

MasterWorks 6 Concert
Thursday, May 10, 2012

Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose)

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Written: 1908-1911

Movements: Five

Style: Impressionist

Duration: 16 minutes

Maurice Ravel was not much taller than a child. Never married and childless, he loved children, their toys, playing games, and telling them stories. One of his little friends, Mimi Godebski remembered the visits by Ravel:

I would settle down on his lap, and tirelessly he would begin, 'Once upon a time . . .' It was 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'The Ugly Empress of the Pagodas' and, above all, the adventures of a little mouse he invented for me. I laughed a great deal at this last story; then I felt remorseful, as I had to admit it was very sad.

Mimi had a brother Jean. To entice the two to practice their piano, Ravel wrote a series of piano duets for them. He based them on some fairy tales from the "Tales of Mother Goose." Several years later, the theater manager Jacques Rouché asked Ravel to rewrite those piano pieces for an orchestra and to recast them into a ballet. Ravel composed a new prelude, added another scene, and provided musical transitions between the various stories. Nowadays orchestras typically perform just the individual movements without those transitions. There are five short musical stories.

Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty introduces Sleeping Beauty with a short, slow, and stately procession. *Tom Thumb* tells the story of the little boy who drops breadcrumbs to lead himself a path out of a forest. Of course, birds eat the bread. You can hear little Tom's wanderings by the constantly shifting meter of the music: from two beats to three, then four, then five. High harmonics played by the violins imitate the birds while the oboe and English horn suggest Tom's crying.

Ravel gave a written description of *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*:

"She undressed herself and went into the bath. The pagodas and pagodines began to sing and play on instruments. Some had oboes made of walnut shells and others had violas made of almond shells – for they had to have instruments that were of their own small proportions."

In the Mother Goose story, Laideronnette was a princess who had been cursed with ugliness by a witch. While hiding in a far-off castle, she falls in love with a green serpent, who used to be a handsome prince. Of course, the spell is broken and they live happily ever after. In one of their adventures, the couple comes to the land of living pagodas, small porcelain Chinese figurines with grotesque features. Ravel's use of only the black keys of the piano (a pentatonic scale) is what gives this piece its Oriental flavor.

In Ravel's telling of *Beauty and the Beast*, the clarinet takes on the role of Beauty while the Contrabassoon is the Beast. As they fall in love, their melodies entwine, and as the Beast is transformed, his melody is played by a solo violin.

In the ballet, *The Fairy Garden* tells of Prince Charming awakening Sleeping Beauty with a kiss while all of the characters gather around. The music begins peacefully but grows to provide the perfect storybook ending.

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Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Written: 1934

Movements: one

Style: Romantic

Duration: 22 minutes

The nineteenth century had its celebrities, just like today. Back then, they were virtuoso singers and instrumentalists. A German newspaper said this about one of the greatest, Niccolò Paganini:

One must await him in an overcrowded opera house among thousands of visitors and hear the strange rumors running from row to row. And now, after a long pause, see the odd, sickly, worn-out man sliding through the orchestra, the face fleshless and bloodless in its entanglement of dark lock and beard, the boldest of noses with an expression of contemptuous scorn, eyes that shine like black jewels out of bluish-white. And now, instantly, the hasty beginning of the ritornelli, and then the tenderest and boldest song ever heard on the violin.

Paganini was an amazing violinist. He seemed to have an almost supernatural talent—some even said he was in league with the devil. He could switch from dazzling technique to such soulful playing that his listeners would weep. Realizing that there was more to being a celebrity, he developed an entire aura that turned him into the rage of all Europe. No one ever asks if you have heard Paganini, but if you have seen him, he wrote. He composed much of the music that he performed, or course tailored to show off his prodigious talent.

Sergei Rachmaninoff had a stage presence much like Paganini. He was tall, angular, somber, and dignified. Igor Stravinsky had another opinion. [He] was the only pianist I have ever seen who did not grimace. That is a great deal. Like Paganini, Rachmaninoff was a tireless performer, often giving more than fifty performances in a year. Again, like Paganini, Rachmaninoff wrote a great deal of music that he performed all over the world. Most of his works are part of the standard piano literature. Many performers consider them the ultimate technical challenge.

Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, written in 1934, is the last work he wrote for piano and orchestra. It isn't a concerto, but the twenty-four variations of the theme—based on the melody of the *Eighteenth Caprice* from Paganini's first published work, the *twenty-four Caprices for Solo Violin*—fall into three distinct sections that resemble the three movements of a concerto. A short introduction, the theme, and the first ten variations make up the first section. They are in a bright tempo and are devious decorations of the theme. The seventh variation introduces a second, slower tune. It is one that Rachmaninoff uses in many of his works: the *Dies Irae*, from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. The eleventh variation is a cadenza for the piano, much like a cadenza at the end of a normal first movement of a

concerto. The character and key shift for the next seven variations; the eighteenth is the luscious tune that makes this work so famous. That variation is actually Paganini's theme played upside down! The nineteenth variation begins a continuous crescendo all the way to the twenty-fourth variation, which brings back a menacing restatement of the *Dies Irae*. A final, quirky, snippet from the theme ends the piece.

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Pétrouchka

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Written: 1911, revised in 1947

Movements: Ballet in four scenes

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 34 minutes

Paris is more than just the city of lovers. Filled with street corner artists, poets, cabarets and world class musicians, it has always been a Mecca for struggling young artists. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a young Russian émigré named Igor Stravinsky landed there, certain to take the city by storm. He needed more than talent to make his impression on Paris; he needed inspiration and, most important, an audience. Stravinsky found both in his association with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev and in the *Ballets Russes (Russian Ballet)*. Diaghilev was part of the movement known as *Miriskusstva (World of Art)*, an innovative group of poets, philosophers, musicians and artists whose objective was the integration of folk traditions into all aspects of art and literature. Diaghilev's *Russian Ballet* regularly shocked the Parisian public with exotic choreography set to the most unusual modern music (Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*, for example). The *Russian Ballet* was the radical *chique* of the day. They were almost sure to get a full house, usually an equal mix of the cultural *avant-garde* and curious thrill seekers.

After completing *The Firebird*, his first great ballet for Diaghilev, Stravinsky was supposed to start on a second, called *The Rite of Spring*. Instead, he got sidetracked working on an orchestral piece in which the piano would play the most important part. . . . I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of *arpeggios*. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet blasts. The outcome is a terrific noise that reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the puppet.

Diaghilev arrived one day expecting to hear sketches of the *Rite of Spring*. Instead, he heard a good deal of the newly titled *Pétrouchka*. Diaghilev was immediately taken with the music, and convinced Stravinsky to use it as the basis for another ballet based on the Russian counterparts of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*: *Pétrouchka* as Pierrot (the traditional antihero), Harlequin (his nemesis), and the ballerina as Columbine – the object of both characters' affections.

Stravinsky collaborated on the ballet with the artist Alexandre Benois, setting the scene at the Shrovetide Fair in St. Petersburg and playing off the xenophobia of Parisian public – even then – by making the brutish Harlequin a Moor. The ballet begins with a chaotic street scene, interrupted by drummers announcing the beginning of the puppet show. A mysterious and

cruel showman exhibits his three puppets, which he magically brings to life. Pétrouchka, awkward and ugly, is the most sensitive of the three. The Moor heckles him. The second scene shows Pétrouchka in his room. The Ballerina has rejected him. The two clarinets play a dissonant melody that represents his despair. The third scene finds the Moor lying in his room. The Ballerina enters and dances for him until Pétrouchka bursts in, only to be chased off by the Moor. In the final scene, we are back at the fair, with dancing bears, coachmen, grooms, and nursemaids. Pétrouchka rushes into the crowd, pursued by the Moor who attacks him and strikes him dead with his scimitar. The showman reassures the horror-stricken crowd that Pétrouchka is only a puppet, but when the spectators leave, the puppet's apparition startles him. He jeers at the terrified puppeteer from the roof of his booth.

Pétrouchka is one of Stravinsky's most popular works, successfully integrating Russian folk songs, innovative rhythms, and colorful combinations of instruments. Stravinsky originally wrote it for a massive orchestra. He revised it in 1947 for concert performance, reducing the orchestration and adding a concert ending – and placing it in American copyright!

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