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Milhaud

PROTÉE

Symphonic Suite No. 2

San Francisco Symphony Orchestra

Pierre Monteur, conductor



Milhaud PROTÉE—SYMPHONIC SUITE No. 2

One of the first manifestations of the new post-war I spirit was provided by a group of young Parisian composers who banded themselves together to propagate their own music. This group, called "The Six," consisted of Durey, Auric, Tailleferre (a woman), Honneger, Poulenc and Milhaud; and while all six later developed along independent lines, the last three have been the most successful. Under the aegis of the composer, Erik Satie, and the poet, Jean Cocteau, who was connected with Parisian journalism and was responsible for much propaganda for the six, the group, greatly influenced by the new elements in modern art, cubism and functional architecture, revolted violently against the Impressionism of Debussy and the Romanticism of Franck. Their works were characterized by an excessive use of polyphony, and their inspiration was largely derived from American jazz rhythms, music hall and popular music of the street corner type which they parodied in a witty and sophisticated way.

These were some of the elements that influenced the work of Darius Milhaud. A most important association was his meeting in 1917 with the playwright and poet, Paul Claudel, who later provided him with the texts of some of his more important works, among them the satiric drama, *Protée*, based on the *Orestes* trilogy of Aeschylus.

Milhaud was born in Aix-en-Provence in 1892. At the age of eighteen, he entered the Paris Conservatory where he studied with Gédalge, Widor and d'Indy, and successively gained prizes for violin, counterpoint and fugue. While still a student he produced much music, including four string quartets, two sonatas for piano and violin and a sonata for piano, flute, oboe and clarinet. His studies were interrupted by the outbreak of the European War, unfortunately upsetting his plans for the Prix-de-Rome competition. From 1917-19 he was attached to the French Legation in Brazil and it was here that he met Paul Claudel. Three years later he toured the United States as pianist and conductor; and from 1941-42 he was active in America as composer, conductor and teacher, participating in programs devoted to his music.

Milhaud's productivity has been extraordinary and

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he has made contributions to almost every species of music. While his early works revealed the influence of the post-Franck school, it soon became apparent that the young composer was leaning more and more towards somber and violent expressions. He has proved, particularly in his incidental music to Greek tragedies, that he is capable of lifting dark and sinister themes to a high level; he has also proved himself equally versed in comedy and satire, as is evident in the *Protée* Suite. Paul Landormy in his book, "A History of Music," calls Milhaud a Romanticist. "... a musician of rage, hatred, despair, terror, all the passions carried to paroxysms ... this does not prevent him ... from writing charming idyls ... after the manner of all romanticists he likes to abandon himself in his dreams. ... Yet it is in these gentle interludes that one senses the tempest preparing. At times he employs irony and uses it with ferocious cruelty...."

The *Protée* Suite, incidental music to Claudel's play, was first performed in Paris on October 24, 1920, at one of the Concerts Colonne, and was directed by Gabriel Pierné. It was introduced in this country by Monteux at a concert of the Boston Symphony on April 22, 1921. Milhaud himself writes the following of the Suite: "Paul Claudel's *Protée* is a satiric drama, a strong mixture of truculent gaiety and poetry. I wrote three different versions for the play, the first in 1913 after a meeting with Claudel at Helleran, Germany, when he had just finished writing *Protée*. This was for chorus and orchestra, consisting merely of pieces necessary to the drama. In 1916, the actor, Gemier, planned a per-

formance of *Protée* in a circus and I rescored the music for small orchestra. When the Theatre au Vaudeville produced lyric works in 1919 *Protée* was announced for production. I was asked to develop the music, add some preludes, and use a larger orchestra...."

The presentation of the Suite had violent beginnings. The music was so drastically new to the ears of its Parisian audience that the police were called in to check the general confusion that ensued; and on the following Saturday when Mr. Pierné saw fit to repeat the Suite, the audience was filled with curiosity seekers. While music critics argued back and forth with each other, the composition survived, and it was not long before it was widely performed.

Claudel's dramatic poem has been described as depicting with touching pathos and lyric expression, the hopeless love of the old man Protius for a young girl. There is even a satiric strain, too, "a mockery that assails the unhappy swain from all sides, even for the birds of the air and the seals of the sea." In Greek mythology, Protius was an old prophet who dwelt in an island cave in the Aegean Sea and tended the sea-god Posseidon's "herd" of seals. He could change himself into any beast or element; hence the adjective "protean."

The Suite is made up of five pieces. It opens with an Overture in Tango-Habañera rhythm. This is followed by a fast Prelude and Fugue (for brasses with the rest of the orchestra sustaining them). In the play, the scene is described as follows: "The Repast of the Seals"—(Tumult, battle, flocking foam, leaps of the seals which throw themselves from the summits of the crags into water and snow of turquoise. Braying, trumpeting, thumping of tails and fins. All this is expressed by the music.) A lovely Pastoral follows and is succeeded by the Nocturne, a composition which has been used for a piano and violin piece called *Le Printemps*. This is referred to in the play as a Bacchanale Nocturne. A Finale, of a strong and bright character, closes the Suite.

It is fitting that Pierre Monteux, who understands the music of Milhaud so well, should record the *Protée* Suite, and it is an intelligent and vital performance that he and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra give us.