

Jean Martinon

conducts

Ibert • Saint-Saens Bizet • Berlioz

PARIS CONSERVATOIRE ORCHESTRA - CONDUCTOR JEAN MARTINON



ominous theme develops in relation to Hercules. This subsides, the music pauses, and then the oboe and other woodwinds introduce a light, mocking melody derived from Omphale's music. The spinning wheel material returns, now in even more sparkling orchestration; aside from another sarcastic visit from the oboe, this music holds until the end. Each of these episodes follows a crescendo-decrescendo pattern and the tone poem as a whole can be heard as such, rising from quiet, hesitant string and flute notes, climaxing with the Hercules episode, and receding to a closing passage that is high, soft, and thinly scored -- the final thread spun from Omphale's wheel.

Berlioz's most popular and most virtuosic overture is actually an independent concert piece, but it has close ties to an opera. After the premiere of his opera *Benvenuto Cellini*, based on the autobiography of the famous Italian Renaissance sculptor, Berlioz never forgave the conductor for his lifeless delivery of the second act's saltarello finale. So ten years later he used the saltarello as the opening of his *Roman Carnival Overture*, and took the trouble to conduct the work himself in its first performances. But even before the strings and winds can really launch the revelry, the solo horn and clarinet introduce some harmonic ambiguity, and the English horn slips in with the rapturous love-duet theme from the opera's first act. Suddenly, three swirling woodwind passages suggest that fireworks are being set off on the Piazza Colonna, and the saltarello takes over, eventually incorporating the love theme into the festivities.

Although Berlioz was one of the greatest proponents of music that adhered to a detailed program, this concert overture actually has nothing to do with Lord Byron's narrative poem about the pirate Jean Lafitte, from which the title comes. Berlioz sketched this work during a visit to Nice in 1844, and called its first version *The Tower of Nice*, having written it in the ruined fortification on the city's coastline. Berlioz provided this description: "I discovered the ruins of a tower built on the edge of a precipice: in front of it is a tiny level spot where I stretch myself in the sun and watch, at my ease, the approach of the distant ships; I count the fishing-boats and gaze with admiration on the sparkling, gleaming tracks, which (as Moore says) should lead to some happy and peaceful isle."

Berlioz had considered writing an opera based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* as early as 1833, but nearly three decades passed before he got down to serious work on it. Berlioz himself conducted the premiere at the new Baden-Baden Theater on August 9, 1862. The opera was commissioned by and dedicated to Edouard Benazet, who owned the Baden-Baden casino where Berlioz directed a series of concerts every August for ten years. The overture introduces two melodies that will turn out to be among the opera's most important. The scampering opening theme clearly announces a light comedy. The strings do little pirouettes, each time pausing for an imitative comment from the woodwinds. This happens softly at first, but before long the whole orchestra erupts in a loud, festive version of the material. Unexpectedly, this music is drawn from the love duet at the end of the opera. These 38 quick bars give way to the second theme, an *Andante* passage taken from Béatrice's Act II aria "Il m'en souvient," in which Béatrice realizes that Bénédict loves her. It's a broad melody introduced by horns and woodwinds before being taken up by the strings. The fast theme returns, now in quadruple rather than triple time, with the Béatrice motif weaving merrily around it until the coda appears with some rather uncouth commentary from the trombones.

The cultural scene of the 1920s was infused by a spirit -- part relief, part jubilation -- in which entertainment could be enjoyed guilt free, unfettered by the sobriety, austerity, and destruction that had attended the recent Great War. Dance and theater enjoyed a creative explosion, and composers of every musical persuasion participated, producing perhaps more incidental and theater music and ballet scores than at any other time since; scarcely any composer of note escaped the decade without having produced his or her share of such works.

Ibert's *Divertissement* is drawn from the incidental score the composer produced for the farcical nineteenth century Labiche play *The Italian Straw Hat*. Labiche's comedy, a classic of its type, recounts the adventures of a nervous bridegroom on his wedding day as he attempts to save a woman's honor by searching for a replacement for a hat he inadvertently ruined, all the while concealing his frantic mission from his intended bride, her suspicious father, and the entire wedding party. Along the way, disguises, unlikely deceptions, misunderstandings, and mistaken identities propel the action to ever greater frenzy before a tidy resolution.

The confluence of periods in the *Divertissement* -- a genre with roots in the Baroque applied to a nineteenth century comedy by a twentieth century composer -- is reflected in the parodistic pastiche that informs the work's six sections. In addition to Ibert's "own" music, references to other styles, both sly and blatant, abound. By the end, the astute listener has made his way through a thicket strewn with blues and jazz, music hall tunes, spiky modernist dissonance, Viennese waltzes, and the *Wedding March* from Mendelssohn's music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Like Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and Debussy's *Children's Corner*, Bizet's *Jeux d'enfants* for piano duet is more about children than for children to play. It's a suite of a dozen miniatures, each a minute or two long, evoking the simple games and interests of very young children. Most of Bizet's piano works are miniatures and mood pieces, and *Jeux d'enfants* stands out from this oeuvre only in its special vivacity and tunefulness. "L'Escarpollette" (*The Swing*) is a slow, graceful opening number that mimics the movement of a swing with gentle arpeggios and brief, "push-off" melodic gestures. "La Toupie" (*The Top*) maintains a spinning figure in the background of a scampering main theme. Offering contrast with the top's energy is a berceuse called "La Poupée" (*The Doll*), a sweet, gently rocking lullaby. Galloping through the nursery now are "Les Chevaux de bois" (*The Wooden Horses*), in which Bizet revisits the spinning figure from "La Toupie" and now uses it, along with a quick march tune, to depict a little equestrian stampede. "Le Volant," with its sequence of tiny rising and falling phrases, portrays a shuttlecock being knocked back and forth in a game of badminton. "Trompette et tambour" (*Trumpet and Drum*) is a perky miniature march suitable for toy soldiers (and looking ahead to the "Children's March" in *Carmen*). "Les Bulles de savon" sounds as if it might accompany the progress of rabbits or grasshoppers across a field, but it actually concerns soap bubbles popping in the air. In "Les Quatre coins," it's the children themselves who take to the field, the music following them as they run to the playing area's four corners, a game that begins slowly but ends up rather frantic. The hesitant music of "Colin-maillard" depicts a game of blind man's bluff, while the more vigorous "Saute-mouton" engages in musical leapfrog. "Petit Mari, petite femme" offers the suite's greatest emotional depth, a slow, tender movement inspired by children playing at being husband and wife; the music includes a rapturous little climax almost worthy of one of Bizet's operatic love duets. Finally, "Le Bal" is an effervescent gallop, an exuberant music-hall finale. Bizet arranged five of

these movements for orchestra, calling it either *Jeux d'enfants* like the original or *Petite Suite*.

Composed in 1874 and published in 1875, *Danse macabre* is the third of Saint-Saëns' four orchestral tone poems and is easily his most popular work in that medium. In his *Le carnaval des animaux* (*The Carnival of the Animals*), composed in 1886, Saint-Saëns parodies the *Danse macabre*, as well as works by other composers.

The title of *Danse macabre* is usually translated as *Dance of Death*, but *Ghoulish Dance* or *Dance of Grim Humor* might better communicate the character of the piece. Saint-Saëns did not originally write the *Danse macabre* as a work for orchestra. It was first a song for voice and piano that the composer later transcribed and modified for orchestra. A few lines from the song's text will aid in understanding the symphonic poem: "Death at midnight plays a dance-tune/Zig, zig, zig on his violin....Through the gloom, white skeletons pass/Running and leaping in their shrouds....The bones of the dancers are heard to crack." Once the cock crows, signaling the approach of morning, the fun ends. It is possible that this is the first instance of *Death* being portrayed as a violinist, an instrument generally associated with the devil.

After the orchestra strikes midnight, depicted by horns and pizzicato strings, the violin soloist plays as if he/she is tuning his/her instrument before a solo flute performs a bouncy melody, which is answered by the strings. The violin soloist then enters with a lilting waltz tune, played twice and answered first by a brief return of the flute theme, with added percussion, and then the entire orchestra with the waltz theme. The piece thus far has behaved like an exposition, presenting the principal material, while what follows consists of variations on that material. Xylophones playing the flute melody depict skeletons dancing just before a fugal presentation of the waltz begins. A new melody in the woodwinds is based on the *Dies irae*, a chant melody setting the text of the Judgment Day and often invoked by Romantic-era composers when the subject is death. Eventually, both the flute and waltz tune sound at once in the entire orchestra, just before the violin again begins "tuning." After a huge reprise of the combined melodies, a "cock crow" sounds in the oboe and rapid scales depict the scurrying off of the creatures of the night.

Three of Saint-Saëns' four tone poems are inspired by Greek mythology and two have to do with the hero Hercules. The first of the series, *Le Rouet d'Omphale* (*Omphale's Spinning Wheel*), finds Hercules in temporary exile, dressed in women's clothes and working as a maid for the Lydian queen Omphale. The composer did not write a detailed musical narrative linked to the story; instead, this is more of an atmosphere piece, its inspiration derived from three quite different aesthetic experiences Saint-Saëns had in close succession: reading a Victor Hugo poem about Omphale, seeing a beautiful ebony spinning wheel in a friend's home, and admiring a sensuous painting of Venus in the studio of the painter Cabanel. "The basic idea of *Le Rouet d'Omphale*," the composer wrote, "is voluptuousness." Saint-Saëns provided a description of the tone poem: "The subject of this work is feminine seduction, the victorious struggle of weakness against strength. The spinning wheel is only a pretext, chosen solely from the point of view of the general style and movement of the piece. Hercules surprises Omphale spinning wool at her wheel and tries to win her by the story of his exploits. She laughs at this strength, having as her single weapon of defense her great beauty. Through the witchery of her charm, she vanquishes Hercules and compels him to spin at her feet." The music depicts the wheel with whirling string and woodwind figures and eventually, a melody and rhythm of jerky duplets, perhaps suggesting the spinner's use of a foot pedal. This music expands and fills out, but soon, though the spinning-wheel rhythm never relents, a new, sweeping, and

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Ibert

1 Introduction

2 Cortège

3 Nocturne

4 Valse

5 Parade

6 Finale

Saint-Saëns

7 Danse Macabre

Bizet

Jeux D'Enfants

8 1. Marche (Trompette Et Tambour)

9 2. Berceuse (La Poupée)

10 3. Impromptu (La Toupie)

11 4. Duo (Petit Mari, Petit Femme)

12 5. Galop (Le Bal)

Saint-Saëns

13 Le Rouet D'Omphale, Op. 31

Berlioz

14 Le Carnaval Romain Overture

15 Le Corsaire Overture

16 Beatrice Et Benedict Overture

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Berlioz recorded 1958 the Ibert and Saint-Saens 1960

Bizet recorded 1960

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