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**MA MÈRE L'OYE  
LA VALSE  
BOLÉRO**







# MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

## *Boléro – La Valse – Ma Mère l'Oye*

PIERRE MONTEUX

*conducting the London Symphony Orchestra*

*Ravel's exotic  
music for  
the ballet*

TOWARD THE BEGINNING OF 1928, just before he embarked on a tour of the United States and Canada, Maurice Ravel received a commission from the dancer Ida Rubinstein to orchestrate some piano pieces of Isaac Albéniz for a ballet. Discovering that the exclusive rights to make such transcriptions belonged to the Spanish conductor Enrique Fernández Arbós, Ravel, thoroughly miffed, quickly decided to write an original composition instead. The work was begun that summer at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, following Ravel's return to France, and completed in less than one month.

*Boléro* was a sensation at its première at the Paris Opéra on November 22 that year. Bronislava Nijinska choreographed the ballet, which was set in a smoke-filled Spanish tavern and featured the dance of a solitary gypsy (Mme Rubinstein) on a large table, while other gypsies gradually responded as the music increases in excitement. Ravel described his composition as "orchestral tissue without music . . . one long, very gradual crescendo"; if, for strictly musical reasons, he deprecated his *danse lascive*, as he once called the work, he was not able to restrain his pride in it as a technical feat or in the notoriety the piece was to bring him. One outcome of its burgeoning popularity was a bid from Hollywood for the movie rights, but the producers soon discovered that the huge fee they had paid Ravel for the music did not include a workable plot as well; the film, released in 1934, eventually used only Ravel's title and his score for background, while the screenwriters provided a story loosely based on the life of dancer Maurice Mouvet, starring George Raft and Carole Lombard, and featuring Sally Rand in her famous fan dance. The newspaper reviews were not overly favorable.

Concerning *La Valse*, composed between 1919 and 1920, Ravel wrote, "After *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, my state of health prevented me from writing for some time. I only started composing again for *La Valse*, a choreographic poem, which had first occurred to me before the *Rapsodie espagnole* [c. 1906]. I conceived this work as a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz which is mingled, in my own mind, with the impression of a fantastic and fatal wild circling movement. I place this waltz in the background of an imperial palace, about 1855."

From its earliest inception, when the composer called the work *Wien* (Vienna), *La Valse* was purely orchestral in concept. Sergei Diaghilev, however, had expressed inter-

est in the subject for a ballet, and Ravel submitted the music, together with his own scenario, to the impresario. Supposedly it was to serve on a double bill with Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, but to Ravel's fury Diaghilev refused to produce the work, ostensibly because of the expenses of staging. As an orchestral piece, *La Valse* was first performed on December 12, 1920, but was not given a stage production until October 2, 1926, when the Royal Flemish Ballet Company presented it in Antwerp. Ida Rubinstein, a former member, incidentally, of the Diaghilev Company, produced the work several times at the Paris Opéra between 1928 and 1931, each time with different choreography and decor. It is interesting to note that Ravel was rather displeased with the 1929 presentation because the scenery, costuming, and dancing did not evoke a specific period of time or location.

Like *La Valse*, *Ma Mère l'Oye* was not at first conceived as a ballet. The original form was a suite of five pieces for piano, four hands, written in 1908 in the following order: *Pavan of the Sleeping Beauty*; *Hop-o'-my-Thumb*; *Laidronnette*, *Empress of the Pagodas*; *Conversation of Beauty and the Beast*; and *The Fairy Garden*. The inspiration for their composition came from an illustrated volume of the 17th-century *Mother Goose Stories* of Charles Perrault and the fairy tales of Countess Marie d'Aulnoy and Mme de Beaumont, which Ravel delighted in reading to the two young children of his friends the Godebskis. To help them with their practising, the composer dedicated the suite to Mimi and Jean Godebski, but the prospect of premiering the piece so terrified the fledgling pianists that the honor of a first performance in 1910 had to fall to two pupils (aged six and ten, respectively) of the pianist Marguerite Long.

Two years later, Jacques Rouché, who later was to become director of the Paris Opéra, commissioned Ravel to orchestrate *Ma Mère l'Oye* as a ballet. The composer changed the order of the existing sections and added two new pieces (a *Prelude* plus the *Dance of the Spinning Wheel*), as well as five Interludes to bridge the scenes; the whole presentation consisted of a series of dream vignettes within the framework of the Sleeping Beauty story. The ballet, choreographed by Jeanne Hugard to Ravel's own libretto, was first given on January 28, 1912, at the Théâtre des Arts in Paris.

The first tableau (*Danse du rouet*), following the *Prelude*, shows Princess Florine skipping rope in a garden, with an old woman seated nearby at a spinning wheel. Florine suddenly trips, pricks herself on the spindle, and falls insensible. The second tableau, following without interruption, presents the *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant*, danced by the courtiers as the sleeping princess is gently laid to rest by two ladies-in-waiting; the old woman reveals herself as the Good Fairy and whistles for two blackamoors in yellow turbans, who are to be in charge of the dream spectacle she is about to evoke. Their duty is to change the scenes during the Interludes and to hold up a large cloth banner announcing the title of each of the ensuing stories.

In Tableau three, *Les entretiens de la Belle et la Bête* (from the version by Mme Beaumont), Beauty is petrified of the Beast and at first repulses his affection; finally, she breaks his enchantment by accepting him, whereupon he turns into a prince. The fourth tableau, *Petit Poucet* (Perrault) depicts the seven children of a poor woodcutter wandering through a forest; Hop-o'-my-Thumb tries to reassure his brothers, who believe they are lost, and scatters bread crumbs to leave a trail. While the children sleep at night, birds eat the crumbs, and in the morning they emerge one by one from their moss bed to discover that the trail has disappeared.

The fifth tableau, *Laidronnette*, *Impératrice des Pagodes* (based on Countess d'Aulnoy's *Serpentin Vert*), describes the bath taken by "little ugly girl," an enchanted princess who lives on the island of the Pagodins. These little personages, made of crystal, porcelain, and precious stones, fall on their knees as the gong heralds the approach of Laidronnette. "She undressed and got into her bath. Immediately, the Pagodins and Pagodines began to sing and play on their instruments; some played theorbos made of nut shells; some had viols made of almond shells, for, of course, it was necessary to fit the instruments to their size."

The final tableau, *Le Jardin Féerique*, returns to the original garden setting of the sleeping Princess Florine. A trumpet call signals the arrival of Prince Charming, who approaches and wakes her, while the characters of the preceding tales reappear with rejoicing. The music ends in a blaze of color.

IGOR KIPNIS

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