

Ravel's dream within a dream

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"I do not ask for my music to be interpreted, but only for it to be played," Maurice Ravel remarked, knowing full well what musicians would make of his seemingly cryptic remark. "Do it my way" was only the surface of his message. The composer's written indications to performers are as detailed as they come, linguistically more precise than those of most other composers. But he was composing at a time when, far more than today, performers, French ones in particular, regarded printed scores as starting points for interpretations.

So does the new recording of Ravel's complete ballet "Daphnis et Chloé" by the ensemble Les Siècles (Harmonia Mundi) obey? To the extent it's obedient, it's in the way certain codified modes of sexuality are. Conductor François-Xavier Roth, a nice heterosexual man with edge to spare, pays scrupulous attention to Ravel's "orders," but what he does in this arresting, game-changing new recording is do the composer the honor of giving him a performance likely to sound like what Ravel had in his domineering ear.

You guessed it, Les Siècles plays with instruments and in a style that reflect the period of the composition, 1912, and so are "historically informed." The longer we're lashed to that locution, the more it feels like being tied to the stake over which the "modernists" are lighting a fire we'll soon regret, or so they claim. "But is it 'old' beautiful?" the real lunatics among the deniers counter. Well, if you're fond of a sound world that conjures the magic of a vivid dream with telling details everywhere, all of them belonging to and enhancing the whole, Yes!

I've spent a lifetime fine-tuning my ear, and my love for Ravel is boundless, but I admit to having succumbed to sea-sickness in performances of the full score of "Daphnis," which hints at why it's heard in concert on its own (as opposed to in an actual ballet pit) far less often than the suites drawn from it. Its swells can seem endlessly, dreamily attention-defeating despite the enormous sonic climaxes, even in what has until now been my favorite of the versions, Claudio Abbado's with the London Symphony Orchestra. With Les Siècles, you get all that plus sharply defined event, real put-you-on-the-edge-of-your chair musical storytelling.

There's little audible doubt that the composer's attention was to swamp – overwhelm, really – the listener with orchestral colors of the most perfumed, shimmering sort. But he wrote the piece for performance by Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which performed it in a season between Stravinsky's

"Petroushka" and, in 1913, a certain "Le Sacre du printemps," both of which Les Siecles has gratefully recorded on a single CD that belongs in every collection – certainly every discerning gay person's. Although it eventually played itself out in that Continental Baths kind of way, the Ballets Russes was a cauldron of gay creative energy at the time of "Daphnis." The ballet, choreographed by Michel Fokine, featured Diaghilev's then-lover Vaslav Nijinsky dancing before Leon Bakst sets, while Pierre Monteaux (first conductor of "Le Sacre," and later, music director of the SF Symphony, who recorded "Daphnis" with the LSO) conducted. It was a hit, promptly revived.

There are credible reports that, at this apex of the Ballets Russes, the drag-loving Ravel and Stravinsky found more than supreme orchestration skills to admire in one another. The Ballets Russes' impact on 20th-century art was incalculable, but it also put on shows, and all of Paris (including Proust for "Le Sacre") showed up. What with some "artistic differences," "Daphnis" turned out to be a success mostly for Ravel (who wrote that he knew only how to swear in Russian).

Once you've heard the Les Siecles "Daphnis," modern-instrument versions of it – gliding and sliding, swooping and whooping – may feel like the soundtrack for competition figure-skating or Terrence Malick dolphin porn. Ravel said his intention was to create "a vast musical fresco," but the tableaux are moving pictures. In Les Siecles' "Daphnis," you "hear" the dance steps.

You're not constantly jumping up and down to change the volume levels to compensate for the extreme low and high dynamics. The naysayers will think this is because it's all equally dull on those "old" instruments, when in fact it's a matter of exquisitely balanced proportions that make dramatic sense of the dynamic fluctuations and extremes.

Ravel hewed to symphonic criteria, with careful key relationships. That noted, this new recording marks the first time I've heard the often evanescently beautiful tale of the love of the shepherd and shepherdess violently interrupted by Chloe's abduction by pirates. The sonic specificity the historical instruments lend is astounding. And for once, the wordless chorus is more than sound effects. If you're watching the European scene, you know that right now the London Symphony is welcoming its new music director with a series called "Rattle is here." The latest LSO Live recording, on their house label, features a "Daphnis et Chloe Suite No. 2" that supports the excitement. Meaning no disparagement to the superb Simon Rattle, he's no Roth with "Daphnis."

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