

Gallic Lightness

by René Spencer Saller

"You will find sobriety and sadness in French music just as in German or Russian," Francis Poulenc observed in 1950. "But the French have a keener sense of proportion. We realize that somberness and good humor are not mutually exclusive. Our composers also write profound music, but when they do, it is leavened with that lightness of spirit without which life would be unendurable."

The word *lightness* often carries a negative connotation—it can mean "inconsequential," even "flimsy"—but this program reveals its positive features. Lightness doesn't mean a lack of depth. The music of Poulenc—like that of his mentor Maurice Ravel and his all-time favorite composer, Mozart—is light like a flame, light like a spiderweb, light like the laughter of little children.

While composing the music that eventually led to his *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and *La Valse*, Maurice Ravel wrote to a friend about his creative values: "You know my intense attraction to these wonderful rhythms, and that I value the *joie de vivre* expressed in the dance much more deeply than Franckist puritanism."

In a recent interview for the French-language publication *Tutti*, Guillaume Connesson described the primacy of music as a felt experience:

"Very often I write pieces that have a relationship with dance," Connesson remarked. "But with me the dance must be so spontaneous that nothing about it is premeditated. I like dance, but I think above all that I'm attracted to the place that exists between the body and rhythm. [...]When jazz bassists express a rhythm, they feel it and don't read it off the page. It's this rhythm that can't be written down that I'm seeking. For me, the score is there only to represent a bridge of memory between rhythm and the body."

Child's Play

As its title suggests, *Ma Mère l'Oye* ("Mother Goose") was originally intended for children. Maurice Ravel wrote it as a piano duet for Mimi

and Jean Godebski, the 6- and 7-year-old children of close friends. After the Godebski siblings surrendered to stage fright, Jeanne Leleu and Geneviève Durony—who were 6 and 10 at the time—debuted the suite in April of 1910. The premiere went so well that Ravel repackaged the work as an orchestral suite and a ballet the following year.

The five sections that make up the suite are based on fairy tales by Charles Perrault and other, less famous sources. “The idea of evoking in these pieces the poetry of childhood naturally led me to simplify my style and refine my means of expression,” Ravel wrote. Along with the explicitly programmatic titles, he annotated the score with brief descriptions and quoted extracts.

A Closer Listen

Inspired by Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty,” “La Pavane de la Belle au Bois Dormant” is an enchanted dream. The flute sings a slow, spellbound theme as soft horn and tender viola provide counterpoint. “Petit Poucet” (“Tom Thumb”) meanders along with the tiny protagonist, whose trail of bread crumbs is consumed by birds. The melody shimmers like a mirage; the meter struggles to find its footing; birds twitter and jeer. “Laideronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes” depicts an ugly little Empress who is shipwrecked with her serpent companion on an island populated by tiny porcelain figurines, who play instruments carved from almond and walnut shells. The pentatonic melodies and unusual sonorities point to the Chinese origins of the figurines, known as pagodas.

In “Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête” (“Conversations Between Beauty and the Beast”), Ravel juxtaposes the graceful and the grotesque; Beauty waltzes along to lilting wind instruments while the Beast bumbles in as a clumsy contrabassoon. When the spell is broken (listen for an abrupt cymbal followed by an eerie glissando), the Beast turns into a handsome prince, now portrayed by a solo cello, the romantic counterpart to Beauty’s plangent violin. Finally, “Le Jardin Féérique” (“The Fairy Garden”) returns to the initial Sleeping Beauty scenario. A sparkling celesta delivers the kiss that restores the princess to consciousness, and wedding bells and fanfares foretell her happy future with Prince Charming.

Complex Flavors

In the early 1930s the Parisian composer Francis Poulenc received two unusual commissions from the Princesse Edmond de Polignac (née Winnaretta Singer). One was for the frankly bizarre combination of organ, strings, and timpani. The other was for two pianos and an orchestra of classical proportions. The unconventional American-born princess, painter, philanthropist, and heiress (to the Singer sewing-machine fortune) presided over one of the most celebrated salons in Paris. Marcel Proust was one of many avant-garde luminaries who clocked countless hours in her drawing room. The Princess specifically requested that Poulenc's concerto be scored for two pianos so that the composer could perform it with his close friend Jacques Février. Its superficial airiness is deceptive. This concerto is as light as a sliver of mousse, but also rich and strange, with a bittersweet bite.

One reason that the Concerto for Two Pianos has retained its freshness almost 86 years after its premiere is that Poulenc had a restless imagination. Despite his credentials as a serious composer, he wasn't a snob or a bloodless academic. Among other things, the D-minor concerto is a compendium of his eclectic influences. Poulenc relished both the café balladry of the Parisian demimonde and the hypnotic, densely layered gamelan music of Indonesia. Somehow, despite its brevity, the concerto coheres, making a singular soundworld from the motley source material. Even today, when the Internet has flattened out our notions of the "exotic" and inured us to strangeness, the Concerto for Two Pianos carries a pungent whiff of the weird. Certain passages wouldn't sound out of place on a Radiohead album.

Movement by Movement

The opening movement starts out with a nervy, hectic energy. Sudden plunges, rattletrap percussion, and staccato jabs subside in Impressionist incantations. In the final section, the two pianos shimmer and ripple in Poulenc's astonishing approximation of the Javanese gamelan music he'd heard at the Paris Colonial Exposition a year earlier.

For the central movement, the composer explained, "I allowed myself...to return to Mozart, for I cherish the melodic line and I prefer Mozart to all other musicians." Indeed, the Larghetto begins as a Mozartean mash-up but soon takes on a Romantic flavor, with tangy touches of 20th-century dissonance.

The finale leapfrogs between jittery Gershwin-esque jazz and wistful fragments of previous melodies. Poulenc's quick-change artistry permits seamless shifts in mood and genre: broad dance-hall melodies explode into Stravinskian fireworks; delicate reveries give way to frenetic clatter.

Flaming Fifth

Born in 1970, Guillaume Connesson is among the most prolific and widely performed composers of his generation. The recipient of many awards and honors in his native France and internationally, Connesson has been remarkably prolific; his catalog covers all the major genres, from opera to pedagogical works. Stylistically, he draws from what he calls "the complex mosaic of the contemporary world," which might mean Ludwig van Beethoven, James Brown, John Adams, Maurice Ravel, or Bernard Herrmann, depending on the context. He completed *Flammenschrift* in 2012, fulfilling a commission for a Beethoven-related work from the conductor Daniele Gatti and the National Orchestra of France. Conceptually, *Flammenschrift* focuses on Beethoven's iconic Fifth Symphony, but Connesson radically expands the Beethovenian soundworld, pushing it beyond Brahms and into new sonic terrain.

Although it wasn't originally part of his plan, Connesson turned *Flammenschrift* into a symphonic triptych by combining it with two similar orchestral works, *Maslenitsa* and *E chiaro nella valle il fiume appare*, which pay tribute to the Russian and Italian musical traditions, respectively. Stéphane Denève and the Brussels Philharmonic Orchestra recorded all three pieces, along with a recent flute concerto by Connesson, for the 2016 Deutsche Grammophon release *Pour sortir au jour*.

The Composer Speaks

"*Flammenschrift*, or 'fire-letter,' is a word that Goethe used in his poem 'Marienbad Elegy.' I wished to compose a 'Furies' tune' that draws a psychological portrait of Beethoven and, more generally, pays homage to the music of Germany. For Beethoven I portray an angry, seething, impetuous man, whose interior violence shows through in numerous pages of his music. In his works Beethoven constantly celebrated the fraternity of man, but he was often harsh with his loved ones and

domestic servants. My desired musical portrait originates in this paradox. This misanthropic Beethoven—seen walking down the street looking disheveled, with his misshapen hat, this loner cursed by destiny but sanctified by genius—has always fascinated me: he constructed a very significant image of the artist in the 19th-century imagination that endures to the present day.

"To pay tribute to him, I use the same instrumentation as in his Fifth Symphony, but also some oppositions of characteristic units (the winds against the strings), and above all a rhythmic language that frequently alludes to his work. But in a larger sense, it was to the whole of Germanic music that I wanted to give homage, with glimpses of compositions by Brahms and Richard Strauss toward the end of the piece.

"*Flammenschrift* is cast in a kind of double-sonata form, without the opening recapitulation. Two themes of a fierce character are revealed first; a third, initially more relaxed one (carried by the clarinets and bassoons) will experience a great number of transformations. Finally, a fourth, more lyrical theme completes the substance of the introduction. After a lengthy development, the four themes are transmuted, in the memory of the major-key eruption from the Fifth's finale: the drama followed by a dance of joy." —**Guillaume Connesson** (translated from the French by René Spencer Saller; the original note appears on the composer's website: www.guillaumeconnesson.net)

Sentimental Journey

Ravel's enduring interest in the Viennese waltz first bore fruit in 1911, with his *Valses nobles et sentimentales* ("Noble and Sentimental Waltzes"). In his original setting for solo piano, as with his subsequent orchestration, Ravel ingeniously linked the eight waltz-based sections that make up the suite. (Some of the material came from the same sketches that would eventually lead to the 1920 "choreographic poem" *La Valse*.) Its dedicatee, Louis Aubert, Ravel's former classmate from the Paris Conservatory, performed the premiere. In March of 1912, Ravel orchestrated the piece for a ballet, *Adélaïde, ou Le langage des fleurs* ("Adelaide, or The Language of Flowers"), which was staged for the first time a month later at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris. Ravel's stylized scenario resembles a much less suspenseful *La Traviata*.

In French the connotations of the word "sentimental" aren't so burdened by the cloying nostalgia that English speakers might expect. (Consider, for instance, Gustave Flaubert's 1869 novel *Sentimental Education*, a deeply cynical coming-of-age story about a bunch of bourgeois wastrels.) The tone that Ravel meant to strike with his title seems, at least at first, quintessentially French: pensive reflection, a melancholy mixture of yearning and loss. But the title also deliberately invokes two similarly titled piano collections by Franz Schubert, whom Ravel admired greatly. The published piano edition bore a phrase by Henri de Régnier as epigraph: "...the delicious and always-new pleasure of a useless occupation." How better to describe these wistful and whimsical tunes?

Waltz of Destiny

Ravel began *La Valse* in 1919 and finished it late the following year, but the large-scale symphonic work percolated in his subconscious for more than a decade. He began exploring the idea in 1906, while sketching out *Wien (Vienna)*, a tribute to Johann "Waltz King" Strauss, Jr., and, as Ravel put it, "...a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, with which is mingled in my mind the idea of the fantastic whirl of destiny."

Destiny, in the form of World War I, forced him to put aside the project temporarily. Ravel was rejected for military service because of his physical frailty, but he was able to serve as a truck and ambulance driver until 1916, when a severe bout of dysentery sent him back to Paris for a long recuperation. By the time he resumed his "Vienna" project, his beloved mother, the central figure of his life, was dead, and his wartime experiences had left him disillusioned and depressed. His sentimental portrait of a bygone Austrian age was now laced with menace. The refined, romantic waltz, that gracious symbol of Viennese ballroom culture, had become a reeking, off-kilter *danse macabre*.

In 1918 the flamboyant Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev commissioned a ballet from Ravel, who quickly set to work adapting and orchestrating *Wien*, which he renamed *La Valse* in keeping with post-war prejudices. But two years later, after digesting a two-piano arrangement of the full score, Diaghilev rejected the music outright. According to Poulenc, who witnessed the dispute, Diaghilev pronounced

it a "masterpiece" but added that it was not a ballet so much as "the portrait of a ballet, a painting of a ballet." Ravel stormed out and never forgave him. In 1926 Ida Rubinstein, who would dance his *Boléro* two years later, choreographed a ballet version of *La Valse*.

A Closer Listen

Ravel chose a rather fanciful subtitle for the work: "poème chorégraphique ("choreographic poem"). He also wrote a programmatic preface to the score: "Through a swirling mist one discerns, in brief glimpses of clarity, waltzing couples. Little by little, the vapors dissipate: one can faintly discern an immense hall, filled with a whirling throng. The scene becomes gradually brighter. The light of chandeliers bursts forth [at the *fortissimo*]. An Imperial Court, around 1855."

In 2009 the French musicologist David Lamaze identified a distinctively Ravelian three-note figure, E-B-A, as a musical cipher for "Misia." The brief motive, which surfaces at critical points in *La Valse* and throughout Ravel's work in general, is expressed as *mi-si-la* in French solfège intervals. This is likely a cryptic reference to the composer's friend Misia Sert, a painter and the aunt of the young *Ma Mère l'Oye* dedicatees. Indeed, Ravel dedicated *La Valse* to her, along with his song "Le Cygne" ("The Swan").

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