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Ravel: Daphnis et Chloé

(Complete Ballet)

Pierre Monteux
conducting
The London
Symphony Orchestra
and chorus of the
Royal Opera House,
Covent Garden

Chorus Master:
Douglas Robinson



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Two names—Debussy and Ravel—stand out in the history of French music during the first decades of this century. Saint-Saëns, apart from a few light pieces, is but a memory, cherished particularly by those who forgive him for his platitudes and remember him as a great craftsman and a great teacher. Gabriel Fauré remains a French composer *par excellence*—a connoisseur's musician, and another great teacher. Debussy (b. 1862) was, of course, the founder of the "Impressionist" school of music, a school which desired to avoid the dramatic, or the conventional, in music, and which concentrated on the use of sound for purely tonal effect—the creation, in fact, of an "impression" through music. And Debussy's "L'Après-midi d'un Faune" is still one of the crown jewels of this period; it creates the desired effect by taking liberties with most of the previously accepted rules of music, the composer's sole aim being the closest possible expression in music of the spirit of Mallarmé's poem on which the work is based.

But Impressionism is a dangerous word, and it becomes even more so when glibly applied to certain types of painting and certain types of music. For whereas the impressionist school of painters (Degas, Renoir and Cézanne, etc.) desire not to portray physical objects in a photographic sense but prefer to study and portray, say, the play of light on those objects, the impressionists in music may use their technique to create the most exact and vivid image, or emotional response, in the listener's mind. The initial creative approach in the two arts may be similar, but the objectives are not always so allied as a superficial consideration might suggest.

All this leads to Ravel, who was born at Ciboure in 1875. Debussy, with whom his name was later to be commonly associated, was thirteen years his senior. He studied under Fauré and Gédalge, and his friendship with Chabrier had a not unimportant influence on his musical style in later years. But Ravel's career was not without its troubles, and he repeatedly tried to gain the *Prix de Rome* (Debussy won it at twenty-two), but got no nearer than winning the second

prize in 1901. At the age of thirty he tried again, and the resulting drama—or farce—is one of the best-known rows in academic music. At the time Ravel was not exactly an unknown composer; he had written his charming and popular Pavane for a Dead Infanta, an excellent String Quartet and the piano piece "Jeux d'eau." So, with confidence, he entered once more for the *Prix de Rome*, but this time he was refused permission to sit—on the grounds that the preliminary test which he had submitted was unsatisfactory. The press and the musical public sided, in the main, with Ravel. Dubois, the Director of the Conservatoire, resigned and Gabriel Fauré took his place. But Ravel gave up all hope of winning the prize and settled down to compose the works which we now know as the masterpieces of their kind.

Sets of piano pieces, the "Mother Goose" Suite, songs, two operas, "Daphnis et Chloé," "Bolero" and the Suite "The Tomb of Couperin" followed. Ravel was established as one of the leading French composers.

The question then arises of how closely he is related to Debussy. It cannot be denied that a great deal of Ravel's music can be generally classified as "Impressionistic", but on the other hand his technique—his *method*—is so different from Debussy's that Ravel is seen to be a composer of remarkable originality. Although he obviously followed the career of the older man, and although he may well have been attracted to the theories of the Impressionists, Ravel's art is more *objective*, and, in a sense, more "classical". Whatever happens, he must be listened to as himself, and not as a younger and somewhat synthetic Debussy. As others have pointed out, an historical survey, showing the parallel dates of Debussy-Ravel compositions, indicates that on more than one occasion Ravel was in advance of Debussy with some idea or approach which is often attributed to the older man.

"Daphnis et Chloé" was written for the Russian Ballet, and first produced by them in Paris on June 8th, 1912, and

Nijinsky appeared as Daphnis. The music is in many ways Ravel's masterpiece, and has won a steady popularity both with the ballet and in the concert hall version usually performed.

The story of the ballet is a Greek Pastoral. Daphnis and Chloé are shepherd and shepherdess; the scene is laid on the borders of a sacred wood. At the entrance to a grotto are seen three ancient statues of nymphs, and in the distance a large rock bears a vague similarity to the form of Pan, the "nature-divinity" and special patron of the shepherds. Daphnis has a rival for his love of Chloé, in the form of Dorcon, a country bumpkin; and, to make an eternal quadrangle, another shepherdess called Lyceion contests with Chloé for the love of Daphnis. Chloé is captured by pirates, after which follows one of the most magical sequences in the Ballet, accompanied by the *Nocturne*. A little flame shines out above the head of one of the three nymphs. She comes to life, followed by the other two. Daphnis, having lost Chloé, is prostrate with grief before the grotto. The nymphs rouse him, and slowly lead him towards the rock. The rock is transformed, and the figure of Pan becomes discernible. Daphnis falls on his knees in prayer, and the sequence closes in silence and darkness. In the course of the ballet, Chloé is rescued from the pirates by the intervention of Pan, and is reunited with Daphnis, her lover.

Having some knowledge of the story, one can easily visualize the effectiveness of the production. The music represents an admirable cross-section of Ravel's art; the diffuse, "atmospheric" "Nocturne" and rather more solid "Pantomime," the strident, almost Stravinsky-like vitality of the *Danse Guerrière* and the *Danse Générale*, and, above all, the indescribably beautiful "Daybreak" which, more than anything else, shows Ravel as a man searching for a means of expressing the essence of beauty, and finding it.

JOHN CULSHAW