

Pelléas et Mélisande Suite, Op. 80

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)

Written: 1898

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: Eighteen minutes

When the English actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell read a translation of Maurice Maeterlinck's drama *Pelléas et Mélisande*, she felt she “knew *Mélisande* as though she had been part of me before my eyes were open. . . . I knew I could put the beauty of the written work into color, shape, and sound.” So, she convinced an actor friend to stage the play in London and in English. She also knew that, “The incidental music needed was a most important element . . . I felt sure M. Gabriel Fauré was the composer needed.”

If Fauré was the composer needed, it was because another composer, Claude Debussy had turned down the job. Actually, Debussy had secured the rights to turn Maeterlinck's play into an opera soon after its premiere. Mrs. Campbell just wanted Debussy to extract music from the opera and use it as incidental music for the play. However, five years later he was still struggling to get the thing done, so he turned Mrs. Campbell down. He was none too pleased when she then turned to Fauré. “I don't see there can be any confusion between the two scores, at least not in the matter of intellectual weight,” he wrote. “In any case Fauré is the mouthpiece of a group of snobs and imbeciles . . .”

Once Fauré accepted, he had to work quickly—the first performance was in less than two months! He asked a former student, Charles Koechlin, to orchestrate the music as he wrote it. Fauré conducted the premiere at the Prince of Wales Theatre. The production itself was a hit, and Maeterlinck, who saw the London production, was “bowled over.”

Fauré initially chose three of the seventeen numbers from the play—and re-orchestrated them by himself—to make up a suite for orchestra; he added the *Sicilienne*—the most famous part of the suite—later. The first movement is the prelude to Act I, setting the mood for the entire play. The second movement is *Mélisande's* spinning music from the prelude to Act III. It depicts her purity and charm. The *sicilienne*, with its gorgeous flute solo, underscores the love scene when *Mélisande* drops her wedding ring into a well. The final piece, the *Death of Mélisande*, was played at Fauré's own funeral.

Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose)

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Written: 1908-1911

Movements: Five

Style: Impressionist

Duration: 16 minutes

Maurice Ravel was not much taller than a child. He never married and was childless, but he loved children, their toys, playing games with them, and telling them stories. One of his little

friends, Mimi Godebski remembered the visits by Ravel:

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. I laughed a great deal at this last story; then I felt remorseful, as I had to admit it was very sad.

Mimi had a brother Jean. To entice the two to practice their piano, Ravel wrote a series of piano duets for them. He based them on some fairy tales from the "Tales of Mother Goose." Several years later, Ravel rewrote them for orchestra and recast them into a ballet. There are five short musical stories.

Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty introduces Sleeping Beauty with a short, slow, and stately procession. *Tom Thumb* tells the story of the little boy who drops bread crumbs to leave himself a path out of a forest. You can hear little Tom's wanderings by the constantly shifting meter of the music. High harmonics played by the violins imitate the birds while the oboe and English horn suggest Tom's crying.

Ravel gave a written description of *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*:

"She undressed herself and went into the bath. The pagodas and pagodines began to sing and play on instruments. Some had oboes made of walnut shells and others had violas made of almond shells—for they had to have instruments that were of their own small proportions."

Ravel's use of only the black keys of the piano (a pentatonic scale) is what gives this piece its Oriental flavor.

In Ravel's telling of *Beauty and the Beast*, the clarinet takes on the role of Beauty while the Contrabassoon is the Beast. As they fall in love, their melodies entwine, and as the Beast is transformed, his melody gets played by a solo violin.

In the ballet, *The Fairy Garden* tells of Prince Charming awakening Sleeping Beauty with a kiss while all of the characters gather around. The music begins peacefully but grows to provide the perfect storybook ending.

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 56 ("Scottish")

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

Written: 1829–42

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 38 minutes

Before Felix Mendelssohn turned fifteen, he had already written twelve symphonies! At the end of his teenage years, after he completed his "home-schooling," his father sent Felix on a 'grand tour' of Europe, beginning in England and Scotland.

He and his friend Karl Klingemann visited the famed novelist Sir Walter Scott. In June they were in Edinburgh, where they took in the lore of Queen Mary and her personal secretary (and possible lover), David Rizzio. In a letter home, he described the scene: "We went to the palace of Holyrood where Queen Mary lived and loved. . . . Everything is broken and moldering

and the bright sky shines in. I believe I found today in the old chapel the beginning of my Scottish Symphony.”

By the following year, Mendelssohn was in Italy. “Who then can blame me for not being able to return to the mists of Scotland,” he wrote. “I have therefore laid aside the symphony for the present.” Actually, it was more like ten years before he got around to completing his Scottish Symphony.

When he came back to it, he used the music that he wrote at Holyrood as an introduction to the first movement. It is somber and moody in character. The clarinet and violins then get to introduce the main theme of the movement, itself somewhat disquieting in mood. The theme grows into a real tempest and then dissolves into a more lyrical second melody. Solemn chords announce the development section that works with the stormier elements of both the first and second themes. An even stormier episode follows a full restatement of the principal themes. The solemn introduction returns to usher in, without any pause, the next movement.

The second movement is a blistering dance-like piece, full of barely-containable joy. It proceeds directly into the slow movement. The music here alternates between a beautiful singing melody and a stern, rigorous one. Mendelssohn marks the last movement *allegro guerriero*—fast and warlike; however, it is not without those elfin-like moments that permeate so much of Mendelssohn’s music. The symphony ends with a joyful solemnity.

©2015 John P. Varineau