

Paul Dukas / October 1, 1865 – May 17, 1935

THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

Best known for its prominent role in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, Dukas's scherzo is the translation into music of a poem by Johann von Goethe based on an ancient folk tale. The moral of the tale is 'don't try to run before you can walk,' or 'don't meddle in matters you don't understand.' Goethe turned the fable into poetry, Dukas into a literal sound poem.

Dukas's programmatic music recounts the story of a magician who could turn a broom handle into a living object which would then execute the duties of a servant, such as fetching water. The secret of the trick lay in the magic words the sorcerer used to work this miracle. One day the sorcerer's apprentice overheard him rehearsing these words, and while his boss was away on an errand, the apprentice decided to try the trick himself – with disastrous results. The broom did become a servant, and it did fetch water as commanded, but the apprentice had not overheard the words needed to put the magic in reverse. The mindless runaway broom proceeded to flood the house. Desperately, the apprentice took an axe to the broom, splitting it in two – but then there were two mindless creatures flooding the house. Fortunately, the sorcerer arrived and put a halt to the mayhem.

Dukas's clever music captures the story in great detail, with the bassoons and contrabassoon playing the part of the broom. As the flood increases, orchestral arpeggios create the effect of flooding water. Suddenly, everything stops. The apprentice has taken his axe to his tormenter. But now all hell breaks out with double the amount of water. The sorcerer arrives, and calm is restored. It's a fun piece, but could Dukas have been anticipating and warning us against the perils of the robots of today controlled by artificial intelligence? Humm.

Francis Poulenc / January 7, 1899 – January 30, 1963

SUITE FROM LES BICHES GLORIA

Poulenc belonged in the 1920s to an avant-garde circle of French composers called, Les Six. Their style of composing reflected a reaction against Debussy and the impressionists as well as against super-heated romanticism and Germanic formality. Les Six rejected the prevailing idea that a composer had to be some kind of strange being battling with demons, communing with nature, or struggling with the cosmos. They believed instead that a composer could be, to quote Aaron Copland, a regular fellow "who liked to go to nightclubs like everybody else."

The youthful Poulenc fit this description to a "t." He was intentionally an enfant terrible, audacious in spirit, extroverted, and brash in manner. His early music reflected these characteristics, giving it the timeless feeling that it is fresh and new. He said, "I am not a cubist musician, even less a futurist, and certainly not an impressionist. I'm a musician without a label. What counts is not what is played, but what is played again and again." And here we are 100 years later with two of his enduring pieces.

Poulenc wrote *Les biches* on commission for a ballet from Serge Diaghilev of the Ballet Russes. *Les biches* (without a "t") meant Darling ladies. Poulenc described it as "an atmospheric ballet. I had the idea to situate a grand party in a vast, white country drawing room, with an immense blue divan as the only article of furniture. Twenty ravishing and flirtatious young women would frolic about with three handsome men dressed as oarsmen. It's not a question of love, but of pleasure, and it creates the erotic atmosphere of my early 20s." Years later, he extracted the sunny suite of six instrumental numbers we'll hear tonight, which has always been a concert favorite for

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its spirit and wit.

After years filled with unabashed antics, Poulenc returned to Catholicism into which he was born and from which he had strayed, producing thereafter a stream of religious works. He approached religious music, however, with the same playful sense of humor and love-of-life style as before. No requiems, thank you.

The Gloria, which is a setting of the Gloria text of the Catholic Mass ordinary, exemplifies this approach. In fact, one stuffy critic panned it as sacrilegious – but maybe he had a point. In response to the criticism, Poulenc said, “While writing it I had in mind those Crozzoli frescoes with angels sticking out their tongues, and also some solemn-looking Benedictine monks that I saw playing soccer one day.”

Poulenc was a free spirit. One of his friends said, “There is in him something of the monk and the street urchin.” Both show through in his captivating music. I might note that he gave this program annotator some good advice: “Above all, do not analyze my music—love it!”

Maurice Ravel / March 7, 1875 – December 28, 1937

BOLÉRO

Ida Rubenstein was a famous barefoot ballet dancer in Paris during the first half of the Twentieth Century. She appeared in Sergei Diaghileff’s Ballets Russes, and other productions, starring as Cleopatra, Salomé, Helen of Troy, and Scheherazade; and she ran with the avant garde crowd of Igor Stravinsky, Sarah Bernhardt, and Claude Debussy.

Ida was a sensualist, an emancipated feminist, a shameless self-promoter, and rich. She posed in the nude for French painters, kept a black panther as a pet, and delighted in drinking champagne from Madonna lilies. Trafficking in her statuesque sensuality, she attracted a bevy of rich male admirers who underwrote many of her productions. Eventually, she started a ballet troupe of her own.

In 1928, Ida Rubenstein commissioned from Ravel a piece to be used as the music for an original ballet. The result was Boléro. Ida’s choreography turned Ravel’s composition into symbolic lovemaking. To quote Madeline Goss in her book Boléro, “The stage of Mme. Rubenstein’s ballet Boléro was set to represent the interior of an Andalusian Inn, with a huge table in the center, and a large lamp hanging directly over it. The scene was like one of Goya’s paintings, with deep shadows and brilliant contrasts of light and color. A crowd of all male Gypsies sprawled about in chairs and on the floor, half asleep. Mme. Rubenstein, with castanets and a brilliant Spanish shawl, climbed onto the table and started to dance to the music, slowly at first in languid rhythm, then with more and more abandon. Gradually, the on-looking Gypsies began to awaken and sway with the music. Finally the whole company joined in the dance and whirled to the furious and lustful climax of motion, sound, and color.” The cascading excitement of the music, and the hypnotic power of the persistent rhythm, and Rubenstein’s suggestive performance precipitated a riot in which she barely escaped injury.

Later on, when Ravel himself conducted the premier of the purely symphonic version of the music, many in the cheering audience found it irresistible, but one terrified woman was seen at the back of the hall clutched to an exit door screaming hysterically, “He’s a madman, he’s a madman!” When Ravel was told about her reaction to his music, he smiled and said, “She is the only one who really understood it!”

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