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Debussy

Nocturnes (Nuages · Fêtes) · Afternoon of a Faun
Ravel · Rapsodie Espagnole · Pavane for a Dead Princess
Pierre Monteux · London Symphony



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SIDE 1

Debussy

PRÉLUDE À L' APRÈS-MIDI D'UN FAUNE (9:15)

NOCTURNES (12:45)

1. Nuages 2. Fêtes

SIDE 2

Ravel

RAPSDIE ESPAGNOLE (15:05)

1. Prélude à la nuit 2. Malagueña - 3. Habanera 4. FERIA

PAVANE POUR UNE INFANTE DÉFUNTE (6:20) BMI

Pierre Monteux, who here records *L'Après-midi d'un faune* and the *Rapsodie espagnole* for the first time, was born in 1875, the same year as Ravel. After his classical Conservatoire education, he played the viola for many years as a soloist, orchestral player and chamber musician. His quartet once played Brahms' A minor quartet to the composer. "Brahms was surprised," he recalled, "that Frenchmen play so well his musique." During the summer Monteux would conduct the orchestra at Dieppe; here he had the best musicians from the Paris orchestras, famous soloists on vacation and an opportunity to perform new music when he wished. Once Saint-Saëns came to play one of his concertos, stipulating that there should be no announcement of his participation because he dreaded a full concert-hall in the middle of summer.

Monteux continued this busy career until he joined Diaghilev and gave the historic first performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* which, as Roman Vlad says in his biography of Stravinsky, caused one of the most notorious scandals in musical history. Apparently the whistling and booing from the audience was so loud that it completely drowned the orchestra — although the volume of sound produced was greater than any composer had ever wrung from an orchestra! But Monteux remembered that Debussy's music too met great resistance. He played in one of the early rehearsals of *La Mer* (now accepted as one of the glories of the 20th century); the conductor, Colonne, had his head in the puzzling new score and the orchestra grew restive, talked, threw paper darts; finally the bass players at one end of the hall — the big hall in the Châtelet, with open fires at both ends — began to grill cutlets. When someone asked Monteux what he thought of the music, he was naturally unable to say. In the same way, he could form no sort of idea of Stravinsky's *Rite* from the composer's attempt to play the newly-completed score on the piano. But with his grounding in classical music,

Monteux always had the flair and the rare painstaking devotion to give fine performances of new music.

As one who knew them well, Monteux was more aware of the differences than of the similarities between Debussy and Ravel — the former often bitter and hostile, the latter a charming companion and a fastidious host; the former invariably greatly revising his music after the first performance, the latter producing a score perfect in every detail; Debussy a great pianist, Ravel an astonishingly poor one.

In Monteux's performance we can approach as near as it is possible to these two great composers. To him they are not the classics we know but two contemporaries made good. When he reaches the 'cello and doublebass *glissandi* in the slow part of *Feria* in the *Rapsodie* he gleefully remembered the first performance, when someone shouted from the gallery, "Where is the cat?"

L'Après-midi d'un Faune is a remarkable example of an artistic chain reaction. Mallarmé seems to have been inspired by a painting by Boucher; Debussy was in turn fired by Mallarmé's poem, possibly intending at first to write an accompaniment to a recitation, and many years later Nijinsky turned it into a ballet. (While Debussy's music seems principally to express the afternoon, Nijinsky was all faun and scandalized his audience.) Though coolly received in 1894, this work of the 32-year-old composer soon earned him international recognition and has remained the most popular of all his works. It is certainly unique in its simple beauty of color and melody, its expression of a lazy afternoon in a young world:

...through this quiet, when a weary swoon
Crushes and chokes the latest faint essay
Of morning cool against the encroaching day,
There is no murmuring water, save the gush
Of my clear fluted notes... (Mallarmé,

translated by Aldous Huxley.

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The *Nocturnes*, first performed complete in 1901, met with an immediate success that astonished even the composer. In calling these pieces *Nocturnes*, Debussy was thinking of Whistler's paintings of mood and here he comes as close to painting as music can. The impressions, of watching clouds passing by in the first piece and those of being present at some festival with excited crowds and a passing band in the second, need as little explanation as the works of the Impressionist painters.

The *Rapsodie Espagnole* is one of Ravel's very few purely orchestral works. It was first performed in 1908 and its magical orchestration and jaunty rhythms have earned it countless performances since. The *Habanera* is an orchestration of the two-piano piece of 1895, Ravel's first publication: he had this date added to the full score to give the lie to that absurd criticism which is still heard today—that he aped Debussy! Debussy wrote no Spanish music before 1895.

The *Pavane pour une Infante défunte* began life as a piano piece in 1899. Ravel orchestrated it in 1909. He gave the piece its name, merely, he said, because he liked the sound of the words. But it is an apt title for this little masterpiece with its melancholy formal grace.

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