

Impressionism and All That

JUST before the turn of the century an airy-fairy mist settled on the face of music's landscape. Out of this mist peeped such things as fauns on their afternoon off, sunken cathedrals, girls with flaxen hair and other fancies. This was Impressionism. The composer was Debussy.

Debussy was very successful in conjuring up romantic imagery out of the tones of music and it is not surprising that a whole following of composers sought to cash in on this new mode of musical expression. Most of them got no further than the mist, their musical pictures no more than vague shadows. But two at least—Debussy and Ravel—turned impressionism to their own use and created music of unsurpassed beauty.

You will hear something of this in the Orchestra's programme from Dunedin on May 5 in Debussy's *Song Before Sunrise* and Ravel's *La Valse* (YC Link).

Debussy and Ravel both adopted the ideals of impressionism but they are not by any means—either of them—imitators of Debussy. They fashioned the patterns of individual styles.

Looking at Debussy's music—looking, I say, not listening—one might be forgiven for thinking that he had chipped out his chords with a chisel. On paper, his music almost always looks most unpromising stuff. In fact, hardly a page would have got by in a theory examination. He had the heartiest contempt for academies. "My dear fellow, there is nothing in counterpoint," he once said. "I have done all that stuff myself. You can take it from me it leads nowhere."

It was not rules that led Debussy where he wanted to go, but a vivid imagination, an infallibly sensitive ear and a fastidious sense of knowing what was exactly right for his purposes.

Ravel was most fastidious too. But he had respect for tradition and a love for classical forms. One suspects that, for all his impressionistic style, he had a nostalgia for these glories of the past.

La Valse is certainly a looking backward—to the gaiety of Johann Strauss's Vienna. He called it a "Choreographic Poem for Orchestra." "At first the scene is dimmed by a kind of swirling mist" says Ravel's preface to the score. "through which one discerns, vaguely and intermittently, the waltzing couples. Little by little the vapours disperse, the illumination grows brighter, revealing an immense ballroom filled with dancers; the blaze of the chandeliers comes to full splendour. An Imperial Court about 1855." Well, if that's not impressionism, nothing is.

La Valse goes further, however, than a recreation of Vienna's lost splendour and gaiety. Underlying the nostalgia is a note of tragedy, a bitterness of the decay of what Ravel may have believed to be some of the good things of life. There is in this music, as one French critic put it, "implied anguish, with some Prud'homme exclaiming: 'We dance on a volcano'."

You will not have to listen very intently to discover something of this in *La Valse*.

—Owen Jensen



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