

RAVEL: *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Notes on the Program

By Noel Morris ©2020

“He drove a truck or an ambulance in the war,” recalled Igor Stravinsky, “and I admired him for it because at his age and with his name, he could have had an easier place—or done nothing.”

When Germany declared war on France in August of 1914, the 39-year-old composer Maurice Ravel made several attempts to enlist. He aspired to be a pilot or perhaps an observer in the French air force; he was rejected as physically unfit. And so it was, in 1915, he volunteered as a driver. It nearly broke him.

“He looked rather pathetic in his uniform,” said Stravinsky. “So small. He was two or three inches smaller than I am.” Ravel was just over 5 feet.

In the early months of WWI, Ravel expressed his patriotism through music: he started to compose a suite based on French Baroque dances for piano, an homage to the 18th-century composer François Couperin and to a golden age in French composition.

“No, it isn’t what you think: *La Marseillaise* will not be in it. But it will have a forlane and a gigue; no tango, however,” he joked. (At that time, the tango was all the rage in Paris—and quite scandalous.)

In 1916, Ravel was sent to the front lines, and served at the Battle of Verdun. By 1917, he was suffering from what was in all likelihood PTSD, as well as a heart condition, frostbite and complications from dysentery.

During a long recovery, he returned to work on his French suite, now titled *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and designated each movement as a memorial to a friend who had died in the War (tombeau means tomb or musical memorial).

The last of these was a toccata dedicated to Joseph de Marliave, husband of pianist Marguerite Long—the woman who played the first performance in 1919.

Some listeners noted at the time that *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is not particularly somber, to which Ravel replied: “The dead are sad enough in their eternal silence.”

He arranged four of the movements for orchestra.

- I. Prelude
- II. Forlane
- III. Menuet
- IV. Rigaudon

RAVEL: *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

First ASO Performance: **MAR 3 – 5, 1959** | Henry Sopkin, conductor

Most Recent ASO Performance: **MAR 14 – 16, 2013** | Jun Märkl, conductor

Instrumentation: **2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 1 trumpet, harp, strings**

RAVEL: *Shéhérazade*

Before the war, Ravel was part of a glittering scene in Paris. Known as the Belle Époque (Beautiful Epoch), pre-War Paris drew the likes of Picasso, Stravinsky, Matisse, Debussy, Proust, Gertrude Stein, and more. **Many artistic influences converged in the French capital, including exotic items from Asia which were distilled into an artistic movement called "Orientalism."** Asian themes became wildly popular in storefronts, theater, and literature. Europeans began decorating their homes with oriental rugs, screens, and tableware ("China"), and paid good money to have their portraits painted in traditional Asian costume.

Composers were not immune to its influence. In 1904, Maurice Ravel was part of a group of writers, artists and musicians who laughingly called themselves "Les Apaches," borrowing the Native American name to signal their own radicalism. Together, they haunted the cafes of Paris, drinking, debating, discussing politics and sharing their latest inspirations. One of those creatives was Tristan Klingsor (a Wagnerian pen name for Arthur Leclère), who wrote a volume of poems titled *Shéhérazade* after the mythical storyteller of the Arabian Nights. Klingsor's poems inspired Ravel to take a second look at one of his own projects.

In 1898, he had toyed with the idea of writing an opera based on the story of Sinbad, another figure from the Arabian Nights anthology. Ravel got as far as an overture (also titled *Shéhérazade*) and set it aside. In 1904, after reading Klingsor's poems, he dusted off his overture and repurposed the music into settings for three of the poems.

In February of 1904, Giacomo Puccini issued his famous monument to Orientalism *Madama Butterfly*. Three months later, Ravel premiered his own nod to the East, *Shéhérazade*.



**Please see song translations
on pages 4 & 5**

RAVEL: *Shéhérazade*

First ASO Performance: **OCT 24 – 25, 1957** | Henry Sopkin, conductor | Jennie Tourel, mezzo-soprano

Most Recent ASO Performance: **MAY 1 – 3, 2013** | Donald Runnicles, conductor | Susan Graham, mezzo-soprano
Brittany Bagwell, child soprano

Instrumentation: **2 flutes 2 clarinets, percussion, harp, keyboard, strings**



RAVEL: *Mother Goose Suite*



Maurice Ravel was an intensely private person. Around Paris, he was a dandy who moved comfortably among the glitterati. Yet, if he had any romantic attachments, it has eluded his biographers. His desk was always wiped clean, and his work and personal affairs were kept out of sight.

He “generally arrived late for dinner, often long after we had finished and the servants had gone to bed,” recalled Mimie Godebski. “Then he apologized to my mother, whom he adored: ‘I’m sorry, Ida, give me a little of whatever’s going, I’m not at all hungry today.’ . . . On those evenings we knew that was the end of the next day’s cold meat.”

Little Mimie and her brother Jean Godebski adored Ravel. In those years, their parents welcomed an endless stream of celebrities to their home. **Ravel was the one who would take the children upon his knee and tell them a story. It was for these two—both piano students—that he wrote *Five Children’s Pieces for Piano Four Hands* based on tales from *Mother Goose*.**

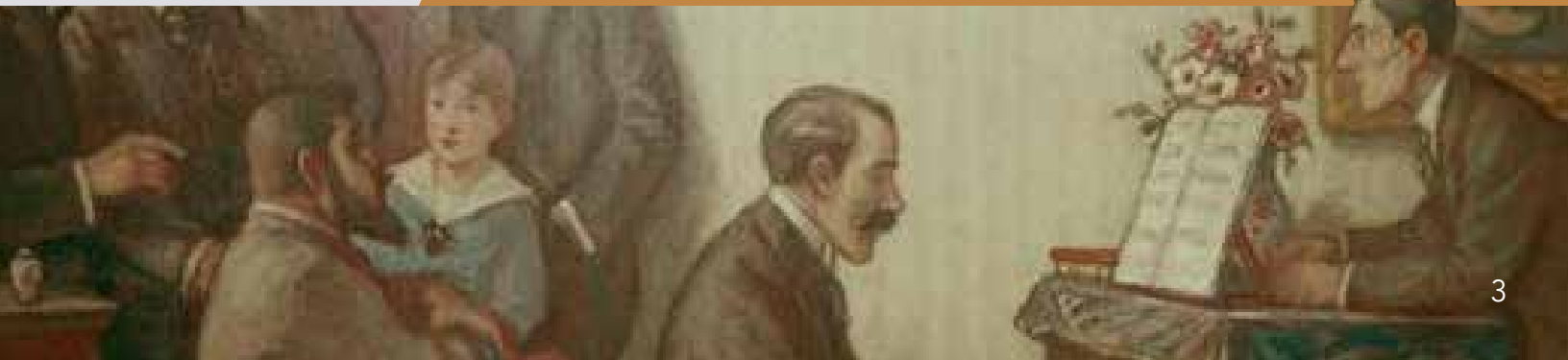
In the spring of 1910, the little Godebskis proved too shy to play the duets in public, so the world premiere fell to 11-year-old Jeanne Leleu and 14-year-old Geneviève Durony. The following year, Ravel orchestrated and expanded the music into the *Mother Goose* ballet, which he stitched together using scenarios from the fairytales.

RAVEL: *Mother Goose Suite*

First ASO Performance: **NOV 16 – 22, 1960** | Henry Sopkin, conductor

Most Recent ASO Performance: **OCT 10 – 12, 2013** | Susanna Mälkki, conductor

Instrumentation: **2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 1 timpani, 2 percussions, harp, keyboard, strings**



RAVEL: *Shéhérazade*

Translation by Ahmed E. Ismail

I. Asie

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Asie, Asie, Asie,
Vieux pays merveilleux des contes de nourrice
Où dort la fantaisie comme une impératrice
En sa forêt tout emplie de mystère.
Asie,
Je voudrais m'en aller avec la goëlette
Qui se berce ce soir dans le port
Mystérieuse et solitaire
Et qui déploie enfin ses voiles violettes
Comme un immense oiseau de nuit dans le ciel d'or.
Je voudrais m'en aller vers des îles de fleurs
En écoutant chanter la mer perverse
Sur un vieux rythme ensorceleur.
Je voudrais voir Damas et les villes de Perse
Avec les minarets légers dans l'air.
Je voudrais voir de beaux turbans de soie
Sur des visages noirs aux dents claires;
Je voudrais voir des yeux sombres d'amour
Et des prunelles brillantes de joie
En des peaux jaunes comme des oranges;
Je voudrais voir des vêtements de velours
Et des habits à longues franges.
Je voudrais voir des calumets entre des bouches
Tout entourées de barbe blanche;
Je voudrais voir d'âpres marchands aux regards louches,
Et des cadis, et des vizirs
Qui du seul mouvement de leur doigt qui se penche
Accordent vie ou mort au gré de leur désir.
Je voudrais voir la Perse, et l'Inde, et puis la Chine,
Les mandarins ventrus sous les ombrelles,
Et les princesses aux mains fines,
Et les lettrés qui se querellent
Sur la poésie et sur la beauté;
Je voudrais m'attarder au palais enchanté
Et comme un voyageur étranger
Contempler à loisir des paysages peints
Sur des étoffes en des cadres de sapin
Avec un personnage au milieu d'un verger;
Je voudrais voir des assassins souriant
Du bourreau qui coupe un cou d'innocent
Avec son grand sabre courbé d'Orient.
Je voudrais voir des pauvres et des reines;
Je voudrais voir des roses et du sang;
Je voudrais voir mourir d'amour ou bien de haine.
Et puis m'en revenir plus tard
Narrer mon aventure aux curieux de rêves
En élevant comme Sindbad ma vieille tasse arabe
De temps en temps jusqu'à mes lèvres
Pour interrompre le conte avec art...

I. Asia

Asia, Asia, Asia,
Old marvelous land from childhood tales
Where fantasy sleeps like an empress
In her forest filled with mystery.
Asia,
I wish to go away with the boat
Cradled this evening in the port
Mysterious and solitary
And that finally deploys her violet sails
Like an enormous night-bird in the golden sky.
I wish to go away, toward the isles of flowers,
Listening to the perverse sea sing
Over an old, bewitching rhythm.
I wish to see Damascus and the cities of Persia,
With their light minarets in the air;
I wish to see beautiful silk turbans
On dark faces with bright teeth;
I wish to see eyes dark with love
And pupils shining with joy
In skin yellowed like oranges;
I wish to see velvet robes
And clothes with long fringes.
I wish to see pipes in mouths
Surrounded by white beards;
I wish to see harsh merchants with cross-eyed gazes,
And judges, and viziers
Who with a single movement of their crooked finger
Grants life, or death, according to their desire.
I wish to see Persia, and India, and then China,
The pot-bellied mandarins under their umbrellas,
And the princesses with dainty hands,
And the literary men who quarrel
Over poetry and over beauty;
I wish to linger in the enchanted palace,
And like a foreign traveler
Contemplate at leisure painted countrysides,
On fabrics in fir frames,
With a person standing in the middle of an orchard;
I wish to see smiling assassins,
The executioner who cuts an innocent neck
With his great curved Oriental blade.
I wish to see paupers and queens;
I wish to see roses and blood;
I wish to see death caused by love or even by hate.
And then returning, later
Tell my story to the dreaming and curious
Raising, like Sinbad, my old Arab cup
From time to time to my lips
To interrupt my tale with art...

RAVEL: *Shéhérazade*

Translation by Ahmed E. Ismail

II. La flûte enchantée

L'ombre est douce et mon maître dort
Coiffé d'un bonnet conique de soie
Et son long nez jaune en sa barbe blanche.
Mais moi, je suis éveillée encor
Et j'écoute au dehors
Une chanson de flûte où s'épanche
Tour à tour la tristesse ou la joie.
Un air tour à tour languoureux ou frivole
Que mon amoureux chéri joue,
Et quand je m'approche de la croisée
Il me semble que chaque note s'envole
De la flûte vers ma joue
Comme un mystérieux baiser.

III. L'Indifférent

Tes yeux sont doux comme ceux d'une fille,
Jeune étranger,
Et la courbe fine
De ton beau visage de duvet ombragé
Est plus séduisante encor de ligne.
Ta lèvre chante sur le pas de ma porte
Une langue inconnue et charmante
Comme une musique fausse.
Entre! Et que mon vin te reconforte...
Mais non, tu passes
Et de mon seuil je te vois t'éloigner
Me faisant un dernier geste avec grâce
Et la hanche légèrement ployée
Par ta démarche féminine et lasse...

II. The enchanted flute

The shade is sweet and my master sleeps,
Wearing a conical silk bonnet,
With his long yellow nose in his white beard.
But I, I waken again
And hear outside
The song of a flute pour forth
By turns sadness and joy.
A song by turns languorous and frivolous
Which my dear lover plays,
And when I approach by the window.
It seems to me that each note steals away
From the flute toward my cheek
Like a mysterious kiss.

III. The indifferent one

Your eyes are soft, like those of a girl,
Young stranger,
And the fine curve
Of your handsome face with shadowed down
Is more seductive still.
Your lip sings, on the step of my door,
A tongue unknown and charming
Like dissonant music.
Enter! And let my wine comfort you...
But no, you pass by
And from my door I watch you depart,
Making a last graceful gesture to me,
Your hip lightly bent
In your feminine and weary gait...