

Paul Dukas: Villanelle for Horn and Orchestra (1906)

Paul Dukas (1865-1935) was a French composer, critic, scholar and teacher. A studious man, of retiring personality, he was intensely self-critical, and as a perfectionist he abandoned and destroyed many of his compositions. His best known work is the orchestral piece *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (*L'apprenti sorcier*), the fame of which became a matter of irritation to Dukas. In 2011, the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* observed, "The popularity of *L'apprenti sorcier* and the exhilarating film version of it in Disney's *Fantasia* possibly hindered a fuller understanding of Dukas, as that single work is far better known than its composer." Among his other surviving works are the opera *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* (*Ariadne and Bluebeard*, 1897, later championed by Toscanini and Beecham), a symphony (1896), two substantial works for solo piano (*Sonata*, 1901, and *Variations*, 1902) and a sumptuous oriental ballet *La Péri* (1912). Described by the composer as a "poème dansé" it depicts a young Persian prince who travels to the ends of the Earth in a quest to find the lotus flower of immortality, coming across its guardian, the *Péri* (fairy). Because of the very quiet opening pages of the ballet score, the composer added a brief "Fanfare pour précéder La Péri" which gave the typically noisy audiences of the day time to settle in their seats before the work proper began. Today the prelude is a favorite among orchestral brass sections.

At a time when French musicians were divided into conservative and progressive factions, Dukas adhered to neither but retained the admiration of both. His compositions were influenced by composers including Beethoven, Berlioz, Franck, d'Indy and Debussy.

Dukas was born in Paris, the second son in a Jewish family of three children. His father, Jules Dukas, was a banker, and his mother, Eugénie, was a capable pianist. Dukas took piano lessons, but showed no unusual musical talent until he was 14 when he began to compose while recovering from an illness. He entered the *Conservatoire de Paris* at the end of 1881, aged 16, and studied piano with Georges Mathias, harmony with Théodore Dubois and composition with Ernest Guiraud. Among his fellow students was Claude Debussy, with whom Dukas formed a close friendship. Two early overtures survive from this period, *Goetz de Berlichingen* (1883) and *Le Roi Lear* (1883). The manuscript of the latter was rediscovered in the 1990s and the work was performed for the first time in 1995.

Dukas won several prizes, including the second place in the *Conservatoire's* most prestigious award, the *Prix de Rome*, for his cantata *Velléda* in 1888. Disappointed at his failure to win the top prize, he left the *Conservatoire* in 1889. After compulsory military service he began a dual career as a composer and a music critic. His career as a critic began in 1892 with a review of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* conducted by Gustav Mahler at Covent Garden in London. His Parisian debut as composer was a performance of his overture *Polyeucte*, written in 1891 and premiered by Charles Lamoureux and his *Orchestre Lamoureux* in January 1892. Like many French works of the period, shows the influence of Wagner, but displays individuality.

His *Symphony in C major* was composed in 1895–96, when Dukas was in his early 30s. It is dedicated to Paul Vidal, and had its first performance in January 1896, under the direction of the dedicatee. Along with Franck's only symphony written in 1888, most critics found that the work magnificently refuted the generally prevalent notion that no French composer had ever produced a great symphony. Like the Franck, Dukas's is in three movements rather than the conventional four.

In the last years of his life, Dukas became well known as a teacher of composition. When Charles-Marie Widor retired as professor of composition at the Paris Conservatoire in 1927, Dukas was appointed in his place. He also taught at the École Normale de Musique in Paris. His many students included Yvonne Desportes, Carlos Chávez, Maurice Duruflé, Jean Langlais, Olivier Messiaen, Manuel Ponce, Joaquín Rodrigo, and David Van Vactor.

Dukas wrote scholarly books on some of his favorite composers, including Richard Strauss, whose father was a notable horn player. Perhaps he hoped the senior Strauss would promote his Villanelle. Most recordings describe his Villanelle (1906) as "for horn and piano," because the original orchestral accompaniment was lost. The version we hear tonight was orchestrated by Dr. Donald Miller of the University of Missouri.

A Villanelle is a "simple-minded" Neapolitan street song with a repeating pattern, popular in the 16th century. That is according to one source. According to another, it is a "sophisticated" parody of a madrigal. The term later was used to suggest a bucolic scene, perhaps a village dance. Berlioz, Dukas, and others have used it in this sense.

The horn was introduced to the orchestra in the 17th century, and was appreciated by Mozart, who wrote four horn concertos. In spite of this endorsement, and the many works written for solo horn in those days, the horn repertoire fell into obscurity for many years. Horns are notoriously hard to play, so perhaps there just weren't many good players. This changed with the English family Brain, and especially with Dennis Brain. There were generations of horn players in that family, but Dennis Brain was outstanding. In the 1950s, if you asked music-lovers to name a great horn-player, they would name Dennis Brain, and could think of no others. Brain resurrected the four horn concertos of Mozart, and began to popularize other horn pieces that had been forgotten ... including the Dukas Villanelle. Dennis Brain could make even a garden hose sound pretty good! The next generation included famed horn soloists Barry Tuckwell and Hermann Baumann, followed by today's principal chairs of the world's great orchestras, who play at soloist level in order to hold such a position.

This piece is easy to listen to, as a Villanelle should be. But it is not easy to play. It was written in 1906 as a competition piece, and is designed to show off the particular charms of the instrument. Wait for the coda, which is very fast, and displays speedy triple-tonguing. There is not a great deal of complicated structure here, and the work is very lyrical. One or two themes are repeated and the speed increased (the original Villanelle was quite repetitive, but this one is more varied) until we reach a dramatic finish.

--notes adapted from Internet sources by Stephen Larmore