

Daphnis et Chloé, Choreographic Symphony in Three Parts

MAURICE RAVEL

Born

March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France

Died

December 28, 1937, in Paris

Work composed

begun in 1909; initial version of the piano score finished on May 1, 1910; considerably revised and expanded in 1911; orchestral score completed April 5, 1912, and published in definitive form in 1913

World premiere

first staged by the Ballets Russes at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, on June 8, 1912, Pierre Monteux conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere

November 29, 1914, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928 to form today's New York Philharmonic)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

March 18, 1975, Pierre Boulez, conductor

Estimated duration

ca. 50 minutes

Prince Igor (1909, to music by Borodin) and *Scheherazade* (1910, to Rimsky-Korsakov's score) had established the credentials of the company's core production personnel: director Diaghilev, choreographer Michel Fokine, designer Léon Bakst. In 1910 Diaghilev took the brave step of commissioning music for an entirely new ballet, thereby serving as midwife for Stravinsky's *L'Oiseau de feu* (*Firebird*). Stravinsky contributed another score for the 1911 season — *Petrushka* — and in 1913 did his part to inspire the riot that greeted the third of his ten ballets for the company, *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*).

In between, Diaghilev turned to Ravel. Fokine had been urging Diaghilev to consider a ballet on the myth of Daphnis and Chloé, and in early 1909 he began working with Ravel to devise a suitable scenario. For their source they turned to a pastoral romance attributed to the third-century (A.D.) Greek author Longus, as filtered through the late-16th-century French poet Jacques Amyot. From the outset the going was not easy. In June 1909 Ravel wrote to a friend,

I must tell you that 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 Fokine doesn't know a word of French, and I only know how to swear in Russian. In spite of the interpreters, you can imagine the savor of these meetings.

Work continued rather slowly, and in the event "the next Russian season" came and went, with *Daphnis et Chloé* still a work in progress. Whether due to the logistics of collaborating with his Russian colleagues or to some sort of personal block, Ravel fell farther and farther behind

When Maurice Ravel was approached about writing music for a new ballet being planned by Sergei Diaghilev for his Ballets Russes, the composer was understandably excited. Early productions such as the "Polovtsian Dances" from

schedule — so much so that at one point Diaghilev came close to canceling the whole project. Following considerable lobbying by Ravel's publisher, the impresario's better judgment ruled and the ballet (structured as a single act divided into three scenes) finally made its way to the stage of the Théâtre du Châtelet about two years later than Diaghilev had hoped, with Vaslav Nijinsky dancing the role of Daphnis and with Tamara Karsavina as Chloé. It shared a bill with Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, Nijinsky's erotic tour de force), Weber's *Le Spectre de la rose*, and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. Because the program fell at the very end of the company's season, it got only two performances. Although it was revived in

Paris the next season and in 1914 received a production in London, *Daphnis et Chloé* has enjoyed only sporadic success in the world of ballet. Ravel's score, however, has achieved the status of a classic, both in its complete form and through the orchestral suites the composer extracted from it.

The premiere left listeners and critics divided, due in part to a degree of inadequacy in the performance. The innumerable delays cut into rehearsal time, and being slated at the end of the season entailed further complications of scheduling, not to mention a certain physical exhaustion on the part of all concerned. A good deal of respect was forthcoming, but many well-informed listeners were baffled by the rhapsodic nature of the

Angels and Muses

The Ballets Russes was *au courant* in Paris in 1909, when Ravel began work on his *Daphnis et Chloé* score; a commission from the company was a sign that a composer had arrived at the summit of the cultural life in the city that prided itself as the summit of culture. In addition to scoring successes with Stravinsky's *Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1913), others of the Ballets Russes's commissions which have staked places in the repertoire include Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* and *Jeux*, *The Three-*

Cornered Hat by Falla, and *Les biches* by Poulenc.

Many of these works have entered the orchestral repertoire directly or through suites prepared by their composers. It is in the latter form that Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* score has endured: while the complete work is rarely staged by ballet companies, the composer's two suites — particularly the second — are favorites among orchestras and audiences worldwide.

— The Editors



Design by Léon Bakst for Part One of the premiere of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* at Paris's Théâtre du Châtelet

The Story

Fokine's ballet scenario for *Daphnis et Chloé* is divided into three parts, though the action is dovetailed into a single sweep in the staged ballet and, accordingly, in Ravel's score. Here is a summary of the general scenario, gleaned from inscriptions spread through the score:

PART ONE: Religious Dance. A meadow on the outskirts of a sacred wood in springtime. Youths and maidens bow before the altar of the Nymphs. The shepherd Daphnis enters and Chloé joins him. They prostrate themselves before the Nymphs. The dance is interrupted. Flirting and jealousy ensue, with the herdsman Dorcon making advances toward Chloé.

General Dance. At the end of the dance, the emboldened Dorcon wants to kiss Chloé. Daphnis pushes him aside and gently approaches Chloé. The young men propose a dance contest between Daphnis and Dorcon: the prize will be a kiss from Chloé.

Dorcon's Grotesque Dance: The crowd sarcastically imitates the herdsman's awkward motions, and the dance ends in general laughter.

Daphnis's Light and Graceful Dance: All invite Daphnis to receive his prize. The crowd withdraws, leading Chloé away. Daphnis remains motionless, as if in ecstasy.

Lycanion's entrance. She sees the young shepherd and approaches him. Daphnis tries to escape. Lycanion dances. She lets her veils fall, and Daphnis replaces them. Annoyed, she slips away, ridiculing him.

Sounds of war. The women are pursued by pirates. Daphnis dreams of Chloé, who may be in danger, and quickly leaves to rescue her. Chloé runs in, lost and seeking shelter. She throws herself before the altar of the Nymphs, begging their protection. A group of bandits abducts her. Daphnis enters, looking for Chloé. Coming to life, the Nymphs descend from their pedestal, revive Daphnis, and invoke the god Pan. Daphnis prostrates himself before the god.

PART TWO: War Dance. The pirates's camp. Their leader, Bryaxis, orders that the captive be brought in and commands her to dance.

Chloé's Dance of Supplication. She unsuccessfully tries to flee. She gives herself over to despair, thinking of Daphnis. Suddenly the atmosphere seems charged with strange new elements. Gradually, the entire camp is seized by terror. Little fauns appear and surround the pirates. The earth opens up. The formidable shadow of Pan is seen. Everyone flees, bewildered. On the deserted stage Chloé holds herself motionless. A glowing crown is placed on her head. The scene seems to dissolve. It is replaced with the landscape from Part One.

PART THREE: Daybreak. Daphnis remains stretched out before the grotto of the Nymphs. Shepherds enter and awaken Daphnis. Anguished, he looks about for Chloé. She at last appears surrounded by shepherdesses. The two rush into each other's arms. Daphnis notices Chloé's crown. His dream was a prophetic vision: the intervention of Pan is manifest. The old shepherd Lammon explains that Pan saved Chloé, in remembrance of the nymph Syrinx, whom the god loved.

Daphnis and Chloé mime the story of Pan and Syrinx. Chloé impersonates the young Nymph wandering over the meadow. Daphnis, as Pan, declares his love for her. The Nymph rejects him and disappears among the rushes. In desperation he plucks some reeds, fashions a flute, and plays a melancholy tune. Chloé falls into Daphnis's arms and he swears his fidelity. Young maidens enter, dressed as Bacchantes and shaking tambourines, and a group of young men come on the stage: joyous tumult.

General Dance. Dance of Daphnis and Chloé. Dorcon's Dance. Final Dance: Bacchanal.

music, which to some ears verged on the anarchic. Pierre Lalo found Ravel's music to be lacking in rhythm, while quite a few other critics commended the score particularly for its rhythmic verve. Robert Brussel, writing in *Le Figaro*, found himself "stirred, not because [Ravel's] manner is aggressive or haughty, but because it is infinitely gentle, fresh, and tender, as it should be for such a subject."

English horn, two clarinets plus 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, glockenspiel, xylophone, celesta, two harps, and often divided strings, along with optional parts for chorus, used in these performances.

Instrumentation: two flutes (two doubling piccolo) and alto flute, two oboes and

Trouble with the Premiere

The dancers of the Ballets Russes were utterly befuddled by the 5/4 meter which pervades the finale of *Daphnis et Chloé* (the "General Dance"). It was reported that the only way they managed to keep the five-beat measures straight was by incessantly repeating "Ser-gei Dia-ghi-lev." In an earlier version of the score, Ravel had written this music in 3/4 and 9/8 meter, but the modifications that move the section into 5/4 represent a compelling improvement in a musical — if perhaps not a choreographic — sense.

What's more, Ravel's contribution to the production was somewhat at odds with those of his collaborators. The sets, by Léon Bakst, reflected a sort of primitive barbarism, a spirit Ravel delved into only in his finale. Michel Fokine's choreography turned out to be so ultramodern for its time that the audience was said to have trouble imagining that it had much to do with Greek antiquity. In such a context, Ravel's ultimately Romantic conception of Greek antiquity stood rather on its own.



Léon Bakst's costume designs for the characters of Daphnis (top) and Chloé for the 1912 Parisian premiere