



The Philharmonic

Gallic Delights

Suite from *Pelleas and Melisande*.....Gabriel Fauré
Zigeunerweisen.....Pablo de Sarasate
Meditation, from *Thais*.....Jules Massenet
Carmen Fantasy.....Pablo de Sarasate
Symphony in C Major.....Georges Bizet

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): Suite from *Pelleas and Melisande*

Claude Debussy, the composer whose sesquicentennial we celebrate this year, was in the audience the night that *Pelleas et Melisande*, the radical new play by the Symbolist master Maurice Maeterlinck, had its Paris premiere in 1893. With its air of perfumed tragedy, very little happens in *Pelleas*' long span. The play is essentially a love triangle: the young, waif-like Melisande, who is rescued in the forest by the nobleman Golaud; whereupon Pelleas, Golaud's young, headstrong half-brother, falls in love with her. Golaud will eventually murder Pelleas; Melisande will die in childbirth. The common, yet complex emotions of the play (love, fear, jealousy, heartbreak) are all conveyed in a static yet potent manner, no doubt casting a spell on audiences of the time.

Over the next dozen years, *Pelleas* inspired many of its era's greatest composers. Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy, Jean Sibelius, and Arnold Schoenberg would all weigh in with their own magnificent scores in tribute to this strange and mysterious work. Debussy eventually turned out what is widely regarded as one of the greatest operas of all time and Schoenberg gave us a sprawling symphonic poem of crunchingly anguished harmonies. But the Nordic Sibelius and the Frenchman Gabriel Fauré offered space, elegant scores of traditional incidental music – short musical numbers to be performed during the play by a small pit orchestra. All four works, which each could not be more different from the others in their expression, are profound musical renderings of the Belgian playwright's elusive masterpiece.

Commissioned in 1898 by Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the popular English actress who would play Melisande in *Pelleas*' first London production, Fauré's music for *Pelleas and Melisande* was so successful that it traveled with the production to New York. It's not difficult to see why as Fauré, with his usual economy of means, captured the essence of Maeterlinck's haunting, fragile confection. The Suite's four movements are drawn from the original music's 17 numbers and, together, paint a sparse and lonely picture of the play's emotional landscape: the Prelude to Act I, so delicate, yet warning with its horn calls of dark things to come; the Act III Prelude, portraying Melisande at her spinning wheel; the lovely Sicilienne, underpinning the lovers' seduction scene at the well; and finally the fraught, yet elegant "Death of Melisande," which in its noble tragedy would inspire the composer to have it performed eventually at his own funeral. Composers from Debussy and Ravel to Copland and Sibelius would come to revere Fauré for the very qualities he supremely displayed in this elegant little score.

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Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908): *Zigeunerweisen* (Gypsy Airs)

Jules Massenet (1842-1912): *Meditation*, from *Thais*

Pablo de Sarasate, after Georges Bizet (1838-1875): *Carmen Fantasy*

One of the greatest and most generous virtuosos of the 19th century, Pablo de Sarasate was a walking example of the profound musical links between France and Spain. Although he inspired truly great works for violin and orchestra by no less than Lalo (the *Symphonie Espagnole*), Saint-Saens, and Max Bruch (the *Scottish Fantasy*), Sarasate is best remembered for his own compositions of music for solo violin. The two most famous of them are the bookends, if you will, of today's three-movement suite for violin and orchestra: the *Zigeunerweisen* (Gypsy Airs) of 1878 and the virtuoso Fantasy from 1883 on melodies from Bizet's opera *Carmen*.

Prove the old adage that "the Orient begins at the Pyrenees," Sarasate in both these works dramatically develops both Spanish and Gypsy folk melodies and dances into dizzyingly effective vehicles for the virtuoso violin. *Zigeunerweisen* is divided into four different and mercurial sections based obsessively on the *czardas*; the *Carmen Fantasy* is also in a mini-concerto form, with Sarasate paying pyrotechnic homage to the opera's *Aragonaise*, *Habanera*, *Seguidilla*, and, in the gypsy tradition, the *Danse boheme*. Both works have their ending in whirling Gypsy dances at breakneck speed.

As a central contrast, our soloist Maria Bachmann offers us one of the beloved *bonbons* of the repertoire, the meltingly beautiful intermezzo for violin and orchestra from Jules Massenet's opera *Thais*, premiered in Paris in 1894 as the *Belle Epoque* of Parisian life was steaming full-bore into decadence. The sublimely cloying beauty of the *Meditation* ultimately reflects a spirit of genuine tenderness that has made this piece such a favorite, for ultimately the right reasons.

Georges Bizet (1838-1875): *Symphony in C Major* (1855)

There is good music, there is great music, and then, there are miracles like Georges Bizet's *Symphony in C*. Written as a student exercise at the Paris Conservator, where the 17 year-old Bizet was a student of Charles Gounod, this symphony was actually modeled on Gounod's own First Symphony, a charming and underrated work. Once written, Bizet's *Symphony in C* was put into a drawer, never, Bizet thought, to be seen again; Bizet showed no desire whatsoever to have it published or performed in Paris' nascent orchestral culture of the time (opera and ballet dominated the scene by far) and never even mentioned the piece in his surviving letters. Twenty years later, the still-young genius would die more or less of a broken heart, following the initial failure of his own operatic masterpiece, *Carmen*.

Bizet's widow, who would die long afterward in 1926, strangely also took no interest in her late husband's only symphony even though the orchestra scene in Paris was growing explosively by the end of the 19th century. She instead left the manuscript in a sheaf of papers bequeathed to the great French song composer Reynaldo Hahn, who in the early 1930s would wisely turn it back to the library of Bizet's *alma mater*, the Paris Conservatory. Soon after, the score was shown to the great German conductor Felix Weingartner, who led the very first performance in Basel, Switzerland in 1935.

The *Symphony* was immediately hailed as a youthful masterpiece. With its four movements corresponding to that of the late-Classical symphony at the very beginning of the 19th century – fiery first movement, gently-paced slow movement, bouncing scherzo, and rambunctious finale – in its sunny perfection Bizet really gives us the French equivalent of Mendelssohn's "Italian" symphony in so many respects. Its striking resemblance to the First Symphony of his teacher Gounod no doubt explains Bizet's refusal to have his own first symphony noticed during his lifetime. For all of the genuine merit of Gounod's *Symphony in D*, Bizet's own stab at the genre does not copy that of his teacher, but respectfully surpasses it, with all the joyous fervor of youth.

