

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### Maurice Ravel

Born March 7, 1875, Ciboure, Basses Pyrénées, France.

Died December 28, 1937, Paris, France.

### ***Mother Goose, Complete Ballet***

Ravel composed *Mother Goose* as a suite of five pieces for piano duet between 1908 and 1910; the first performance was given in Paris on April 20, 1910. In 1911, Ravel orchestrated and refashioned the suite as a ballet, rearranging the five pieces and adding a prelude and a new dance at the beginning (as well as brief interludes). The first performance of the complete ballet was given in Paris on January 28, 1912. The score for the complete ballet calls for an orchestra consisting of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, two horns, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, xylophone, glockenspiel, celesta, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of music from Ravel's *Mother Goose* were given at Orchestra Hall on December 27 and 28, 1912, with Frederick Stock conducting. The Orchestra first performed the complete ballet on January 26, 27, and 28, 1978, with Leonard Slatkin conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were of the complete ballet, given on May 24, 25, 26, and 29, 2007, with Alan Gilbert conducting. The Orchestra first performed a suite from the ballet at the Ravinia Festival on July 8, 1937, with Ernest Ansermet conducting, and most recently on August 6, 1981, with Edo de Waart conducting.

Although he had none of his own, Ravel loved children. Throughout his life, he kept his ability to see the world through a child's eyes, and he never outgrew his passion for creating elaborate toys and reading fairy tales aloud. The adult composer, little taller himself than most children, particularly enjoyed the company of Mimie and Jean Godebski, the daughter and son of his friends Cipa and Ida Godebski, a young Polish couple whose Paris apartment was a gathering place for some of the greatest artists of the day, including André Gide, Jean Cocteau, Erik Satie, and, from time to time, Igor Stravinsky. Ravel was a regular visitor to the Godebskis' salon, and it's possible that he was drawn as much by the enchanting games and conversation he shared with Mimie and Jean as he was by the more rarefied discussion among the grown-ups.

Ravel often made up stories to tell the Godebski children, and, when they were apart, he sent them funny postcards. But the greatest treasure among his many gifts to Mimie and Jean is a suite of pieces inspired by the *Mother Goose* tales, originally written for piano duet and intended to be played by children. Ravel dedicated the score to Mimie and Jean, in the hope that they would give the first performance, but, although, they were unusually accomplished pianists for children, they happily accepted the gift but declined the premiere. "To us," Jean later recalled, "it mainly meant a lot of work."

Two more precocious children, Geneviève Durony and Jeanne Leleu, then only six and seven years old, premiered the suite in April 1910. Ravel was so enchanted by Jeanne's performance in particular that he wrote to her:

When you are a great virtuosa and I either an old fogey, covered with honors, or else completely forgotten, you will perhaps have pleasant memories of having given an artist the very rare joy of hearing a work of his, one of a rather special nature, interpreted exactly as it should be.

*Mother Goose* is one of Ravel's most exquisite creations. "The idea of evoking the poetry of childhood in these pieces," Ravel later explained, "naturally led me to simplify my style and to refine my means of expression." Even when he orchestrated and enlarged the suite into a ballet score in 1911, he managed to heighten the music's sense of fantasy and adventure without taking away its grace and innocence.

Ravel borrows his title and two tales (Sleeping Beauty and Tom Thumb) from Charles Perrault, the seventeenth-century French writer who is responsible for preserving a number of well-known stories, including those of Little Red Riding Hood and Bluebeard. (It's Perrault's 1607 volume, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé avec des moralitez*—Stories or tales of olden times, with morals—that became known in France as "Mother Goose.")

Ravel begins with a Prelude that previews, in tantalizing fragments, the tales that follow. The Dance of the Spinning Wheel and Scene that begins without pause introduces us to the tale of Sleeping Beauty. As the orchestra races through measures of running sixteenth notes, an old woman works at her spinning wheel. A young princess enters, jumping rope; she trips against the spinning wheel, pricks her finger on the needle, and falls into a deep slumber. The subsequent Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty is as simple as the briefest of fairy tales—just twenty measures of limpid melody over plain, magically colored harmonies. The rest of the ballet depicts her dreams, which end when Prince Charming awakens her with a kiss in the Fairy Garden.

Ravel took the Conversations of Beauty and the Beast from the *Moral Tales* of Marie Leprince de Beaumont:

"When I think of your good heart you no longer seem so ugly to me." "Oh yes, good lady! I have a good heart, but I am a monster." "Many a man is more a monster than you." "If I had the wit, I should pay you a great compliment, but I am only a beast."

"Beauty, will you be my wife?" "No, Beast."

"I die happy, for I have the joy of seeing you once more." "No, my dear Beast, you will not die: You will live to become my husband!" . . . The Beast had disappeared, and she saw at her feet only a prince more beautiful than the god of love, who thanked her for having put an end to his spell.

Ravel gives the dialogue to the clarinet, playing Beauty, and the contrabassoon, as Beast. She dances to a gentle waltz, and they talk. Finally, with a sweeping harp glissando, he is transformed into a princely violin.

Ravel prefaces Tom Thumb with a quote from Perrault: "He thought he would easily find his way, thanks to the bread he had scattered wherever he had passed, but he was quite surprised when he couldn't see even a single crumb of it. Birds had come along and eaten every bit." Ravel shows us Tom Thumb's meanderings—the meter changes often and unpredictably—and also, unforgettably, the birds making off with the crumbs.

Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas is an oriental tale by the Countess d'Aulnoy, a Perrault contemporary and imitator. The empress is serenaded at her bath by her subjects: "At once mandarins and mandarinettes set to singing and to the playing of instruments: some had lutes made of nutshells, some had viols made from the shells of almonds, for their instruments had to be in proportion to their own scale." In the original four-hand version, the upper piano part is written entirely for the black keys, automatically producing melodies in the pentatonic scale, that most convenient way of conjuring up the Orient. When Ravel made his orchestral transcription, he serenaded the empress with an array of bell-like and percussive sounds—cymbals, xylophone, glockenspiel, celesta, harp, and the ceremonial striking of the tam-tam—recalling the Javanese gamelan ensemble the fourteen-year-old composer watched in wonder at the Paris Exhibition of 1889.

Prince Charming now enters The Fairy Garden (accompanied by the character of Love) and awakens his princess as day breaks. The music is warm and knowing—the world of Ravel's own childhood memories

viewed with the wisdom and affection of a grown man who has learned that only in fairy tales does one live happily ever after.

Without children of his own, and lacking any important students or disciples, Ravel grew, in his final years, to lament that no one would carry on his name or continue his work. "I have left nothing," he said. "I have not said what I wanted to say. Alas, I am not one of the great composers!" But nearly all of the sixty-some pieces of music he left behind have found a permanent place in the repertory—an astonishing and rare accomplishment—and Ravel's deep-seated fear that, as he told seven-year-old Jeanne Leleu, he would die "an old fogey," completely forgotten, turned out to be groundless.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

**For the record**

The Orchestra recorded a suite from Ravel's *Mother Goose* in 1968 with Jean Martinon conducting for RCA. A 1961 performance (for television) conducted by André Kostelanetz was released by Video Images.

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