

Shéhérazade, Three Poems of Tristan Klingsor for Voice and Orchestra

Maurice Ravel

A taste for the exotic surfaces often in the catalogue of Maurice Ravel. He was 14 years old in 1889, when the International Exhibition astonished *le tout Paris* with such musical attractions as a Javanese gamelan, a Hungarian gypsy ensemble, and a troupe of Annamite dancers from Vietnam. If Claude Debussy was the first major composer to incorporate some of those newly heard sounds into his compositions, Ravel, 13 years his junior, would not be far behind.

Spain was the exotic milieu that surfaced most often in his oeuvre, although several of such works — *Alborada del gracioso* (1904–05), *Rapsodie espagnole* and the opera *L'Heure espagnole* (both from 1907), and the ever-popular *Boléro* (1928) — may sound more redolent of faraway places today than they did to Ravel, who hailed from a town practically on the border between France and Spain and whose mother was of Basque heritage.

But other distant locales also inspired him, yielding such works as the orchestral song cycle *Shéhérazade* (1904), which Ravel said reflected not only the influence of Debussy but also his own deep-seated fascination for the Orient; *Cinq mélodies populaires grecques* (*Five Greek Folk Songs*, 1904–06); the ballet *Ma Mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose*, 1908–10), its hexatonic scale evoking the Far East; *Chanson hébraïque* (1910), and *Deux mélodies hébraïques* (1914); *Tzigane* for violin and orchestra (1924), with its Romany tinge; and the *Chansons madécasses* (1925–26), a song cycle to poems that presumably originated in Madagascar. In 1910 Ravel produced a thoroughly multicultural collection for a competition announced by the House of Song in Moscow — *Chants populaires*, consisting of seven harmonizations of songs in Spanish, French, Italian, Hebrew, Scottish, Flemish, and Russian (four of which were awarded prizes).

The song-cycle *Shéhérazade* evolved out of the composer's intention to write an opera based on the Sinbad episode from the *Arabian Nights*. Scheherazade is both the narrator and heroine of that work, spinning out tale after tale because her life depends on it. Ravel never finished the opera, but he did complete its overture, which was performed at a concert of the Société Nationale in Paris on May 27, 1899, to mild success. The piece was never published, and Ravel may have recycled some of its material into the song cycle he composed four years later. So said Ravel's pupil and biographer Alexis Roland-Manuel, although scholars today find that any resemblance is slight.

In Short

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris

Work composed: 1903; its three movements bear different dedications: *Asie* to Mademoiselle Jane Hatto (who sang the set's premiere); *La Flûte enchantée* to Madame René de Saint-Marceaux (a Parisian socialite); and *L'Indifférent* to Madame Sigismond Bardac (who would become the second Mrs. Claude Debussy)

World premiere: May 17, 1904, at the Salle Nouveau Theatre in Paris, at a concert of the Société Nationale de Musique, Alfred Cortot, conductor, mezzo-soprano Jane Hatto, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 12, 1959, Leonard Bernstein, conductor, mezzo-soprano Jennie Tourel, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 25, 2015, in Paris, France, Alan Gilbert, conductor, mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 19 minutes

Ravel's *Shéhérazade* owes its existence to the composer's affiliation with Les Apaches, a high-spirited group of Parisian writers, musicians, and artists who, from the turn of the century until the onset of World War I, would gather on Saturday evenings to share their latest work, discuss cultural events of the moment, and do whatever else creative types do on Saturday nights. They had their own secret theme song (it was the opening of Borodin's Symphony No. 2) and called each other by nicknames reserved for use within Apache circles. The group's fanciful name was apparently suggested by the Catalan pianist Ricardo Viñes, although a conflicting legend has it that it was the epithet screamed at them by an irate newsstand vendor who found them disruptive. Other regulars included the writers Tristan Klingsor and Léon-Paul Fargue, the painter Paul Sordes, the conductor Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht, and the composers André Caplet, Maurice Delage, Manuel de

Falla, Florent Schmitt, and Déodat de Séverac. Ravel's code-name in the group was "Rara" — and it was in this circle of artistic acceptance that he tried out some of his first masterworks.

Tristan Klingsor had just published a volume of Symbolist poems titled *Shéhérazade*, and Ravel pounced on three for his rather mysterious settings, in which the composer himself observed that "the influence of Debussy is fairly obvious." "Here again," he said, "I yielded to the profound attraction which the East has always held for me since my childhood."

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, cymbals, suspended cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, orchestra bells, celesta, two harps, and strings, in addition to the mezzo-soprano soloist.

Sources and Inspirations

Tristan Klingsor, whose texts Ravel set in *Shéhérazade*, began life in 1874 under the name Arthur Justin Léon Leclère. He cobbled together his pseudonym from the names of two Wagnerian characters. He died in 1966, and shortly thereafter was described by the *Encyclopédie Larousse* as an "amiable dilettante" and by *The Penguin Companion to European Literature* as "a curious survival from the age of literary gentlemen who relied on the appeal of limited editions on thick paper."



Klingsor, ca. 1904

The poet's principal fame derives from his Symbolist poems, of which he published several volumes from 1903 to 1921 (his later poetry might better be described as neo-Romantic). He wrote of Ravel's *Shéhérazade* settings:

His love of difficulty led him to choose, in addition to *L'Indifférent* and *La Flûte enchantée*, one which, by reason of its length and narrative form, seemed the least suited for his purpose: *Asie*. The fact is that he was just at that time extremely preoccupied with the problem of adapting music to speech, heightening its accents and inflections and magnifying them by transforming them into melody; and to assist him to carry out his project he asked me to read the poems out loud to him.