

**PROGRAM NOTES**  
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The transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw what is arguably history's greatest revolution in music – indeed, in art. The grandiose ambitions of Romanticism that began with Hector Berlioz had become fully realized in the megalomantic operas of Richard Wagner and the prolix, populous symphonies of Gustav Mahler. Looking through the other end of the telescope, the Romantic miniature that began with Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn, Frederic Chopin, Robert Schumann and Franz Liszt culminated in the technically and psychologically complex and deeply layered songs of Hugo Wolf and the compact, plenipotentiary late works of Johannes Brahms. For younger generations of composers inheriting this auspicious legacy, the glaring question facing them was “now what?”. So began the full assault on aesthetics, politics and culture that would spawn what in retrospect we call *modernism*. This assault came from multiple schools of thought, from every Western nationality, from every quarter, and its ambition was both focused and comprehensive: dismantle this edifice and start over. In music, the momentum built in two primary places, Germany and France. The former movement saw two principal branches, a very technical one led by Arnold Schoenberg and his disciples, and the very practical one intertwined with the *Bauhaus* movement and best represented by Paul Hindemith and Kurt Weill. In France, the effort was led by Claude Debussy with the able help of his junior, Maurice Ravel. Together, they embody a style of composition that borrowed its name from painting – *Impressionisme*, a moniker that was actually despised by both composers who saw it as a lazy term of convenience invented by “imbeciles”, i.e. critics.

But the term stuck, and today it's used to refer not so much to an overarching aesthetic as to a musical language and grammar that departed sharply from its antecedents. Its characteristics include the wholesale abandonment of traditional tonality – dependency on the manipulation of the major and minor modes (scales) and the organizational principles that evolved around them –, instead favoring unresolved, free dissonance and organization around modes that diffuse the impulse to hear gravitational centers in music. The best known of these is the whole-tone scale, used to great effect particularly by Debussy (the final song in tonight's *Chansons de Bilitis* uses it in several extended passages and *Syrinx* is built almost entirely upon it). But there is unquestionably a depictive element to Impressionistic music, despite its practitioners' protestations. As with the Impressionist painters and the Symbolist poets and writers who are the real progenitors of French modernism, Impressionistic music endeavors not to objectify but to ambiguate – to refract reality through the intensely colorful prisms of metaphor and suggestion. Particularly with Debussy, we find a predominance of music with evocative titles like *Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses* (The fairies are exquisite dancers), *Des pas sur la neige* (Footprints in the snow), and *Jardins sous la pluie* (Gardens in the rain). Mind you, without these suggestive titles one would never infer those images merely from listening to the music – music has very limited power literally to depict, Richard Strauss's bleating sheep and Mahler's sardonic military bands notwithstanding. But the music is powerfully evocative of the emotional states that accompany the experience of poetry and visual art. There is something ineffably but unmistakably imagistic about this music. One need only listen to *Lever du jour* (Daybreak) from Ravel's ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* to understand the profoundly suggestive capability of Impressionistic music.

Ironically, Debussy's and Ravel's musics are corporeal in their attractiveness – sensual, sexual, beautiful to the ear in the same sense that the eyes are arrested by physical beauty. To such beauty the mind responds more than reflects. The scope and intensity of color in a work like tonight's *Gaspard de la Nuit* transcends both the mundane and the poetic precisely by obviating both, subjecting them to each other's influence in a way that miraculously magnifies rather than cancels their respective opposing natures. To those uninitiated to classical music, Debussy and Ravel are invariably effectual on first hearing, so compelling is the surface beauty of their work. And beneath the surface there run currents of texture, tune, harmony, rhythm, and novel organization that can nourish the mind and spirit through a lifetime of discovery and rediscovery. That such music is at once completely accessible and ultimately unfathomable is the characteristic that most distinguishes it as great art. (MM)

*La flûte de Pan (Syrinx)* is a staple work of the modern flutist's repertoire and is often performed on other wind instruments, including recorder as we'll hear tonight. But tonight's performance as incidental music to a drama is quite unusual, even given the uncustomary instrumentation. The piece was actually written as incidental music for a melodrama within Gabriel Mourey's (1865-1943) Symbolist play, *Psyché*, and was first performed in that context on December 13, 1913. The flute solo, performed from off-stage (by the preeminent French flutist, Louis Fleury, who championed the piece as an independent solo work), was directed by Mourey to be “the last melody Pan plays before his death.” Possibly to avoid confusion with the first song in the *Chansons de Bilitis*, which pre-dated the incidental music, Debussy changed the title of the work to *Syrinx*, invoking the myth of the maiden who, to escape Pan's unwanted advances, turns into a thatch of reeds, only to be cut by Pan into the pipes that bear his name.

For the modern movie-goer, the confluence of music and scripted drama seems quite ordinary, but rarely do movie scores do more than establish an ambient emotional ecology. The melodramas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century endeavored to wed the two forms more tightly while preserving their individual integrities – something short of formal art song or operatic treatments, preserving the actor’s role to speak the part and the composer’s to paint it. Coordination of text and music are therefore essential, but not rigorous in the way that measured music must be.

The germane passages occur in *Acte III, Scène I* of the play, and the dialog is between *L’Oreade* (the Wood-nymph) and *La Naiade* (the Water-nymph). *L’Oreade* declares “*Mais voici que Pan de sa flûte recommence à jouer*”, so cueing the beginning of the flute accompaniment. *La Naiade* is seduced by the music, losing her fear of the demi-god. The respective texts and sections of the music continue to the conclusion of the scene.\* (MM)

The *Chansons de Bilitis* (The Songs of Bilitis) originate with the poetry of Pierre Louÿs (1870-1925), who was fascinated with themes of Greek mythology and feminine sexuality. He published his various collections of Bilitis poems in 1894, claiming them to be translations of works by the companion of the famous Greek poet Sappho. The free verse, unrhymed lyrics were immediately attractive to a number of composers, including Louÿs’ friend Claude Debussy, who composed this three-song cycle in 1897. The songs, written for a mezzo voice, have a strikingly sensual quality achieved through impressionistic, whole-tone harmonies and atmospheric coloration. The voice is mostly asked to declaim the text in a speech-like manner, rarely rising in pitch or dynamic except at climactic phrases. The first song, *La flûte de Pan*, narrates an encounter between Bilitis and an unnamed male flute player which evolves from a music lesson to a sexual awakening. Debussy weaves the sensuous song of the pan-flute, the singing frogs, and even the quiet breaths of the two people into his subtle accompaniment. In the second song, *La Chevelure*, Bilitis’ lover describes a dream in which their bodies and souls merge through the bond of her hair. A hypnotic ostinato pervades this piece, which reaches two passionate climaxes. The final song, *La Tombeau des Naiades*, mourns the passing of the mythological culture in elegaic tones. The chill of the frozen landscape is etched in whole-tone scale figures, which dissolve into radiant oscillations as the extinct laughter of the water-nymphs is recalled. (PD)

*Histoires Naturelles* (Nature Stories), published in 1906, is considered to be among the very greatest of the French song cycles. This is so even though the texts for these pieces are highly unusual for the classic French *mélodie*; they consist not of poetry, but prose – so-called prose-poems by Jules Renard (1864-1910). No one reading these beautiful texts could possibly doubt their “profound and latent poetry” (in Ravel’s own words). However, the demands of the prose style drew a revolutionary response from Ravel: he set these texts according to the rules of 'spoken' rather than 'sung' French, a difference greater in French than most other languages. Weak final syllables, traditionally sustained in French singing, are here to be dropped or elided as in speech; moments of lyrical line are contrasted with absolute parlando, and the rhythms of speech are painstakingly notated. All of this sophistication and subtlety of execution is at the service of absolutely charming subjects: four birds and an insect. *Histoires Naturelles* is like watching a National Geographic special – the animals are observed in their natural habitat, while the narrator supplies a subtext that is unabashedly anthropomorphic in character. The splendor of these songs lies in the uncanny balance Ravel achieves between humor, naturalistic precision, and ravishing beauty.

The first song, *Le Paon* (the peacock), is a ceremonial French overture, solemn and dignified. This mimics the slow tread of the peacock, who struts around a barnyard trailing his long tail feathers. The text imagines the bird as an expectant groom, awaiting his bride on their wedding day – except that the ceremony repeats itself day after day, mindlessly! The light ridicule that imbues the first song is entirely absent from the second, *Le Grillon* (the cricket). Here, instead of portraying the visual, we are focused on sound – the chirping cricket’s call that the text continually interprets and reimagines. This time the conceit is of a fussy homeowner who tidies up his little domain and carefully locks the door. Instead of mockery, there is a subtle tenderness to the delicacy with which Ravel portrays the rustling insect. A moment of breathtaking poetry ends this song, as the cricket falls silent.

The ironic detachment returns with *Le Cygne* (the swan). The beautiful bird is depicted with Ravel’s most romantic gestures; oscillating arpeggiated figures and luscious harmonic turns. We are transported to a world where swans feed only on the reflections of clouds, a fantasy as exquisite as it is ridiculous. The narrator gets caught up in this vision even to the point of melodrama, until reality intervenes at the conclusion. *Le Martin-Pêcheur* (the king-fisher), the fourth song, is a change of tone. Instead of depicting the actions of an animal, it captures “a rare emotion,” the wonder and awe of being in the proximity of a wild creature. Ravel attempts to recreate this very special feeling through daring extremes of tempo (*on ne peut plus lent* – “it cannot be slower”) and dynamics (*ppp*).

The final animal is *La Pintade* (the guinea-hen). The depiction of this barnyard creature is pure comedy – the violent pecking and flurry of motion conveyed with rapid repeated notes and staccato sequences. Our narrator, progressively more present throughout the five songs, is here as much a victim of the stubborn stupid fowl as its portrayer. (PD)

Ravel is reported to have said to his student and fellow composer, Maurice Delage, that he wanted to compose a piano piece more difficult than Balakirev's *Islamey*, a reference to the notorious stunt written by the Russian Romantic composer Mili Balakirev. Ravel is quoted elsewhere as saying "I wanted to compose a caricature of Romanticism, [whispering] but perhaps I let myself get carried away." Ravel was referring in particular to the piece *Scarbo*, which concludes his three part 1908 work for piano, *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Among pianists, *Gaspard* is legendary, commonly cited as the most difficult work ever written for the piano. The claim is dubious in the company of other contenders like the 24 *Études* of Chopin, the *Paganini Variations* of Brahms or the third piano concerto by Rachmaninov, to say nothing of the fearsome modern repertoire by the likes of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Gyorgy Ligeti. But I think it fair to characterize Ravel's masterpiece as first among equals. Surely, no other composer ever succeeded in creating an incomparable, completely original and utterly serious masterpiece starting with the premises of writing something really, really hard and as a pasquinade.

The pieces were inspired by the work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French writer Aloysius Bertrand (1807–1841), widely acknowledged as the father of the prose-poetry style of Romantic French writing. His posthumously published collection of verse, completed in 1836, was signed by the author as *Gaspard de la Nuit*, an arcane reference to an ancient Chaldean office and translating in this context to something like "Keeper of the Night", which became the default name for the collection. In particular, Ravel chose three works from the set: *Ondine*, a poem depicting a water sprite's mischievous but touching efforts to seduce a mortal husband to share her subaqueous domain; *Le gibet* (The gibbet), depicting the slow expiration of a hanged man whose incipient corpse is framed by a reddening sunset; and the aforementioned *Scarbo*, depicting a terrifying and sorcerous dwarf who haunts the poet's nights as a phantasm neither completely dreamed nor completely real.

Each piece poses multiple and extreme technical challenges to the performer, not all of them overt or in the least obvious. Taken in their entirety, they do arguably constitute the most comprehensively challenging work in the standard repertoire.

*Ondine* is challenging on a pure notes-per-unit-time basis. It opens with its dominant textural and rhythmic device depicting the gentle, lapping undulations of the lake surface from which the quiet but compelling voice of the lady of the lake, *Ondine*, entreats us "Listen! Listen!" What follows is a tour-de-force of texture, dynamics, and melody, gurgled but ungarbled within the aqueous wash of sound. The opening figure goes through myriad transformations, as does the opening melody, stunningly depicting very specific scenes from the poem while never losing its integrity as a piece of music quite independent of banal pictorialism. For all the imagistic invention in *Gaspard*, it remains rooted in classical forms – *Ondine* being a barely concealed Sonata Allegro and *Scarbo* being similar in organization to the Chopin *Ballades* or *Scherzi*.

*Le gibet* is quite simply the loneliest, most desolate piece of music known to me. It occupies several simultaneous planes of color and texture, each of them with individual integrity, all of them integral to the whole. Ravel actually insisted that this piece be played monotonously and at an invariant tempo, but I think the word "monotonous" has connotations that are simply anathema to the piece. Rather, it's implacable, chillingly casual, indifferent to the horror it depicts – "detached" is perhaps a better way to describe it. The unifying feature of *Le gibet* is the ceaseless tolling of a distant bell – the inescapable and imperturbable punctuation that both frames and persistently compels our fixation on the hellscape of the gallows and the man dying upon it. As Ravel himself described it to Henriette Fauré, "This bell does not dominate, it is, it tolls unwearingly." Aside from this effect, the piece doesn't indulge in literalism at all, but rather uses its power as dispassionate witness to impel the questioning at the heart of the poem.

*Scarbo* is a finale to eclipse all others. Every conventional technical problem imaginable and a few novel ones amplify the nightmarish poem into the performer's personal waking nightmare. Virtually every key of the piano is used in this ten minutes of frenetic virtuosity. As with *Ondine*, there are literalistic portrayals from the poem within the piece but they are so integral to the music *qua* music as to be ultimately quite superfluous to the experience of hearing it. (MM)

\* For an excellent and detailed summary of the relationship between *Psyché* and *Syrinx*, see Laurel Astrid Ewell's doctoral thesis examining it: [http://wvuscholar.wvu.edu:8881/exlibris/dtl/d3\\_1/apache\\_media/L2V4bGliemlZL2R0bC9kM18xL2FwYWNoZV9tZWRpYS8yMDYxMQ==.pdf](http://wvuscholar.wvu.edu:8881/exlibris/dtl/d3_1/apache_media/L2V4bGliemlZL2R0bC9kM18xL2FwYWNoZV9tZWRpYS8yMDYxMQ==.pdf)