

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Paul Dukas (1865–1935)

Written: 1897

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: 11 minutes

Near the end of his life, the composer Paul Dukas burned all but a very small portion of his life's work. If he were alive today, he may have wished that he left more music around, because his reputation rests on one piece. Here in America, were it not for Mickey Mouse and Disney's 1940 film *Fantasia*, contemporary American audiences might know nothing of Paul Dukas.

Paul Dukas' father was a banker and his mother was an accomplished pianist who died when he was only five. Although he played the piano as a child, Paul didn't show any real aptitude toward music until he turned fourteen. When he was sixteen, he enrolled at the Paris Conservatory, where he befriended the slightly older Claude Debussy. Even though Paul did well as a student, he dropped out. He was frustrated that he couldn't win any of those prizes, like the coveted *Prix de Rome*, that helped establish so many composers. After a short stint in the military, he started a career as a music critic and composed. He wrote an overture in 1892, *Polyeucte*, that received some acclaim, as did his *Symphony in C*, which he wrote four years later. However, it was in 1897, when he wrote *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, that the world suddenly acknowledged Paul Dukas. Later, he wrote an opera based on the story of Bluebeard that is still admired in France. Dukas set such high standards for himself that he rarely released any of his music. Today, musicians rarely perform any of the music that he wrote in the latter half of his life.

Dukas based *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* on a poem that Goethe wrote one hundred years earlier, called *Der Zauberlehrling*. The poem tells of a sorcerer who can turn a broomstick into a real servant. The sorcerer's apprentice overhears the magic formula and, one day when the old man is gone, tries it out. Sure enough, the broomstick does his bidding and starts bringing water from the nearby river to fill his bath. There is a problem. The apprentice does not know how to turn the magic off. As the water in the house begins to rise, the boy desperately axes the broom into pieces. Now, to his horror, each piece of the broom is bringing in the water. In the midst of the chaos, the sorcerer returns home. "Sir, my need is sore," the apprentice cries. "Spirits that I've cited/My commands ignore." The sorcerer says the magic word and restores order.

Dukas' masterful music follows the narrative of the poem. In the introduction, soft strings suggest a magical and watery atmosphere while the clarinet, oboe, and flute intone what will become the theme of the unstoppable broom. A sudden quickening of the tempo portrays the disobedient apprentice, while the snarling muted brass intone the magic spell. After a sudden and eerie silence, the story begins again in earnest with the bassoons playing the broom theme. Soon enough, the music become chaotic; perhaps you will be able to imagine the pleadings of the beleaguered apprentice amidst the rising waters. After a full-throated statement of the "spell" theme from the brass and a lull in the action—the apprentice has cut the broom into pieces—the contrabassoon begins the melee again. This time the orchestra gets even more frantic. At the peak of the action, the brass once again powerfully state the "spell" theme. The master has returned and restores order. All is quiet until a final orchestral outburst signals the end of the story.

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Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra

Jean Françaix (1912–1997)

Written: 1967–68

Movements: Four

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 23 minutes

About ten years after it was written, the English clarinetist Jack Brymer described Jean Françaix's *Concert for Clarinet* as "a work for the future, possibly, when the instrument has developed further or the human hand has changed . . ." After hearing a remarkable recording of his concerto by the French clarinetist Philippe Cuper, Françaix called it an "evil concerto." In the program notes for that recording, Françaix described the concerto as "a kind of aerobatics display for the ear, complete with loops, wing-turns and nose-dives which are fairly terrifying for the soloist. . . ."

Jean Françaix had musicians for parents. His mother taught singing at the Le Mans Conservatory and his father, who was its director, was a pianist and composer. Jean studied piano with his father and composed his first piece when he was six. When he was ten, he sent one of his compositions to Maurice Ravel who commented, "Among this child's gifts I notice above all the most fertile that an artist can possess: curiosity. You must not stifle these precious gifts now or ever, or risk letting this young sensibility wither." Later, he studied composition with the famed Nadia Boulanger (who taught so many American composers, including Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein). When Françaix was twenty, he performed his own *Concertino* at a music festival dedicated to avant-garde music in Baden-Baden. A reviewer remarked, "after so much problematic or labored music, this *Concertino* was like fresh water, rushing from a spring with the gracious spontaneity of all that is natural."

Throughout his life, Françaix was one of France's most successful composers. However, he was something of an anomaly. He refused to buy in to the atonality of the avant-garde. His goal in music was to give pleasure. "When I am composing, the finest theories are the last things that come to mind," he said. "My interest is not primarily attracted by the 'motorways of thought' but more the 'paths through the woods.'"

Jean Françaix's music is unflinchingly tonal. Reviewers describe it as spontaneous, transparent, witty, profound, ironic, and even a little mischievous. (His oratorio *The Apocalypse of St. John* depicts hell by the use of an orchestra made up of saxophones, an accordion, mandolin, and guitar.)

The four movements of the *Concerto for Clarinet* all have an easy-to-follow form. The first movement is in a standard sonata form with a bouncy first theme and a smooth, lyrical second theme. The development has the clarinet doing all sorts of acrobatics over the primary theme. A cadenza intrudes right before the second theme in the recapitulation. After that second theme, the movement ends with a wink. The second movement is a scherzo that intentionally blurs the predominant triple rhythm. A trio section has an unmistakable "meow" motif in the clarinet part. The scherzo returns for a complete restatement, and then it simply fades away. The third movement is a simple, languid theme followed by three variations. The last movement is a rondo. The main theme has a carefree lilting character to it, in spite of its sometimes-confusing rhythm. The bassoon introduces the first episode and the soloist gets a first cadenza before the return of the main theme. Mocking chirps and a statement of the main melody from the first movement characterize the second episode. A second short cadenza brings back the main theme briefly before the concerto, like a toy box, slams shut.

"I know my music is valid, and I know the public likes it," Françaix said. "The musicians like it." He hoped that this concerto would "amuse listeners. To play it is another matter!"

Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose)

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Written: 1908–1911

Movements: Five

Style: Impressionist

Duration: Sixteen minutes

Maurice Ravel was not much taller than a child. He never married and was childless, but he loved children, their toys, playing games with them, and telling them stories. One of his little friends, Mimi Godebski, remembered Ravel's visits:

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 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 bread crumbs to leave himself a path out of a forest. You can hear little Tom's wanderings by the constantly shifting meter of the music. 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 gets 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.

An American in Paris

George Gershwin (1898–1937)

Written: 1928

Movements: One

Style: American Contemporary

Duration: 16 minutes

George Gershwin was the original “crossover” composer. His rag *Rialto Ripples*, written in 1917, and the hit song of 1919, *Swanee*, eventually led to the great Broadway shows *Lady Be Good*, *Oh Kay*, *Funny Face*, *Strike Up the Band*, *Show Girl*, *Girl Crazy* and *Of Thee I Sing*. He wedged his foot into the “classical” tent in 1924 at a concert by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra called “An Experiment in Modern Music.” The hit of the evening was Gershwin’s contribution: *Rhapsody in Blue*. Walter Damrosch, the conductor of the New York Symphony Society (later called the New York Philharmonic), was in the audience. He was so impressed, the next day he contacted Gershwin and asked him to write a concerto for piano and orchestra. Gershwin immediately agreed and, in his own words, promptly went out and got “four or five books on musical structure to find out exactly what the concerto form really was!”

After the success of the *Concerto in F*, he started to study composition in earnest with “classical” musicians. He asked Maurice Ravel if he could take orchestration lessons from him. Ravel replied, “You would only lose the spontaneous quality of your melody, and end by writing bad Ravel.” One of Gershwin’s tennis buddies in Hollywood was none other than the arch-modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg. When Gershwin suggested studying composition with him, Schoenberg demurred. Gershwin’s yearly income of nearly \$200,000 (in 1920s dollars!) made it so that Schoenberg wanted lessons from Gershwin!

Damrosch commissioned a second work from Gershwin. It was during several trips to Paris (where he bought authentic Parisian taxi horns) that Gershwin got the idea of writing “An American in Paris.” He finished the piano version of it in August 1928, and it had its orchestral premiere that December. Gershwin collaborated with his friend Deems Taylor to write the program notes for the premiere performance. They are quite extensive and a little too detailed, leaving almost nothing for the musical imagination. However, in an interview for the music magazine *Musical America*, Gershwin described it more succinctly:

This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely and is the most modern music I've yet attempted. The opening part will be developed in typical French style, in the manner of Debussy and the Six [a group of composers made up of Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger among others], though all the themes are original. My purpose is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls about the city and listens to various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere. As in my other orchestral compositions, I've not endeavored to represent any definite scenes in this music. The rhapsody is programmatic only in a general impressionistic way . . .

The opening gay section is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simpler than in the preceding pages. This blues rises to a climax, followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impression of Paris. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.