An American in Paris – April 30, 2016

Overture to
***Orphéeaux enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld)** Jacques Offenbach
1819-1880

The son of a German Jewish cantor, Jacques (originally Jacob) Offenbach moved in 1833 to Paris where his father thought Jews were better treated than in Germany. Trained at the Paris Conservatoire, he was a cellist and salon musician for many years until he was appointed conductor of the Théatre Français and began composing one-act operettas, satirizing the vapid social scene of Paris. In 1858 he wrote his first three-act operetta, *Orphée aux enfers* spoofing the neoclassical vogue of the Second Empire under Napoleon III. *La belle Hélène*, composed in 1864, was an even more scathing swipe at the none-too-bright-Emperor and his even dimmer empress Eugénie. His operettas influenced Gilbert and Sullivan, Franz Lehár and, ultimately, the musical comedies of the twentieth century.

Orphée aux enfers created a scandal at its premiere. The operetta parodies the story of Orpheus, whose bride, Eurydice, dies on their wedding day. By means of his amazing musical talent Orpheus wins her back from the underworld only to lose her again by looking back at her before reaching the surface. Offenbach insulted everyone evenhandedly. He was accused of denigrating classical antiquity, the revered Christoph Willibald Gluck (who, among many others, had written an important serious opera on the Orpheus legend), the Emperor, the government and the prevailing social order. Predictably, the negative publicity made for soaring ticket sales. With the fall of the Emperor and the changing political and social climate, Offenbach had to revise the operetta extensively in 1874.

The overture, however, is not entirely by Offenbach. The version commonly played was compiled by Carl Binder, a minor Austrian operetta composer, for the first performance in Vienna. He started with the overture Offenbach wrote and added to it the famous violin solo from Act I and the famous cancan from the end of Act IV.

Gymnopédie No. 1 Erik Satie
1866-1925

Bizarre, fiercely non-conventional, comic, extremely sensitive, prickly, eccentric – these are just some of the few descriptions, both approving and dismissive, that were flung at Erik Satie during his lifetime. His was the voice of a child, saying outrageous things with complete honest calm and a straight face. With his ability to use humor to deflate academic pomposity and his critics' self-importance, he became the father figure for the generation of iconoclastic French composers of the early part of the twentieth century. He influenced Ravel and Debussy, but especially, after 1920, the *Groupe des Six*: Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre and Louis Durey.

Satie drew attention to his piano miniatures by giving them such outrageous titles as "Three next-to-last thoughts," "Three pieces in the form of a pear" (his answer to Debussy who complained that his music was formless), "Flabby Preludes" or "Unappetizing chorale." His style was ostensibly simple, clear and short on rhetoric – stripped-down music. Paradoxically, he was not a self-publicist, and the public remained unaware of his work until 1909 when Ravel and pianist Ricardo Viñes introduced Satie's music at their recitals.

The *Trois Gymnopédies* (the title ostensibly originating from games in ancient Sparta) were composed in 1887 and have remained Satie's most popular work. Numbers 1 and 3 were orchestrated by Debussy. This is dreamy music with harmonies that were revolutionary – but not jarring – for their time. The three pieces use essentially the same, but subtly varied, melodic material and have the same mood and tempo.

Piano Concerto in G major Maurice Ravel
1875-1937

In 1929 Maurice Ravel began work on the Piano Concerto in G at the same time as the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, commissioned by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right arm in World War I. At the time of its conception, Ravel had originally intended the G major Concerto for his own use. But by the time he completed it in 1931, his health was not up to the physical rigors of practicing. French pianist Marguerite Long played in the premiere with the composer conducting. The two recorded the Concerto soon after the premiere in January 1932, a performance now reissued on CD.

Because of the Concerto's light-hearted mood, Ravel originally wanted to call it a "*divertissement*." It opens with a crack of the whip, or slapstick, followed by a perky tune on the piccolo, which is in turn taken over by a trumpet solo, all the time accompanied by gossamer arpeggios on the piano. In an exaggeration of the convention of a contrasting second theme, Ravel switches into a languid blues style making use of a short jazz refrain for the clarinet, which he appends as a cadence figure throughout the movement. While the piano, with its jazzy, syncopated rhythm, is clearly the dominant instrument, Ravel provides abundant solo opportunities for the orchestral instruments, especially the winds.

According to Ravel, he modeled the graceful slow movement *Adagio* on the *Larghetto* from Mozart's Clarinet Quintet. It opens with a long piano solo, an "unending melody," resolving only many bars into the orchestral part. Ironically, the seemingly easy and natural spinning out of the melody, with its inherent tension born of delayed resolution, belies the difficulties the composer had with it: Ravel said he pieced it together bar by bar.

The dazzling *Presto* finale is a virtuoso piece for the soloist, the drumming of repeated notes suggestive of a Baroque toccata. But this is no Baroque imitation, punctuated as it is by jazz riffs for solo winds and "blue notes." A strategically placed whip crack leads into the final cadence, a repeat of the opening bars of the first movement.

Suite from the Incidental Music to:
***Pelléas et Mélisande*, Op. 80** Gabriel Fauré
1845-1924

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Belgian Symbolist poet and playwright Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) touched a sympathetic chord with composers of the period with his fantastic stories and plays of mystery and spiritual transcendence. The most successful of Maeterlinck's plays was *Pelléas et Mélisande*, written in 1892. It has a mystical fairy tale quality, taking place in the nebulous medieval past described as a "dissonant dream world." The motives and motivations of the characters in the play are unimportant in themselves, as they are all helpless against fate.

Golaud, grandson of King Arkël, has discovered Mélisande, a mysterious young woman with luxuriant golden hair, lost in a forest. He marries her, but her life in the castle is unhappy. Gradually Mélisande develops a friendship with Golaud's younger half- brother, Pelléas, but Golaud becomes suspicious of them and believes that Mélisande is unfaithful. The more he presses Mélisande for information, the more she withdraws from him, turning always to Pelléas for emotional support. In the climactic scene, Pelléas and Mélisande meet at night outside of the castle gates. Pelléas announces his departure, declaring that his love for Mélisande has made his life at the castle unbearable; hesitantly, Mélisande says that she loves Pelléas as well, and the two share a passionate embrace. At that moment, Golaud, dashes out and kills Pelléas. Mélisande flees but is found and brought back to the castle where she dies mysteriously a few days later, heartbroken over the loss of Pelléas but finally at peace with herself.

The story has everything to whet a composer's appetite: jealousy, fratricide, belated remorse, wife abuse, even child abuse (Golaud forces his little son to spy on the lovers.) Claude Debussy converted the play into an opera, Arnold Schoenberg wrote a massive symphonic poem, and Jan Sibelius and Gabriel Fauré wrote incidental music to the play.

Fauré composed *Pelléas* in 1898 for a production in London, commissioned by famed actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell (the original Eliza Doolittle in G.B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*). It was a hasty job, and Fauré had his student, the composer Charles Koechlin, finish some of the orchestration. Soon thereafter he extracted four movements from the original nine to create an orchestral suite:

1. *Prélude* sets the mood for the play and Mélisande's fate. The French horn symbolizes Golaud.
2. *Fileuse* (The Spinner) introduces Act III, which opens with Mélisande spinning, a beautiful oboe solo.
3. *Sicilienne* precedes Act II, in which Mélisande inadvertently loses the ring Golaud had given her down a well. Fauré originally composed this music in 1893 for Molière's comedy *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* and later transcribed it in 1898 for cello and piano. Here it is a flute solo, the best known of the movements and often played as a separate piece.
4. *La mort de Mélisande* (The Death of Mélisande) introduces Act V.

Those familiar with Claude Debussy's opera of the same name will note the ephemeral atmosphere of both works, inspired by the dream-like quality of the play, despite its moments of violence.

An American in Paris George Gershwin
1898-1937

George Gershwin was the first American composer to make jazz acceptable to American classical music audience. The son of poor Jewish immigrants in lower Manhattan, Gershwin was a natural-born pianist and left school at 16 to become a pianist with a Tin-Pan Alley firm, plugging their new songs. He soon commenced writing songs himself, eventually teaming up with his brother Ira as lyricist to become one of the most successful duo of song and musical comedy writers on Broadway. They created a string of immensely successful

musicals from *Lady be Good* in December 1924 to *Let 'em Eat Cake* in October 1933. The opening night of a George Gershwin musical comedy was a social and media event with Gershwin himself usually leading the orchestra.

Gershwin composed *An American in Paris* in 1928 on a commission from the Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York. It is a jazz-based tone poem inspired by the composer's trip to France where he attempted to study with, among others, Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky. Both declined. Ravel was supposed to have said: "Why be a second-rate Ravel when you are a first-rate Gershwin?"

The work captures the sound and spirit of post-World-War-I Paris where such American bohemians as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway – and their fictional characters – went to lose (and rediscover) themselves. According to the composer, "The piece is really a rhapsodic ballet, written very freely...to portray the impressions of an American visitor as he strolls around the city...the individual listener can read into the music such episodes as his imagination pictures for him." But for the program book at the premiere, with Gershwin's approval, composer Deems Taylor wrote a different scenario involving a detailed description of the tourist's day adrift in the City of Light, proving that the music came first, the explanation later. To add authenticity to its sound, Gershwin purchased in Paris taxi horns for the New York premiere.

An American in Paris has had a strong influence on a certain type of American music. Leonard Bernstein's musical *On the Town*, is an expanded version chronicling a day in the lives of two American sailors on leave in New York during World War II. But even more persistent has been Gershwin's hustle-bustle evocation of busy Parisian life that has been used in so many film scores, TV and advertising as to become iconic "city" music.

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