Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes arrived in Paris in 1909 — he had already tested the waters by producing operas and concerts there during the two preceding seasons — and in no time flat a commission from the company became a signal that a composer had arrived at the summit of cultural life in the city that prided itself as the summit of culture. Such early productions as the Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor* (1909, with music by Borodin) and *Schéhérazade* (1910, to Rimsky-Korsakov’s score) established the credentials of the company’s production personnel — Diaghilev as director, Michel Fokine as choreographer, Leon Bakst as designer — and introduced some of the most impressive dancers of the day. In 1910 Diaghilev took the brave step of commissioning music for an entirely new ballet, thereby serving as midwife for Stravinsky’s *The 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, *The Rite of Spring*.

In between, Diaghilev turned to Maurice 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 the pastoral romance attributed to the third-century 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 slowly and “the next Russian season” came and went with *Daphnis et Chloé* still in progress. Whether it was due to the logistics of collaborating with his Russian colleagues or to some personal block, Ravel fell farther and farther behind schedule. Diaghilev came close to canceling the whole project. Following considerable lobbying by Ravel’s publisher, Jacques Durand, the impresario’s better judgment prevailed. The ballet, structured as a single act divid-
In the Composer’s Words

In his “Autobiographical Sketch,” a brief document Ravel prepared in 1928, he described Daphnis et Chloë:

a great choreographic symphony … a vast musical fresco, less scrupulous in questions of archeology than faithful to the Greece of my dreams, which identifies quite willingly with that imagined and depicted by late eighteenth-century French artists. The work is constructed symphonically according to a strict tonal plan, by means of a small number of motifs, whose development assures the symphonic homogeneity of the work.

The Suite No. 2 incorporates sections of the ballet that have principally to do with celebration. Ravel provided the following scenario, extracted in a general way from the plot of the entire ballet, to correspond to the Suite No. 2. His indications are inscribed at the appropriate spots in the score:

No sound but the murmur of rivulets fed by the dew that trickles from the rocks. Daphnis lies stretched before the grotto of the nymphs. Little by little the day dawns. The songs of birds are heard. Afar off a shepherd leads his flock…. Herdsmen enter, seeking Daphnis and Chloë. She at last appears encircled by shepherdesses. The two rush into each other’s arms. Daphnis observes Chloë’s crown. His dream was a prophetic vision: the intervention of Pan is manifest. The old shepherd Lammon explains that Pan saved Chloë, in remembrance of the nymph Syrinx, whom the god loved.

Daphnis and Chloë mime the story of Pan and Syrinx. Chloë impersonates the young nymph wandering over the meadow. Daphnis, as Pan, appears and declares his love for her. The nymph repulses him; the god becomes more insistent. She disappears among the rocks. In desperation he plucks some stalks, fashions a flute, and on it plays a melancholy tune. Chloë comes out and imitates by her dance the accents of the flute.

The dance grows more and more animated. In mad whirlings, Chloë falls into the arms of Daphnis. Before the altar of the nymphs he swears on two sheep his fidelity. Young girls enter; they are dressed as Bacchantes and shake their tambourines. Daphnis and Chloë embrace tenderly. A group of young men come on the stage. Joyous tumult … a general dance.
ed into three scenes, finally made its way to the stage of the Théâtre du Châtelet on June 8, 1912 — about two years after Diaghilev had hoped — with Vaslav Nijinsky dancing the role of Daphnis and Tamara Karsavina as Chloé. It shared a bill with Debussy’s Prélude à l’Après-midi d’un faune (Nijinsky’s erotic tour de force), Weber’s Le Spectre de la rose, and Rimsky-Korsakov’s Schéhérazade. Because the program fell at the end of the company’s season, it got only two performances. Although it was revived in Paris the next season and received a production in London in 1914, Daphnis et Chloé has enjoyed only sporadic success in the world of ballet. Ravel’s music, however, has achieved the status of a concert classic.

By the time Daphnis et Chloé reached the stage, Ravel had already extracted the first of his two orchestral suites from the score. In 1913 he followed up with a second, which has grown to be the more popular of the two. Reviewing Daphnis et Chloé excerpts in La Revue Musicale / S.I.M. (Société Internationale de Musique) in 1914, the composer Vincent d’Indy, who always veered toward the conservative, expressed not just tolerance but even modest enthusiasm for the score; he viewed it as signaling a turn for the better in the catalogue of a composer who, he felt, had previously constrained himself to “the bibelot, the curiosity, the decorative miniature.” Diaghilev, whose faith had greatly wavered during the project’s fitful birth, apparently felt positive toward the work, at least toward Ravel’s contribution to it. He even invited Ravel to write another ballet score in 1917, although that project never got farther than a letter of agreement.

**Instrumentation:** piccolo, two flutes (one doubling piccolo), alto flute, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, side drum, tambourine, snare drum, castanets, orchestra bells, celeste, two harps, and strings.

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**Listen for . . . a Musical Sunrise**

The first section of Daphnis et Chloé, Suite No. 2, “Daybreak,” proclaims Ravel’s mastery as an orchestrator. Harps, flutes, and clarinets flutter quietly over the hushed background of the string section, often divided into a dozen parts. Violins, cellos, and double basses are muted at the outset, but over the course of the first eight measures the string section gradually grows to full strength by observing Ravel’s extraordinary direction: “Remove the mutes one by one beginning with the first stands.” This imaginative timbral alteration, combined with a theme based on a rising contour, growing out of the depths of the orchestra, creates one of the most evocative sunrises ever committed to musical staves.