

NOTES

L'Enfant et les Sortilèges

Ravel / Colette (Composed in 1925)

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Synopsis

Ravel's opera is set to a story and libretto by Gabriele-Sidonie Colette (more on her later) and tells of a rather truculent child who, when bidden by his mother to attend to his homework, throws an enormous tantrum. During the outburst, he breaks the clock, smashes the teapot and cup, pulls the tail of the cat and tortures the captive squirrel, rips down his wallpaper, stirs up the fire and tears up his homework and story books.

After this orgy of destruction, he sits down exhausted in the armchair, which to his amazement shuffles to life. Thus begins a whole series of animations by the wrecked objects. One by one they appear to taunt the wicked child for his selfishness and cruelty. The child then finds himself out in his beloved garden but even here the creatures he has terrorised assail him. Observing the care the animals show each other, he begins to feel isolated. Remorse for his previously indulgent behaviour begins to overtake him. Seeking retribution however, the creatures turn on the child and in the melee a little squirrel is hurt. The boy, in a hitherto unknown act of compassion, takes a neckerchief and binds the limb of the wounded animal before sinking down exhausted. The other animals observe this unprecedented act of kindness with astonishment and resolve to return the child to his 'nest' where they trust he will be reunited with the person whose name he had been calling earlier - "Mama!".

In a chorus of the utmost tenderness, they revive the child and calling his word "Maman", they lead him back to his house and his mother with the words "He is good, he is wise!"

La belle époque

... influences on French life and Art at the turn of the C20th century.

The death of Victor Hugo in 1885 is generally viewed by the French as the beginning of what was known as "la belle époque". It lasted some 30 years, World War 1 bringing it to an abrupt halt. The period was characterised by a vitalisation of Parisian highlife and a burgeoning of artistic experimentation and exchange of ideas through the salons and cafe culture of the time. Born in 1875, Maurice Ravel was more a product of this period than Francis Poulenc, who was born 24 years later than Ravel in 1899.

What helped galvanise the period was the first Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1889. It was ostensibly held to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution and made a strong impact upon Parisian life and Art. It also gave the world perhaps the most recognisable structure. For the Exposition, a renowned military engineer, Alexandre Gustave Eiffel designed and oversaw the erection of his now famous tower on the Champs de Mars. At the time, it received many protests because of its perceived vulgarity and blatant materialism. Despite the objections from such prominent artists as Dumas and Gounod, who believed that future generations would condemn its erection as an abomination, the tower became a symbol of the modernisation of Europe and as such made its mark in this colourful and innovative period. The Expo saw participation from over 50 countries and their various pavilions housed a dazzling array of exotic culture that had a profound influence on the French artists who witnessed them. Ravel in particular was fascinated by the gamelan displays from Bali, the Anannite dancers, as well as the Oriental and Russian displays. There were engineering and industrial displays (Ravel's father and brother were both engineers and from them he inherited his fascination with things mechanical). All these were a revelation to the 14 yr old and would serve to inspire his musical and literary taste for the rest of his life.

With the end of the War in 1918, despite the fact that the conflict had resolved little in regard to European or French politics - France had regained some pride in overturning or avenging its previous, protracted subjugation at the hands of the German military which in this war had been humbled but not converted (it wasn't until 1945 that France would get its act together politically); French politics were still in turmoil, racked by scandal and intrigue and downright poor leadership - there was a determination to make a fresh start, do away with the past. With the death of Debussy in 1918, one might expect that the mantle of France's leading composer would fall naturally upon Ravel. This was not so and perhaps it was because French society and culture wanted this fresh start and new faces that younger composers and the French society at large, looked more to the emerging group known as "Les Six" (Milhaud, Poulenc, Honegger, Auric, Durey and Tailleferre) than to the older (then 45) Ravel. He found himself temporarily out of favour, 'old hat'.¹ He was certainly less prolific in the 1920s and 30s - a fact due more to worsening ill health than loss of inspiration or motivation - but in reviewing that period from where we stand now, it is surely Ravel who comes to be seen as its most profound musical representative. True that *Daphnis and Chloe* and the *Piano Trio* were the high peaks of the pre-war years, but yet to come were such masterpieces as the two Piano Concertos, the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* and of course *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* - hardly the last vestiges of a spent force.

¹ The English composer and Master of the Queen's Musick Sir Arthur Bliss remembers meeting Ravel. "When, in 1919, I met Ravel in Paris I told him that his was the first 'modern' music I had ever known, and his slight answering shrug perhaps conveyed in ironic comment on my choice of words, the reaction against his works in favour of the 'circus music' of his juniors being very apparent at the time."



Maurice Ravel

Ravel – *the ‘Swiss watchmaker’*

... a snapshot of the man and his music.

Born of a Swiss father and a Basque mother, Ravel grew up in Paris where he studied harmony with Charles-René, a pupil of Délibes, and composition with Fauré. He remained very proud of his Basque heritage and he often used it to explain his natural reserve – a negative trait in the opinion of some critics of his music. As a composer Ravel developed a very distinctive style. He is often labelled as an Impressionist and mentioned alongside Debussy. However, his style has more complexity than the former and is distinctly different to the latter. Romanticism, Neo-Classicism, Spanish music, Jazz and the exotic all found a place in his oeuvre, which always managed to maintain a voice that was unmistakably ‘Ravel’.

An intensely private man, Ravel tended to avoid company and he lived, withdrawn, in a small house in the woods outside Paris. He chose his friends as meticulously as his pupils, of which he only accepted a few during his whole career (one was Ralph Vaughan Williams, in fact). Physically, he was quite small of stature and was someone who took enormous care with his appearance. His scores were just as meticulous, with quality always coming before quantity - it was this aspect of his style that led Stravinsky to call him the "Swiss watchmaker." In keeping with his Basque origins, he felt things deeply but these feelings were often concealed beneath a façade of elegance. Those who knew him well, commented on how he would seem to take delight in forming this façade in his private life and in his works. One of his collaborators, the writer Tristan Klingsor once said of him:

"This ambitious dreamer liked to give an initial impression of being occupied with the surface of things and took delight in setting himself up as a dandy. With the most serious air you can imagine he would encourage us to admire his ties and socks and would enter on solemn disputations about their colour.

...He used to keep his thoughts to himself. When occasionally he used to express them, seriousness was soon leavened with mockery. His voice sounded clear and bantering, his eyes sparkled and his curved mouth executed a mischievous smile. But never sarcastic."

Ravel never married or had children of his own but throughout his life he had a devotion to children and developed a particular kinship with them as demonstrated by the

amusing, illustrated letters he wrote to the sons and daughters of his friends. He composed some of his most hauntingly beautiful music for children or about the experiences of childhood. His "Ma Mere L'Oye," (Mother Goose suite) and of course *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* are the most obvious examples of this. In fact, as an adult, Ravel penetrated the child's world with an insight that few composers had done before. It may be that his empathy came through a shared passion for toys, especially the mechanical kind

"From childhood he had a particular liking for minute objects, miniatures, the tiny world of figurines, little things that worked by clockwork, mechanical birds 'whose heart-beats he felt' and miniscule Japanese gardens which evoked for him the giants of the forest."

.....or simply because Ravel, who was always painfully sensitive about his small stature, felt more comfortable with persons still smaller than himself!

Sadly, most people know Ravel only through his 'Bolero' (the film '10' has a lot to answer for!), a work demonstrating his mastery of orchestration but one which he dismissed as trivial and became embarrassed by its popularity, saying it was 'without music'. If you want to get to know the real Ravel, I recommend that you listen to some or all of the following works, which are representative, but by no means an exhaustive list of his best works.

Orchestral: *Daphnis and Chloe* Here is a wonderful example of why Ravel is regarded as one of the great masters of orchestration.

Concertos: The two Piano Concertos are amazingly diverse compositions. The G major, with its many jazz influences is bold and direct. By contrast, his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, is dark and brooding.

Works for Voice and Orchestra: *Shererazade. L'histoire naturelle* His output in the art song genre is not vast but distinguished. Most remarkable is his collection of songs to poems by Jules Renard, *L'histoire naturelle*. Here we see his love of animals so beautifully and sophisticatedly rendered. *Shererazade*, an orchestral cycle, is an imaginative journey into an exotic world of the Arabian Nights.

... and then there is the Piano Trio, String Quartet and his many works for piano etc.

In many ways *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* combines all of his prodigious gifts in a one act work of such beauty and sublimity that we should all feel privileged to be a part of one of its rare performances.



Colette

Colette: ‘...making soap bubbles out of mud.’

Ravel’s collaborator on *L’Enfant et les Sortilèges* was one of the most exceptional writers of the first half of the century. Born Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette on 28th January 1873, her life and career were colourful by anyone’s standards. Three marriages, a stint as a music-hall performer at the Moulin Rouge and a handful of scandals that kept Parisian society talking, she brought to her novels an insight which blended her acute perceptions of life and love with a particularly warm and guileless affection for nature.

A sensualist by inclination and cultivation, Colette’s love of nature was instilled in her by her mother, who awakened in her a wonder for all that “germinates, blossoms or flies.” Her four “Claudine” novels (1900-03) best represent her early writings, her self-proclaimed ‘years of apprenticeship’. Like most of her writings, these novels are semi-autobiographical, in these cases, reminiscences of a precocious young libertine. There followed several stories centred about animal and plant life in whose company she delighted. She published around fifty novels in total, many with autobiographical elements. Her themes can be roughly divided into idyllic natural tales or dark struggles in relationships and love. All her novels were marked by clever observation and dialogue with an intimate, explicit style. Her most popular novel, *Gigi* was made into a Broadway play as well as a highly successful Hollywood motion picture.

Colette’s collaboration with Ravel proved to be a fortuitous meeting of opposites – Colette, sensuous, fantastic and extrovert and Ravel, by temperament objective and detached, his Basque origins keeping his (deeply felt) emotions firmly in check.

Her language, behaviour and the audacity of her writings could shock as much as they could enchant, leading Jean Cocteau to say of her, not without a hint of jealousy, I think:

“...And there you have Colette. Playing truant, she won all the prizes. She is the only person who can make soap bubbles out of mud.”

Musical and Literary parody in *L'Enfant*.

At the Dress Rehearsal for the *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* in 1925, Ravel described his opera as “ a naive fairy tale, not without irony”. He went on to say that the score was:

*“... a very smooth blending of all styles from all epochs, from Bach up to...Ravel!
... it moves from opera to American operetta, with a bit of jazz band. The penultimate scene, to cite but one detail, is a deliberate combination of ancient chorus and music hall. The fantasy of the poem would have served no purpose had it not been sustained, indeed accentuated by the fantasy of the music”*

Without going into a detailed analysis of the whole opera and in no particular order, here are a few examples of the “blending of styles” of which Ravel speaks.

Duet for the Black Wedgwood teapot and the China cup

This duet is written to a Foxtrot with strong influences of American jazz, featuring a testing alto trombone solo. The China cup sings her solo to a pastiche of oriental sounds, both vocal and orchestral.

Colette’s original script called for a dialogue between an English teapot and ‘a porcelain cup from Limoges’. On reading the draft, Ravel suggested making the teapot a black Wedgwood piece to parody a match between two black boxers such as commonly appeared in Parisian music halls of the period. Colette gladly obliged and revised her script to include the curious lingual mix we see today. As for the original French Cup from Limoges, which in the first draft simply muttered “fouchtra” (a rather vulgar interjection in the Auvergnese dialect), it now had become an oriental one (satirizing the Parisian rage for things exotic) replete with a humorous mishmash of pseudo-oriental words. It has even been suggested that if this seemingly incomprehensible conglomeration of sounds bears a strong resemblance to an idiomatic dialect from Southern France (Could this be a tease on the part of Colette, who knew of Ravel’s proud Basque heritage?). Thus:

Colette’s libretto

Keng-a-fou, Mah-jong

Keng-a-fou puis-kong-kong-pran-pa

Ca-oh-r toujours l’air chino

Cas-ka-ra, harakiri, Sessue Hayakawa

Kek-ta foutuh d’mon Kaoua?

Suggested Reconstruction

Qu’on s’en fout, Mah-jong

Qu’on s’en fout, puis qu’on comprend pas

Ca aura toujours l’air chinois

Casquera, harakiri, Sessue Hayakawa

Qu’est-ce que tu as foutu de mon Kawa?

The translation of the suggested reconstruction would thus read:

That we don’t give a damn, Mahjong,

That we don’t give a damn, since we don’t understand:

It will always sound Chinese.

Someone will have to pay [committing] harakiri, Sessue Hayakawa!

Where the hell did you put my coffee?

Even if audiences are oblivious to the joke that Colette and Ravel seems to be having, we can still identify references to Mah-jong and Ping-pong (both games very popular in France in the 1920s), harakiri (the Japanese ritual for suicide) and certainly, contemporary audiences would have recognized references to Sessue Hayakawa, a popular Japanese actor of the time. The word “Kava” was the name for an intoxicating drink made from the root of a pepper plant from the South Pacific Islands. It was also a popular nickname for coffee.

In a broader sense, the ragtime music of the teapot and the largely pentatonic music of the cup represent the meeting of Eastern and Western cultures, referring back to the experiences of the Exposition Universelle of 1889 but also suggesting an allusion to *Madama Butterfly* to which Ravel refers in another interview of the time.

Dance of the Fire

A parody of early 19th Italian opera (eg Rossini) complete with trills, vocalises, multiplicity of high notes over a simple orchestral accompaniment. There is even the obligatory (unaccompanied) cadenza.

The Princess’s Lament

This is the self-parody that Ravel hints at in the quotation above. The duet with a single instrument (Flute) and the general sparseness of the texture is pure Ravel and has a strong resemblance to the Sonata for Violin and Cello that Ravel wrote about the same time.

The Child’s Lament at the departure of the Princess. (“Toi, le coeur de la rose.”)

Unmistakably this is a homage to Jules Massenet. His famous soprano aria from *Manon* “Adieu, le petit table” is surely the inspiration here.

Chorus of Frogs and Insects

The garden scene evokes from Ravel a marvellous palate of instrumental and vocal sounds. In Colette’s libretto, the chorus of Frogs croak out “Brekékékéx, coax, coax”, which is lifted directly from Aristophanes’ comic play *The Frogs* where a horde of noisy amphibians serenade Dionysus as he ferries across the Acheron into the underworld, calling “βρεκεκεκεξ, κοαζ, κοαζ.”

So with this literary borrowing we can begin to see that the satire is not necessarily something that originated with Ravel. Colette injects into this seemingly naive fairytale many potential layers of meaning and they get quite personal! For example:

Duet for the Armchair and the Sofa

The relationship between the armchair and the sofa can easily be seen to reflect the sour relationship that existed between Colette and her first husband, Henri Gauthier-Villars. As the child sinks exhausted into the armchair, it takes a few steps backward “hobbling like an enormous toad.” (In later writings, Colette referred to her husband as ‘bulbous’.)



Colette and Henri Gauthier-Villars

There ensues a “grotesque” dance for the Armchair (Gauthier-Villars) and the petite sofa (Colette), with the Armchair always leading the dance and the conversation, favouring the formal ‘vous’. It was common knowledge that Gauthier-Villars addressed Colette in this manner, rather than the more intimate ‘tu’ that one would expect of husband to wife. The sofa answers dutifully in short, incomplete phrases!

The Arithmetic Man

In this scene, the Little Old Man, along with his consort of numbers from the child’s torn homework book, bombard the child with impossible mathematical problems and erroneous answers.

This scene satirises an episode from Colette’s semi-autobiographical novel *Claudine à l’école*, an episode, I am sure, with which we can all sympathize.

“..... ‘A workman is planting stakes to make a fence. He plants them at such a distance from each other that the bucket of tar, in which he dips their lower ends to a depth of 30 cm, is empty at the end of three hours. Given that the quantity of tar which remains on the stake equals 10 cubic centimetres, that the bucket is a cylinder whose radius at the base is 0.15 metres and whose height is 0.75 metres and is three-quarters full, that the workman dips 40 stakes and hour and takes about 8 mins rest during that time, what is the area of the property which is in the form of a perfect square? State also what would be the number of stakes necessary if they were planted 10 centimetres further apart. State also the cost of this operation in both cases, if the stakes cost 3 francs a hundred and if the workman is paid 50 centimes an hour.’

Must one also say if the workman is happily married? Oh, what unwholesome imagination, what depraved brain incubates those revolting problems with which they torment us? I detest them! “

The Complaint of the Squirrel

Again this is an overt reference to Colette’s feeling of entrapment during her first marriage. She likened Gauthier-Villars treatment of her to that of her pet dog Toby. There exists a picture of her and the dog to which she has added the caption:

“Colette and Toby-Chien, two nice creatures who have been taught to ‘sit up’ and hold out their paws”



Colette and Toby-chien

As well as being repeatedly unfaithful to her, her husband pressed Colette into becoming one of his many ghost writers. He even resorted to locking her in her room (wherein he provided gymnasium equipment for her exercise!) until the material was produced. He would then publish it under his pen name of Willy. Thus it is no surprise that Colette often thought of herself as a caged animal. The child’s reference to the squirrel’s ‘beautiful eyes’ is also a direct reference to Colette, who by all accounts was blessed with exceptionally striking eyes. Colette’s last husband with whom she had a blissful relationship, comments upon this physical attribute:

“There were never any more beautiful eyes in the world, nor any which knew better how to see ... visitors always agreed that none of her photographs, no snapshot or painting, ever gave any idea of the alternating intensity and sweetness of her gaze.”

On the surface, *L’Enfant et les Sortilèges* is a charming fairytale and certainly it is meant to be enjoyed on that level by its creators. As shown above, there are also many other layers to explore and doing so will certainly add to one’s appreciation of the work. Some commentators have even gone so far as to suggest that the opera is a political satire, with the ‘petit bourgeoisie’ (represented by the animals) revolting against the child-tyrant. Follow that lead if you will!

