Maurice Ravel
“L’Enfant et les sortilèges,” Lyric fantasy in two parts

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. He composed “L’Enfant et les sortilèges” (“The Child and the Spells”), on a libretto by Colette, between 1920 and 1925, though mostly in 1924-25. The first performance took place at the Monte Carlo Opera on March 21, 1925, with Victor de Sabata conducting, Géorge Balanchine as ballet master, and Raoul Gunsberg directing.

THE SCORE OF “L’ENFANT ET LES SORTILÈGES” calls for a mezzo-soprano as the Child, a number of other singers among whom the numerous smaller parts are distributed, chorus, and an orchestra of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, two timpani, small kettledrum in D, triangle, tambourine, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, whip, rattle (with a crank), rasp, wood block, wind machine, crotales, slide-flute, xylophone, celesta, harp, piano, piano-luthéal (a prepared upright piano is used in these concerts), and strings.

Ravel’s two one-act operas—L’Enfant et les sortilèges and the earlier L’Heure espagnole—are perfect gems. Far from the remote brooding worlds of Wagner’s and Debussy’s operas, they evoke color and action and draw the audience into fantastical scenes with brilliantly clever stagecraft and music. They are not ideological tracts, not bitter cries against pain or injustice, not designed to shock or alienate; their purpose is to entertain, to bewitch, to evoke laughter and tears, and to send us home in a state of high euphoria, lost in admiration of the fantasy, imagination, and technique that went into their making. All good operas are unique, but most belong to a tradition or at the very least to a special body of works. Not so with Ravel: neither of his operas can readily be compared to any other of his own time or of previous centuries.

Ravel was proud of his highly polished technique and liked to challenge his extraordinary powers of description. He was, after all, the most accomplished musician of his time. Those who knew him well attested to the warm heart beating beneath that fastidious exterior, and only envious critics accused him of being a “mere technician.” In harmony, in rhythm, and in orchestration he was simply far ahead of the field, not excluding Strauss and Stravinsky, both of whom, in their own ways, were formidably well-equipped as composers. In melodic richness perhaps Ravel cannot here be compared to Puccini or to his own earlier tunefulness in the string quartet or the Sonatine, but in his operas he was after a different effect, in pursuit of which he succeeded spectacularly well.

In L’Heure espagnole (“The Spanish Hour”), his first opera, performed in 1911, his aim was to regenerate Italian opera buffa by crossing it with French farce. He was looking beyond Offenbach and traditional French opéra-comique (regular favorites like Auber’s Fra Diavolo and Hérold’s Zampa) to the genre we know best from Mozart’s Da Ponte operas. He stressed that it was not an opera but a “musical comedy,” which to a Frenchman recalled plays such as those by Feydeau, whose incomparable skill at maneuvering his characters in and out of bedrooms is well matched in the short play by Franc-Nohain which Ravel chose as the subject for his first opera. The humor resides in the series of lovers, each more absurd than the last, who pay court to the beautiful Concepción while her husband, a Toledo clockmaker, is out attending to the city’s clocks. Ravel responded eagerly to the story’s Spanish background. When he came to compose his other opera, L’Enfant et les sortilèges, his style had changed considerably. It was originally as a ballet, to be staged by the Paris Opéra, that it was devised during World War I by the novelist and music hall entertainer Colette. She proposed Ravel as the composer, following his striking success with Daphnis et Chloé, but he saw it, with a remarkable leap of the imagination, as an opera of a very unusual kind. Animals and objects had conventionally been represented in ballet, but how on earth was this vast cast of animals and things (furniture, flames, teapots, etc.) to be realized on stage and asked to sing? The score in fact contains a continuous stream of stage directions of the most precise kind, showing the detailed transmogrifications that occur in the action and allowing (it seems) little scope for creative variation. The main character is a boy of six or seven (to be sung by a mezzo of considerable ability), and the crowds of other characters and animals are to be doubled up in various ways. In the end it was the Monte Carlo Opera, with its reputation as one of the most enterprising of European houses at that time, that undertook to stage the piece, and it opened there in March 1925.

Some of Ravel’s fluency had faded, but not his highly polished craft. To some extent he was turning his back on the richly chromatic style that he cultivated before the war. He was now fond of truly ascetic textures like the accentless flow of oboes in fourths and fifths that introduces the bored child in the opening scene, and the touching aria for the Princess, accompanied only by a lonely flute. After the Princess disappears, the boy sings a sad little song, “Toi, le coeur de la rose,” that could have been one of Fauré’s more austere mélodies. Elsewhere, though, the orchestral texture is richer and more delicately colored than ever. His orchestra is large, but selectively used, with a huge array of percussion, including whip, rattle, cheese-grater, wind-machine, and slide-flute. He also called for a kind of piano...
whose timbre could be altered in various ways (the piano-luthéal, now extinct, which he also called for in his violin- and orchestra piece *Tzigane*).

The opera is not unlike a revue, with its succession of characters and scenes, many of them humorous. A new element is American popular music, the craze that swept Europe in the wake of all those doughboys hanging around in Paris cafés in 1918. Ravel seems to anticipate Gershwin in his languorous tune for the china cup, and hints constantly at ragtime and the blues. The Viennese waltz is more present than ever, especially in the beautiful scene for the dragonfly, which seems to carry on where the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* left off. Sometimes Ravel can reduce us to tears with the most simple means, as for example when the shepherds and shepherdesses lament their suffering in a little pastoral song accompanied by drones and little drums. And when at the end the animals all come forward to sing, in the plainest language and in an archaic contrapuntal style, “Il est bon, l’enfant, il est sage,” the story is touchingly complete. The boy’s final “Maman!,” on a falling fourth, is the perfection of understatement.

What is it all about? Both Colette and Ravel loved cats and both were very fond of their mothers, but it’s not a plea for animal rights, surely, nor is it a hymn to Nature. If the moral is that boys must not be naughty, we can only shrug and reply “duh.” As in Janáček’s *The Cunning Little Vixen*, animals can teach us much about emotion and responsibility, forgiveness and remorse. And while we are learning these lessons, we are dazzled and delighted by the scenic wonders before our eyes and the musical magic wrought by Ravel’s incomparable craft.

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, is a regular pre-concert speaker for the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, and is a frequent guest annotator for the BSO. His latest book, “Music in 1853: Biography of a Year” (Boydell Press), was published this past spring.

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of Ravel’s “L’Enfant et les sortilèges” was given in San Francisco, at the Civic Auditorium, on September 19, 1930.

ALL OF THE PREVIOUS BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES of “L’Enfant et les sortilèges” were conducted by Seiji Ozawa: first in October 1974 in Boston and at Avery Fisher Hall in New York, with mezzo-soprano Jan de Gaetani as the Child, soprano Phyllis Bryn-Julson, mezzo-soprano D’Anna Fortunato, contralto Mary Davenport, tenor Neil Rosenshein, baritone David Evitts, bass Mark Pearson, and the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, John Oliver, conductor; then on August 23, 1975, at Tanglewood, with the same cast except with mezzo-soprano Joy Davidson in place of Mary Davenport; and more recently in November 1996, with mezzo-soprano Susan Graham as the Child, sopranos Sumi Jo and Elizabeth Norberg-Schulz, mezzo-soprano Monica Bacelli, contralto Nathalie Stutzmann, tenor Robert Tear, baritone Chris Pedro Trakas, bass-baritone José van Dam, and the Tanglewood Festival Chorus.

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Synopsis of the Plot

A little boy of six or seven is sitting idly at an exercise book. He is out of sorts, and just wants to get up to mischief. His mother scolds him and leaves him some tea and dry bread. As soon as she’s gone, he flies into a rage, smashes the teapot and cup, sticks his pen into the caged squirrel, pulls the cat’s tail, stirs up the fire, knocks over the kettle, attacks the wallpaper with the poker, swings on the clock’s pendulum, tears up his books, and collapses in an armchair.

At this point fantastic things begin to happen and the child’s world fights back. The armchair stirs into life and begins to dance with a Louis XV bergère: they’ll not let the little boy sit on them anymore. Nor will the bench, the couch, or the wicker chair. The clock, striking irregularly, is badly damaged. The Wedgwood teapot, in broken English, and the china cup, in broken Chinese, console each other by teasing the boy. The fire flares out of the hearth and threatens him, but is restrained by the cinder.

Night is falling and a group of shepherds and shepherdesses peel away from the torn wallpaper and lament their fate. From the page of a mutilated book a beautiful princess appears, sad that her story will never reach its end and her prince will never come. She disappears, leaving the child desolate. From another book leaps a cavalcade of numbers led by a little old man spouting meaningless mathematics. The moon is now up, and the boy attempts to stroke the cat. But the cat spits back and pays more attention to another cat out in the garden. The fire flares out of the hearth and threatens him, but is restrained by the cinder.

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each other. The child realizes that they care nothing for him and that he is alone. “Maman!” he cries, as they all persecute him. A baby squirrel falls wounded and the boy ties up its paw with a ribbon.

Suddenly the animals feel sorry for him and are touched by his action. The child, too, has been hurt, and wants his mother, they realize. He is a good child after all. They lead him back to the house, where he holds out his arms to his mother.

Hugh Macdonald

To Read and Hear More...

The Stravinsky article in the 2001 New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians is by Stephen Walsh, who is also the author of an important two-volume Stravinsky biography: Stravinsky–A Creative Spring: Russia and France, 1882-1934 and Stravinsky–The Second Exile: France and America, 1934-1971 (Norton). The 1980 Grove entry was by Eric Walter White, author of the crucial reference volume Stravinsky: The Composer and his Works (University of California). Other useful books include The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky, edited by Jonathan Cross, which includes a variety of essays on the composer’s life and works (Cambridge University Press), Michael Oliver’s Igor Stravinsky in the wonderfully illustrated series “20th-Century Composers” (Phaidon paperback), Neil Wenborn’s Stravinsky in the series “Illustrated Lives of the Great Composers” (Omnibus Press), Stephen Walsh’s The Music of Stravinsky (Oxford paperback), and Francis Routh’s Stravinsky in the “Master Musicians” series (Littlefield paperback). Charles M. Joseph’s Stravinsky Inside Out challenges some of the popular myths surrounding the composer (Yale University Press). If you can find a used copy, Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents by Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft offers a fascinating overview of the composer’s life (Simon and Schuster). Craft, who worked closely with Stravinsky for many years, has also written and compiled numerous other books on the composer. Noteworthy among the many specialist publications are Confronting Stravinsky: Man, Musician, and Modernist, edited by Jann Pasler (California), and Richard Taruskin’s two-volume, 1700-page Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through “Mavra,” which treats Stravinsky’s career through the early 1920s (University of California).

Stravinsky himself recorded The Nightingale in 1960 with the Orchestra and Chorus of the Opera Society of Washington, D.C. (Sony). Other recordings include Pierre Boulez’s with the BBC Symphony (Erato), James Conlon’s with the Orchestre de l’Opéra National de Paris (EMI), Robert Craft’s with the Philharmonia Orchestra (Naxos), and James Levine’s with Metropolitan Opera forces (a 1984 radio broadcast issued by the Met as part of a large collection celebrating the conductor’s fortieth anniversary with the company). Roger Nichols’s Ravel, published in 2011 (Yale University Press), has now replaced his earlier biography of the composer that was part of the “Master Musicians” series. Nichols also assembled Ravel Remembered, which brings together recollections from musicians and non-musicians who knew the composer personally (Farrar Strauss & Giroux). Gerald Larner’s Maurice Ravel is one of the many well-illustrated volumes in the biographical series “20th-Century Composers” (Phaidon paperback). Also useful are The Cambridge Companion to Ravel, edited by Deborah Mawer (Cambridge University Press), Arbie Orenstein’s Ravel: Man and Musician (Dover), Orenstein’s A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews (also Dover), and Benjamin Ivry’s Maurice Ravel: a Life (Welcome Rain). Laurence Davies’s Ravel Orchestral Music in the series of BBC Music Guides provides a good brief introduction to that subject (University of Washington paperback). Also out of print but worth seeking is Davies’s The Gallic Muse, a collection of essays on Fauré, Duparc, Debussy, Satie, Ravel, and Poulenc (Barnes). Charles Dutoit recorded L’Enfant et les sortilèges with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (Decca). On other recordings, Lorin Maazel conducts the French National Radio Orchestra (Deutsche Grammophon Originals), André Previn conducts the London Symphony Orchestra (two recordings, the earlier on EMI, the later one on DG), Simon Rattle conducts the Berlin Philharmonic (EMI), Ernest Ansermet conducts the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (Decca Eloquence), and James Levine conducts Metropolitan Opera forces (another of the radio broadcasts—this one from 2002—issued by the Met to celebrate Levine’s fortieth anniversary with the company). An esteemed 1947 recording—the first complete recording of L’Enfant—with Ernest Bour conducting the ORTF National Orchestra remains available and important (reissued on compact disc by Testament).