

program notes

BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK ■ 1841-1904 **Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104 (1894-1895)**

During the three years that Dvořák was teaching at the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, he was subject to the same emotions as most other travelers away from home for a long time: invigoration and homesickness. America served to stir his creative energies, and during his stay from 1892 to 1895 he composed some of his greatest scores: the “New World” Symphony, the Op. 96 Quartet (“American”) and the Cello Concerto. He was keenly aware of the new musical experiences to be discovered in the land far from his beloved Bohemia when he wrote, “The musician must prick up his ears for music. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or organ grinder. I myself am often so fascinated by these people that I can scarcely tear myself away.” But he missed his home and, while he was composing the Cello Concerto, looked eagerly forward to returning. He opened his heart in a letter to a friend in Prague: “Now I am finishing the finale of the Cello Concerto. If I could work as free from cares as at Vysoká [his country home], it would have been finished long ago. Oh, if only I were in Vysoká again!”

The Concerto’s opening movement is in sonata form, with both themes presented by the orchestra before the entry of the soloist. The first theme, heard immediately in the clarinets, not only contains the principal melody but also serves to

establish the importance given to the wind instruments throughout the work, their tone colors serving as an excellent foil to the rich sonorities of the cello. “One of the most beautiful melodies ever composed for the horn” is how Sir Donald Tovey described the D major second theme. The cello’s entrance points up the virtuosic yet songful character of the solo part. The effect of the music for the soloist is enhanced by the use of the instrument’s burnished upper register.

Otakar Šourek, the composer’s biographer, described the second movement as a “hymn of deepest spirituality and amazing beauty.” It is in three-part form (A–B–A). A touching bit of autobiography is attached to the composition of this movement. While working on its middle section, Dvořák learned that his sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová, who had aroused in him a secret passion early in his life, was seriously ill. He showed his concern by using one of her favorite pieces in the central portion of this *Adagio* — his own song, *Let Me Wander Alone with My Dreams*, Op. 82, No. 1. She died a month after he returned to Prague in April 1895, so he revised the finale to include another reference to the same song to produce the autumnal slow section just before the end of the work.

The finale is a rondo of dance-like nature. Following the second reprise of the theme, the *Andante* section recalls both the first theme of the opening movement and Josefina’s melody from the second. A brief and rousing restatement of the rondo theme led by the brass closes this majestic Concerto.

MAURICE RAVEL ■ 1875-1937

***Ma Mère l'Oye* (“*Mother Goose*”) (1908, 1911)**

“I would settle down on his lap, and tirelessly he would begin, ‘Once upon a time ...’ It was *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Ugly Empress of the Pagodas*, and, above all, the adventures of a little mouse he invented for me.” So Mimi Godebski reminisced in later years about the visits of Maurice Ravel to her family’s home during her childhood. Ravel, a contented bachelor, enjoyed these visits to the Godebskis, and he took special delight in playing with the young children — cutting out paper dolls, telling stories, romping around on all fours. Young Mimi and her brother Jean were in the first stages of piano tutelage in 1908, and Ravel decided to encourage their studies by composing some little pieces for them portraying *Sleeping Beauty*, *Hop o’ My Thumb*, *Empress of the Pagodas* and *Beauty and the Beast*. To these he added an evocation of *The Fairy Garden* as a postlude. In 1911, he made a ravishing orchestral transcription of the original five pieces, added to them a prelude, an opening scene and connecting interludes, and produced a ballet with a scenario based on *Sleeping Beauty* for the Théâtre des Arts in Paris.

The opening *Prelude* and *Dance of the Spinning Wheel* present the Princess Florine, who pricks her finger on a spindle and falls into a deep sleep. The tiny *Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty* summons the Good Fairy, who watches over the Princess during her somnolence. An interlude leads to the *Conversations of Beauty and the Beast*. The high woodwinds sing the delicate words of the Beauty, while the Beast is portrayed by the lumbering contrabassoon. At first the

two converse politely, but after their betrothal, both melodies are entwined, and finally the Beast’s theme is transfigured into a floating wisp in the most ethereal reaches of the solo violin’s range.

Following an Interlude, *Hop o’ My Thumb* treats the legend taken from Perrault’s anthology of 1697. “A boy believed,” noted Ravel, “that he could find his path home by means of the bread crumbs he had scattered wherever he passed; but he was very surprised when he could not find a single crumb: the birds had come and eaten everything up.” The strings meander through scales as the boy wanders through the woods, with a few of his aviary nemeses returning to scavenge for the last morsels of bread.

Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas depicts a young girl cursed with ugliness by a wicked fairy, but the tale has a happy ending in which the Empress’ beauty is restored. The music, introduced by a lovely interlude featuring the harp, is decidedly oriental in character.

The *Fairy Garden* is Ravel’s masterful summation of the beauty, mystery and wonder that pervade *Ma Mère l’Oye*.

MAURICE RAVEL

***Boléro* (1928)**

Ravel originated what he once called his “*danse lascive*” at the suggestion of Ida Rubinstein, the famed ballerina who also inspired works from Debussy, Honegger and Stravinsky. Rubinstein’s balletic interpretation of *Boléro*, set in a rustic Spanish tavern, portrayed a voluptuous dancer whose stomps and whirls atop a table incite the men in the bar to mounting fervor. With growing intensity, they join in her dance until, in a brilliant *coup de théâtre*, knives are drawn and

violence flares on stage at the moment near the end where the music modulates, breathtakingly, from the key of C to the key of E. So viscerally stirring was the combination of the powerful music and the ballerina's suggestive dancing at the premiere that a near-riot ensued between audience and performers, and Miss Rubinstein narrowly escaped injury. The usually reserved Pitts Sanborn reported that the American premiere, conducted by Arturo Toscanini at Carnegie Hall on November 14, 1929, had a similar effect on its hearers: "If it had been the custom to repeat a number at a symphonic concert, *Boléro* would surely have been encored, even at the risk of mass wreckage of the nerves."

Ravel wrote in 1931 to the critic M.D. Calvocoressi, "I am particularly desirous that there should be no misunderstanding about this work. It constitutes an experiment in a very special and limited direction, and should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything different from or anything more than it actually does achieve. Before its first performance, I issued a warning to the effect that what I had written was a piece lasting about seventeen minutes and consisting wholly of 'orchestral tissue without music' — of one long, very gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, there is practically no invention except the plan and the manner of execution. The themes are altogether impersonal ... folktones of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind, and (whatever may have been said to the contrary) the orchestral writing is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity.... I have carried out exactly what I intended, and it is for listeners to take it or leave it." Take it, listeners have.

ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

MARCH 12-13, 2022

P R O G R A M

DIANE M. WITTRY MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104 ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK
Allegro
Adagio ma non troppo
Finale: Allegro moderato
Cello Soloist: Gabriel Martins (2020 Schadt Winner)

Ma Mère l'Oye ("Mother Goose"), Ballet in One Act MAURICE RAVEL
Prelude — Spinning Wheel Dance
Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty — Interlude
Conversations of Beauty and the Beast — Interlude
Hop o' My Thumb — Interlude
Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas — Interlude
Apotheosis: The Fairy Garden

Boléro MAURICE RAVEL

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