréographique pour orchestre

The waltz is as much a part of Viennese life as whipped cream, Sachertorte, and operetta. Small wonder, then, that Ravel’s *poème choréographique* was initially called *Wien* (Vienna), which he conceived as “a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, with which is mingled in my mind the fantastic whirl of destiny.” It was written as a commission from the famous impresario Sergei Diaghilev for his Ballets russes. Ravel first thought of writing a work based on Viennese waltzes, a kind of homage to Johann Strauss, in 1906, but not until 1920 did he actually get around to doing so. In the meantime, a World War had passed, and the glitter and opulence of Old Vienna had faded. Hence, Ravel’s homage to the waltz became something of a bittersweet memory of shattered dreams, often steeped in threatening, forbidding and even frightening images. The first staged performance (following those for two pianos and for orchestra)

was given in Antwerp by the Royal Flemish Opera Ballet in 1926.

Ravel furnished the following description of the music's opening pages: "Drifting clouds allow hazy glimpses of waltzing couples. The clouds gradually disperse and we see an immense ballroom filled with a whirling crowd. The blaze of chandeliers comes to full splendor. An Imperial Court ball about 1855." A waltz theme struggles to life against a surreal background. The disorienting effect is dispelled as several waltz tunes are played clearly and with confidence. The music reels on, eventually becoming frenzied, swirling out of control, approaching a "fatal sort of dervishes' dance," in Ravel's words. Grinding dissonances pile up, grotesque masses of sound collide, and wildly erratic rhythms rip apart the world of gay Vienna as it crumbles into dust and ruin.

Work composed: 1919-20 World premiere (ballet): 1926, in Antwerp by the Royal Flemish Opera Ballet

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, crotales [antique cymbals], tam-tam, castanets, glockenspiel), 2 harps, strings

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Formerly a horn player in the Montreal Symphony, **Robert Markow** now writes program notes for orchestras as well as for numerous other musical organizations in North America and Asia. He taught at Montreal's McGill University for many years, has led music tours to several countries, and writes for numerous leading classical music journals.