

Debussy THREE IMAGES FOR ORCHESTRA

Debussy's three orchestral *Images* have one thing in common: all deal with folk themes. *Gigues* goes back to English sources, while *Ibéria* reflects the folk music of Spain, and *Rondes de Printemps* the folk music of France. The form of the series is highly unusual. It consists of a full-scale symphonic piece in three movements — *Ibéria* — flanked by two short pieces each in a single movement. The three *Images* were composed between 1906 and 1912. *Ibéria* was the first to be completed and performed, while *Gigues* was the last, although *Gigues* was published as No. 1 of the group.

The late critic, Oscar Thompson, insisted that *Gigues* was not orchestrated by Debussy, but by André Caplet, and this may explain why that musician has been especially eloquent in praise of this score. Caplet reminds us that the original title of the work was *Gigues Triates*, and he goes on to speak of "Sad gigue, tragic gigue, the portrait of a soul in pain uttering its slow, lingering lamentation on the reed of an oboe d'amore. A wounded soul so reticent that it dreads and shuns all lyrical effusions, and quickly hides its soul behind the mask and the angular gestures of a grotesque marionette. . . . The ever-changing moods, the rapidity with which they merge, clash, and separate to unite once more, make the interpretation of this work very difficult."

The jig-rhythm does not appear until nearly 50 bars have gone by, and it is not present even then, but it is handled with great subtlety and variety on its successive appearances. *Gigues* is bound together by a quiet melody, and it has been suggested that this tune may be a transformation of an English folk song; the rhythm of the jig is certainly English or Celtic in its origin, and to use an English melody with an English dance-music is logical enough.

Ibéria is not only the biggest of the three *Images* but the boldest in outline, the most brilliant in sound, and the most well-defined in popular melodic content. Its three movements are entitled *In the Streets* and by the *Wayside*, the *Perfumes of the Night*, and *The Morning of the Festival Day*; the last two movements run together without pause, and there is a momentary flashback to the sensuous habanera of the nocturne after the march-music of the festival has begun.

Debussy, once spent three hours in San Sebastián; otherwise he never set foot in Spain, but he remains one of the great masters of Spanish musical atmosphere. This was part of his tradition: ever since *Carmen* burst on the world in 1870, French composers have taken Spain as a province of their own; witness Lalo's *Espartero*, *Espartero*, Chabrier's *Espartero*, and such earlier works of Debussy himself as the *Soirée dans Grenade*, to say nothing of the *Rapsodie Espagnole*, *L'Heure Espagnole*, and *Boleto* which Maurice Ravel was to produce later. Manuel de Falla, the greatest of all modern Spanish musicians, pays Debussy the supreme tribute of saying that this Frenchman had taught him and his compatriots how to use the folk-materials of their own country. *Ibéria* in particular delighted Falla, who said of it:

"Echoes from the villages, a kind of *avellano* — the generic theme of the work — which seems to

San Francisco Symphony Orchestra

Pierre Monteux

Conductor

float in a clear atmosphere of scintillating light; the intoxicating spell of Andalusian nights, the festive gaiety of a people dancing to the joyous strains of a band of guitars and *bondarinas*. . . all this whirls in the air, approaches and recedes, and our imagination is continually kept awake and dazzled by the power of an intensely expressive and richly varied music."

Rondes de Printemps bears on its printed score a kind of motto translated from an old Tuscan folk song called *La Maggiolata*: *Vive le Mai, bienvenue au Mai avec son gonfalon saugave*. ("Hurrah for May, welcome May with its wild streamer.") The entire piece is based upon the French folk-tune *Vous n'avez plus en bois*, which is varied, transformed, and put through a great variety of symphonic paces. Orchestra-wise, this is the quietest and at the same time the subtlest of the three *Images*. Trumpets and trombones are absent, and the entire texture is one of scintillating, often densely matted instrumental atoms; in this respect *Rondes de Printemps* is quite different in character from the rather gray, melancholy *Gigues* and the sharply-etched fast movements of *Ibéria*.

When *Rondes de Printemps* was first performed, the program notes bore the following remarks by Charles Malherbe:

"These are real pictures in which the composer has endeavored to convey, aurally, impressions received by the eye. He attempts to blend the two forms of sensation in order to intensify them. The melody, with its infinitely varied rhythms, corresponds to the multiplicity of lines in a drawing; the orchestra represents a huge palette where each instrument supplies its own tone color. Just as the painter delights in contrasts of tone, in the play of light and shade, so the musician takes pleasure in the shock of unexpected dissonances and the fusion of unusual timbres; he wants us to visualize what he makes us hear, and the pen he holds in his fingers becomes

a brush. This is musical impressionism of a very special kind and of a very rare quality."

There are those who believe that these lines were inspired by Debussy himself, but that "the definiteness and the trite, elegant style of these notes cannot have entirely satisfied this subtle artist, who disapproved of all such indiscreet analytical notations." Nevertheless parallels have often been drawn between Debussy's music and the paintings of the contemporary French impressionists. Such parallels are, at bottom, intangible, and impossible to demonstrate objectively. Debussy's loud nature and used color with the utmost refinement. So did Claude Monet. Efforts have been made to drive the point further. It has been observed that Debussy deploys his counterpoint in such fashion that each instrument in his orchestral tissue stands out clearly, even though many instruments may be used at once, and that Monet, rather than mixing his colors on his palette, places small dots of pure pigment close together on his canvas so that the beholder's eye will fuse them. Perhaps there is some parallel here, but it is worth pointing out that Monet's dots are supposed to be blended by the spectator and that Debussy's lines are carefully calculated to avoid blending at all costs; Monet's method, then, is the polar opposite of Debussy's rather than its analogue.

Debussy himself, while working on the *Images*, said he was trying to "achieve something different — an effect of reality — what some imbeciles call impressionism, a term that is utterly misapplied, especially by the critics, for they do not hesitate to use it in connection with Turner, the finest creator of mysterious effects in the whole world of art."

For Debussy, then, impressionism and realism were one and the same, while the devices of Turner, which certainly belong in the same bracket with those of the impressionist painters, are romantic. This, of course, is partly a quibble over words. In the long run, however, painting is painting and music is music, and while it is then possible to throw interesting bridges between them, these structures are seldom substantial enough to walk on for any great length of time.

Notes by ALFRED FRANKENSTEIN

SIDE 1

Ibéria

BAVO 1—*Par les rues et par les chemins*

BAVO 2—*Les parfums de la nuit*
Le matin d'un jour de fête

SIDE 2

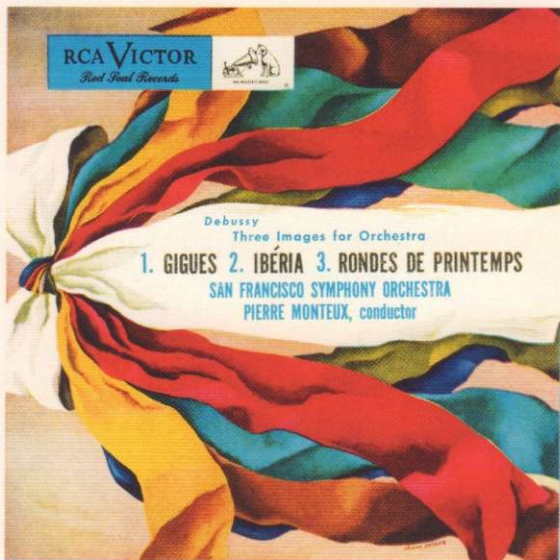
BAVO 1—*Gigues*

BAVO 2—*Rondes de Printemps*

Recent recordings by Mr. Monteux and the San Francisco Symphony include Franck's *Symphony in D Minor* (LM-1065) and two Beethoven symphonies: No. 3, in D, Op. 36 (LM-1024) and No. 8, in F, Op. 53 (LM-43).

LM
1197

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LONG **33 $\frac{1}{3}$** PLAY