

CHAN 6615

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French Favourites

Ravel
La Valse • Bolero

Milhaud
Suite provençale

Debussy
La Mer

Detroit Symphony Orchestra

Neeme Järvi

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)		
1	La Valse	12:10
	Poème chorégraphique pour orchestre	
	Mouvement de valse viennoise	
Claude Debussy (1862–1918)		
	La Mer	23:54
	Three symphonic sketches	
2	I De l'aube à midi sur la mer: Très lent	8:48
3	II Jeux de vagues: Allegro (dans un rythme très souple)	6:25
4	III Dialogue du vent et de la mer: Animé et tumultueux	8:32
Darius Milhaud (1892–1974)		
	Suite provençale, Op. 152b	14:11
5	I Animé	1:35
6	II Très modéré – Vif	1:41
7	III Modéré	1:41
8	IV Vif	1:01
9	V Modéré	1:43
10	VI Vif	1:02
11	VII Lent	2:04
12	VIII Vif	3:06

Maurice Ravel		
13	Bolero	14:11
	Tempo di bolero, moderato assai	
		TT 64:54
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Maurice Ravel: *La Valse*

Initial reaction to Ravel's *La Valse* was subdued. Diaghilev, who had commissioned it for his Ballets Russes, was bemused: 'It's a masterpiece... but it's not a ballet... it's the portrait of a ballet... it's the painting of a ballet.' Superficially it seemed just the sort of work Roussel would have dubbed *impressionniste*, 'where the sentiments expressed only glimpse the light of day through the transparent veil of cloudy symbolism'. And indeed, according to Ravel's own synopsis printed at the head of the score:

Through the rifts of swirling clouds waltzing couples may be seen. One by one the clouds disperse and a huge ballroom filled by a circling mass is revealed.'

But there is nothing vague or pretty about *La Valse*. Although the musical argument may be expressed in a different way to that of Roussel, it is every bit as real. *La Valse* is a masterly exercise in orchestral disquiet – a metaphor for the collapse of an artistic civilization. In Ravel's own words, it is 'a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz combined with a fantastic whirling motion which leads to death'. So, not surprisingly, the work has always seemed more at home in the concert

hall, where it received its first performance in December 1920 by the Lamoureux Orchestra under Camille Chevillard.

Claude Debussy: *La Mer*

On one level, Debussy's *La Mer* is a superbly crafted seascape. Writers have outdone themselves in search of adjectives to describe the swell of the waves, the glint of the sun on water, the fury of the wind. And somewhere in the back of most concertgoers' minds floats the word 'impressionism', which can be called on to explain all that is otherwise inexplicable in Debussy's music.

Not that Debussy was ashamed to write pictorial music. He was, by his own proclamation, a *musicien français*, and his countrymen had combined pictorial vividness and musical logic since the time of the Baroque harpsichordists, whose music Debussy admired. But for all his skill in tone painting, there is much more to *La Mer*.

Here, Debussy brought to perfection a method of musical construction that owed little to traditional notions of themes, modulations, expositions and developments; one can trace bits of melody through *La Mer*, but his structures work on an almost

subliminal level, drawing the listener along, but providing few signposts to point the way ahead or maps to survey the territory left behind. Debussy's forms are more resistant to analysis than those of his German contemporaries, but Pierre Boulez has summarized them neatly:

A component section of a theme is defined as another is suggested; another phrase is added and we have the beginnings of a form. More material is added and we have a structure.

Where, then, is the sea to be found in all these notes? In fact, the sea was a point of departure only, a source of 'endless memories', which Debussy considered to be 'worth more than reality, which generally weighs down one's thoughts too heavily'.

Darius Milhaud: *Suite provençale*

'I am a Frenchman from Provence, and by religion a Jew', writes Darius Milhaud to begin his memoirs, *Notes Without Music*. Both are significant: as long as he lived, Milhaud never lost touch with his Jewish heritage or with his Provençal roots. His years in South America might produce a *Saudades do Brasil*, and his time spent teaching in the United States a *Kentuckiana*, but Milhaud never forgot the place from which he began.

Milhaud would wander far from Provence, and in the 1920s he was most closely associated with the Parisian *Six*. But he was a

more prolific and wide-ranging composer than the rest of them, his catalogue eventually reaching more than 400 opus numbers, and his style adapting itself to whatever circumstances he found himself in.

The tunes Milhaud arranged in his *Suite* are third-hand, having originated with the eighteenth-century composer André Campra, and been first used in the incidental music he wrote in the 1930s for two plays performed in the Provençal town of Orange. He was no more scrupulous about his sources than Stravinsky had been in *Pulcinella* or Respighi in his *Ancient Airs and Dances*. The harmonies here are thoroughly modern, in many cases grinding key against key. And the instrumentation, though it suggests ancient models, especially in the pipe-and-drum music of the final movement, is Milhaud's own – a tribute by a contemporary musician to the ancestors from whom he derived his strength.

Maurice Ravel: *Bolero*

Ravel cheerfully labelled his *Bolero* 'a piece for orchestra without music'. It was born of his frustration at finding the conductor Enrique Arbós had pre-empted him in orchestrating some movements from Albéniz's *Iberia*, which Ravel had intended for a ballet for Ida Rubinstein. So instead, one morning Ravel picked out on the piano what he described as 'a pretty emphatic kind of tune' and declared

that he was going to subject it to varying orchestral effects without any thematic development.

What Ravel did perhaps have in common with Roussel was the latter's perception of 'the invasion of mechanisation... energy restored to pride of place, leading sometimes to brutality'. Certainly Ravel envisaged for *Bolero* a scenario of jealousy and retribution set outside a factory (*Bolero* as a kind of

musical conveyor belt?). But in the event, Ida Rubinstein modified that idea to something rather more picturesque with gypsy dancing in a dimly-lit inn. The choreography (as for *La Valse* the following year) was by Nijinsky's sister, Bronislava, and the premiere took place at the Paris Opera on 20 November 1928, conducted by Walter Straram.

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Neeme Järvi

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FRENCH FAVOURITES - Detroit Symphony Orchestra/Järvi



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