

MAURICE RAVEL

Ma Mère l'Oye (“Mother Goose”) Suite

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France

Died: December 18, 1937, in Paris

Work composed: 1908 (piano version); 1911 (orchestral suite)

World premiere: (orchestral version) January 28, 1912, Théâtre des Arts in Paris; Gabriel Grovlez conducting

Though often compared with the voluptuous, sensuous and intentionally ambiguous music of Debussy, **Ravel**'s compositions are precise, clear in design, economical in its skillful orchestration. Stravinsky complimented Ravel in fastidious craftsmanship as “a Swiss watchmaker.”

Like many of the French composer's works, “**Mother Goose**” was hatched as a piano piece, this one written expressly for a young sister and brother team, Mimi and Jean Godebski, whose parents were friends of Ravel. A gifted pianist with a subtle ear for keyboard timbres, Ravel was a truly consummate orchestrator. These “cinq pieces enfantines,” as he described the music, capture to beguiling perfection a feeling for childhood innocence and freshness. Orchestral colors shimmer in airy lightness; rhythm and melody are intentionally simple (though anything but simplistic).

The brief introductory *Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty* is a mere 20 measures long but effectively limns a musical portrait of the somnolent princess. *Tom Thumb*, derived from a tale in Perrault's anthology of 1697, mirrors the plight of a young boy whose plan to follow a trail of bread crumbs he has strewn on his path course through the woods has been undone by birds who have satisfied their hunger at the poor lad's expense. Ravel cagily has the strings meander through scales in search of a home tonality, just as the boy is searching for a route to safety.

As one might expect, *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*, utilizes melodic shapes redolent of the Orient. Ever since Debussy had been smitten with Asian and South Pacific Island music at the 1893 Exhibition in Paris, composers in the French capital and elsewhere could not get enough of pentatonic and other non-Western scales.

In the familiar story of *Beauty and the Beast*, Ravel gives Beauty's delicate “words” to the high woodwinds, while the Beast speaks through the nether regions of the contrabassoon's deep tones. When they finally join in marriage, the two melodies are braided together and the Beast's theme is magically transformed into an evanescent glow high in the solo violin's range.

The closing number, *The Enchanted Garden*, is not taken from a particular story but is Ravel's enchanting summary of the sense of mystery, magic and fantasy that permeates *Ma Mère l'Oye*. The serene, almost beatific, calm of this section is a marvel of delicate sonority.