

Bacchus et Ariane Suite No. 2, Op. 43

ALBERT ROUSSEL

Born

April 5, 1869, in Tourcoing, a few miles north of Lille in French Flanders

Died

August 23, 1937, in Royan, France

Work composed

The ballet from which this suite is extracted was composed in 1930; it is dedicated to the composer's friend Hélène Tony-Jourdan.

World premiere

the complete ballet *Bacchus et Ariane*, on May 22, 1931, at the Paris Opéra, Philippe Gaubert, conductor; the *Bacchus et Ariane* Suite No. 2, on February 2, 1934, at Paris's Salle Pleyel, Pierre Monteux conducting the Paris Symphony Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere

February 1, 1947, Charles Munch, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

March 9, 1982, Charles Dutoit, conductor

Estimated duration

ca. 20 minutes

polemics, and he was a firm, generous friend to any number of young composers who were just entering the profession. He provided a forum for many through his position as president of the French division of the International Society for Contemporary Music. *La revue musicale*, the most prestigious French music journal, honored him twice by dedicating special issues entirely to his achievements. The first, in 1929, was accompanied by celebratory pieces composed in his honor by eight eminent figures, including Delage, Honegger, Ibert, Milhaud, and Poulenc, and a who's who of leading French musicologists and critics lined up to inscribe appreciations of the man and his music. At that point some of Roussel's best work still lay ahead, including his Third and Fourth Symphonies, his ballet *Bacchus et Ariane*, his Concertino for Cello and Orchestra, and his String Trio. Following his death, in 1937, his colleague Charles Koechlin summed things up: "He was a complete artist — a musician, a thinker, a man."

Roussel's musical awakening came late. His early years were tragically unstable: his father died when he was one, his mother when he was eight, and he moved from house to house to be raised by a succession of relatives. In 1887 he entered the Naval Academy and soon embarked on a career as a naval officer.

In 1892 he made his first stabs at composition while on an ocean voyage, and when he was 25 he decided that that was how he would prefer to make his mark in the world. He entered the Schola Cantorum in Paris and so excelled in the theory classes taught by the organist Eugène Gigout, and the music history and orchestration classes of the school's director, Vincent d'Indy, that he was invited to

Had you consulted any French composer in the middle decades of the past century, you might well have found that he exuded admiration for Albert Roussel. Everyone who knew Roussel seemed to like him personally. He refused to get involved in musical

assume the direction of the Schola's counterpoint classes, which he did from 1902 to 1914. His pupils there included Satie and Varèse, both of whom felt they learned a great deal from him even if they chose not to apply it to their own compositions. In ensuing years Roussel would enrich other interesting composers through private coaching, including Roland-Manuel, Riisager, and Martinů.

Roussel is an intellectual composer. He does not win listeners with the seductive sensuality of Debussy or the ingratiating finesse of Ravel. Instead, he appeals most deeply to the refined aesthetic awareness of the connoisseur who approaches music

on its own terms, who is prepared to delve into what Roussel considered "the most hermetic and least accessible of all the arts." In a 1928 interview he summed up his goal as a composer:

What I would like to achieve is a *music that is entirely self-contained, music that aims to free itself from any pictorial or descriptive element and completely removed from any geographical connection.* ... Far from wanting to describe anything, I always attempt to remove from my mind the recollection of objects or forms that might invite translation into musical effects. I want only to make pure music.

The Story

Abel Hernant's scenario for the ballet *Bacchus et Ariane* is derived from the ancient Greek poet Hesiod. It begins when Theseus has penetrated the Labyrinth, has slain the fearsome Minotaur that had resided therein, and has made his way out again following the thread that Ariadne (Ariane) had provided him. He takes her with him to the island of Naxos and deserts her there. Then, as Roussel's biographer Norman Demuth described:

During the celebrations preliminary to leaving Naxos with the virgins whom Theseus has saved from death, Bacchus appears and drives the party to the ship, on which they hurriedly put out to sea. Bacchus has lulled Ariane into a deep sleep and she dreams that she is dancing with the god. [At this point begins the action of Act Two and, by extension, the Suite No. 2.] When she wakes up she finds she has been deserted by Theseus. In despair she tries to throw herself off a high rock into the sea. Bacchus catches her as she falls and imprints a kiss on her lips. Immediately she becomes immortal, and the Nymphs attendant upon Bacchus lay offerings at her feet while Bacchus crowns her with a crown of stars.



Giorgio di Chirico's sketch of Sleeping Ariadne for the premiere production of Roussel's ballet *Bacchus et Ariane*

Of course, the scenario of a ballet imposes at least some influence on a composition, and Roussel's sumptuous score for *Bacchus et Ariane*, composed in 1930, reflects the contours of the libretto that Abel Hernant created for what must have been a most interesting ballet as staged at its premiere in May 1931. It was directed by Jacques Rouché, with choreography by Serge Lifar and sets and costumes by Giorgio di Chirico, and was described by the *New York Times* as "one of the happiest and most original productions of the Gallic school in this genre during these many years." Roussel extracted two orchestral suites from his ballet, of

which Suite No. 1 essentially comprises the music of Act One and Suite No. 2 (performed tonight) corresponds to Act Two.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, tam-tam, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, celesta, two harps, and strings.

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Hub of the Avant-Garde

In 1930–31, when Roussel's *Bacchus et Ariane* was composed and premiered in Paris, that metropolis had rebounded from the trauma of World War I and the stock market crash of 1929. The cultural and intellectual elite flocked there, including figures as diverse as Coco Chanel, Salvador Dali, Helena Rubinstein, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway.

The visual arts saw a surge of experimentation, including surrealism (Giorgio di Chirico, a prominent exponent of this school, designed the sets and costumes for the premiere of *Bacchus et Ariane*) and Art Deco, which had evolved from 1920s cubism. Perhaps the most prominent of the cubists, the Spanish expatriot Pablo Picasso was exploring harmonious, curvilinear lines, and the use of bright colors; many of his works of this time reveal an underlying eroticism.

— The Editors



Pablo Picasso's Nude and Still Life (1931)