Maurice Ravel

“Daphnis et Chloé”

JOSEPH MAURICE RAVEL was born in Ciboure near Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Basses-Pyrénées, in the Basque region of France just a short distance from the Spanish border, on March 7, 1875, and died in Paris on December 28, 1937. Serge Diaghilev commissioned the ballet “Daphnis et Chloé” in 1909. Ravel composed the ballet in 1909-10 (a piano score was published in 1910) and completed the scoring in 1911, though there was some recasting of the concluding Bacchanale after a private hearing, so the work was not ready until April 5, 1912. By that time the first concert suite had already been performed, on April 2, 1911, at a concert in the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris under the direction of Gabriel Pierné. Pierre Monteux conducted the first stage performance, in a production by Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet on June 8, 1912, also at the Châtelet. Scenario and choreography were by Mikhail Fokin (Michel Fokine), scenery and costumes by Léon Bakst; the principal dancers were Vaslav Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina.

THE SCORE OF “DAPHNIS ET CHLOÉ” calls for three flutes, alto flute, and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, castanets, crotales, cymbals, wind machine, bass drum, tenor drum, tambourine, tam-tam, triangle, celesta, glockenspiel, xylophone, two harps, strings, and wordless chorus (typically omitted from performance of the concert suites), plus offstage piccolo, E-flat clarinet, horn, and trumpet (also omitted from the suites).

The ballet Daphnis et Chloé is Ravel’s longest and most ambitious work. Both his operas (L’Enfant et les sortilèges and L’Heure espagnole) are in a single act, and he preferred to work on Chopin’s rather than on Wagner’s scale. He was not exactly a miniaturist, but his consummate precision in matters of detail and technique spared him the need for a broad canvas or for any Mahlerian endeavor to search endlessly for the essence of his own ideas. They are perfectly formed and whole from the start.

In Daphnis et Chloé, though, he attempted the larger scale, and perhaps it is no surprise that the work is better-known in the form of orchestral suites that divide it into sections of a more typically Ravelian dimension. It belongs to the most fertile period of his life and provides an invaluable glimpse not only of his incomparable musicianship but also of the extraordinary wealth of artistic activity in Paris just before the Great War.

Much of the credit for this surge of creativity must be accorded to Serge Diaghilev, the Russian impresario who commissioned scores from Debussy, Ravel, Dukas, and Satie (to name only the French composers on his list) and who had a knack for throwing together collaborators in different spheres (painters, dancers, musicians) who could work enthusiastically together. But even without Diaghilev the age was teeming: the rapid expansion of orchestral technique at the turn of the century, the prosperity of the European capitals, and the sense of unstoppable cultural advance—all this came together to produce an artistic heritage that dwarfed the output of the rest of the twentieth century.

Diaghilev came to Paris in 1907 with some Russian concerts, in 1908 with Mussorgsky’s Boris Godunov, and in 1909 with the first season of the famous Ballets Russes. On each visit his ear was tuned in to local talent. Ravel was producing a series of masterpieces, mostly for piano or chamber ensemble, and although he completed the one-act opera L’Heure espagnole in 1907, it was not staged until 1911. Diaghilev can only have guessed at Ravel’s sense of stagecraft at that time; perhaps he heard the orchestral Rapsodie espagnole in 1908. By 1909 he had brought together Ravel and Mikhail Fokin, his choreographer, and had commissioned a ballet.

The proposed subject was a touchingly sensuous romance, “The Pastoral Loves of Daphnis and Chloé,” attributed to Longus, a Greek author of the third century A.D. This story entered French literary consciousness in 1559 when Jacques Amyot translated it from Greek. Amyot’s translation was reprinted in Paris in 1896. In June 1909 Ravel wrote: “I’ve just had an insane week: preparation of a ballet libretto for the next Russian season. Almost every night work until 3 a.m. What complicates things is that Fokin doesn’t know a word of French, and I only know how to swear in Russian.” Although Fokin is usually credited with the idea for the ballet, his ignorance of French suggests that the originator was more probably Diaghilev himself.

Despite Ravel’s haste, it was to be three years before Daphnis et Chloé reached the stage. A piano draft was ready by May 1910 and was in fact published that year. The first orchestral suite was played by the Colonne Orchestra and published in 1911, presumably with Diaghilev’s approval, and the full ballet was first staged at the Théâtre du Châtelet on June 8, 1912, with Karsavina and Nijinsky in the main parts, with décor by Bakst, and conducted by Monteux. There had been disagreements and delays, and Ravel’s conception of an idealized Greece, based on 18th-century French paintings, clearly differed from Bakst’s, although he later described Bakst’s design for the second part as “one of his most beautiful.” The dancers found the music unusually difficult to dance to and the production was notable for its “deplorable confusion,” yet it was a triumph for the principal dancers and the music was recognized from the first as a masterpiece.

Ravel liked to think he had written a “symphonic” score. He even called it a “choreographic symphony.” He is
certainly meticulous and inventive in his use of principal themes, but his primary purpose was to convey action and atmosphere. The score closely describes the stage action, which must largely be missed in concert performances, although the character of individual dances and ensembles is clear enough. Ravel calls on the full modern orchestra, with infinite resourcefulness in his use of string effects, harps, muted brass, alto flute and other rarities, a wide selection of percussion, and a wordless chorus. Nowhere is his orchestral brilliance more varied and more vivid than in Daphnis et Chloé. When the upper woodwinds are in full spate and the lowest instruments are firmly anchored to slow-moving bass notes, the characteristic sound of the late-Romantic orchestra is displayed at its richest.

The score is in three continuous parts with concerted dances and set pieces at intervals: in between are passages of action or “recitativo” to convey the interaction of characters or events. The opening scene is a grotto in a woody landscape where young shepherds and shepherdesses gather round the figures of three nymphs carved in a rock. Daphnis and Chloé are childhood companions who learn jealousy first through the attentions of Dorcon, an oxherd. He and Daphnis compete for her by dancing: Dorcon’s grotesque dance arouses derision, and Daphnis is left to discover the ecstasy of Chloé’s kiss. Lyceion, a shepherdess (two clarinets), then tempts Daphnis and leaves him troubled.

A band of pirates approaches and they carry Chloé off. Daphnis, searching for her, finds her sandal and curses his ill-fortune. Suddenly the statues glow and come to life. The nymphs’ solemn dance leads Daphnis to the god Pan. A distant chorus covers a change of scene to the pirate camp where celebrations are in full swing. Bryaxis, the pirate chieftain, orders the prisoner Chloé to dance. In the middle of her dance she vainly attempts to flee, twice. Bryaxis carries her off, whereupon a mysterious atmosphere overtakes the scene and the pirates are pursued by cloven-hoofed followers of Pan, whose formidable image then appears. The pirates scatter and the scene returns to the grotto of the beginning for the famous dawn music (which is the start of the Suite No. 2 drawn by the composer from the complete score). The shepherds have come to reunite Daphnis and Chloé. In gratitude the pair reenact the story of Pan and Syrinx (pantomime), and the ballet ends with the tumultuous Danse générale.

Hugh Macdonald

Hugh Macdonald is Avis Blewitt Professor Emeritus of Music at Washington University in St. Louis. General editor of the New Berlioz Edition, he has written extensively on music from Mozart to Shostakovich and is a frequent guest annotator for the BSO.

THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA has performed the Suite No. 2 from “Daphnis et Chloé” much more often than the complete score. Karl Muck introduced the second suite to the BSO repertory on December 14 and 15, 1917, subsequent performances being given by Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitzky (129 performances between 1925 and 1949), Charles Munch (95 performances between 1949 and 1965), Richard Burgin, Eugene Ormandy, Seiji Ozawa, Milton Katims, Claudio Abbado, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, Charles Dutoit, André Previn, James Conlon, Kent Nagano, Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, Emmanuel Krivine, James Levine, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, Ludovic Morlot, Lorin Maazel, Marcelo Lehninger, and Jacques Lacombe (in July 2016 at Tanglewood).

Charles Munch gave the BSO’s first performances of the complete score in January 1955, with the New England Conservatory Chorus and Alumni Chorus directed by Robert Shaw in association with Lorna Cooke deVaron. Subsequent complete performances were led by Munch, Michael Tilson Thomas, Seiji Ozawa, Charles Dutoit, Pierre Boulez, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, James Levine (whose October 2007 subscription performances were the basis for a Grammy-winning CD release on BSO Classics), and Bernard Haitink (on several occasions, including tour performances in London and Edinburgh in August 2001. The Tanglewood Festival Chorus, John Oliver, conductor, was the chorus for all but one of the BSO’s previous complete performances of “Daphnis” in Boston and at Tanglewood starting with Seiji Ozawa’s subscription performances in October 1974, the exception being BSO subscription performances under Pierre Boulez in March 1986, which featured Lorna Cooke deVaron’s New England Conservatory Chorus. The Tanglewood Festival Chorus has also joined the BSO for complete performances in New York and Providence under Ozawa (in the 1974-75 season) and in London and Edinburgh under Haitink (in August 2001), as well as performing the work with Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony at Tanglewood in July 1990. For performances in Ann Arbor and Chicago under Ozawa in April 1975, Ozawa and the BSO were joined by the Ann Arbor Festival Chorus, Donald T. Bryant, conductor.