

Unknown Paul Dukas

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HIS CAREER IN BRIEF

Paul Dukas (1865-1935) learned to play the piano and first took an interest in composition in 1879. Two years later he attended the Paris Conservatoire as an *auditeur libre* in the classes of Théodore Dubois (harmony) and Georges Mathias (piano); he also studied counterpoint and fugue there with Ernest Guiraud. Shortly after hearing one of his symphonic works, an overture to Goethe's drama *Götz von Berlichingen*, performed privately in Geneva in 1884, Dukas made the decision to earn his living as a freelance composer and music critic. Various compositions date from that time, including the choral pieces and cantatas he wrote for the Prix de Rome. His orchestral setting of *L'Ondine et le Pêcheur* (1884), to a text by Théophile Gautier, heralds his mature style. After his military service Dukas returned to composing in 1891 with the *Polyeucte* overture, which was presented at the Lamoureux concerts in January 1892. Later that year he reported on the London production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, conducted at Covent Garden by Gustav Mahler. His Symphony in C (completed in 1896) and especially his symphonic poem *L'Apprenti sorcier* (1897) brought him international fame. His style, clearly influenced by German Romanticism, was also based on a variation technique borrowed from French Baroque. Furthermore, at the end of the century, he worked with Saint-Saëns on the complete edition of the works of Rameau. His last major compositions were written for the stage: the opera *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* (1899-1906; Opéra-Comique, 1907) and the ballet *La Péri* (1911;

Châtelet Theatre, 1912). Dukas also taught at the Paris Conservatoire: orchestration (1910-1913) and composition (from 1928).



EARLY HOPES FOR THE PRIX DE ROME

Dukas first competed for the Prix de Rome in 1886. For the first-round choral piece with orchestral accompaniment an inspired text by Lamartine had been chosen: *Pensée des morts*. Of the four such pieces that Dukas composed for the Prix de Rome competition between 1886 and 1889, this one is certainly the most Classical in style and tone, but the sensitive touches typical of his mature years are already noticeable, in his use of a solo violin and the chorus *a cappella* in the last section. The piece is in ternary form, with the more intense middle section taken by the solo tenor and the conclusion given to the chorus, imperturbably repeating the melancholy lines previously sung by the chorus and the solo tenor: ‘Voilà les feuilles sans sève ... Ainsi finissent nos jours’. Notice the orchestral transition before the tenor’s solo, a transition that modulates in a radiant major key and takes up a considerable part of that very short section. The oboe’s sad countermelody recalls the nostalgic first bars of the chorus, heard a few minutes previously. Despite the quality of the work as a whole, Dukas did not get through to the next round and the composition of a cantata to a text by Eugène Adenis, *La Vision de Saül*. The Premier Grand Prix that year went to Augustin Savard and the second prizes to Henry-Charles Kaiser (Premier Second Prix) and André Gedalge (Deuxième Second Prix). Also in 1886, Dukas made his first trip to Bayreuth and returned delighted and full of enthusiasm for Wagner’s music – which at that time was not at all to the liking of the Institut de France. Indeed, Dukas himself saw it as the reason for his second failure to qualify for the cantata round of the Prix de Rome competition in 1887.

That year the Académie des Beaux-Arts turned to a brighter subject for the first-round choral piece, choosing *La Fête des myrtes*, a poem by

Charles Toubin. Gustave Charpentier's setting of that text (he was to be the winner of the Premier Grand Prix in 1887) has turned up only recently. His score, of similar length to that of Dukas, unusually includes no solo parts – these provided variety and enabled candidates to show their skill in the treatment of individual voices before the great exercise of the second-round cantata. Dukas's solos, for a tenor and a mezzo-soprano from the chorus, are justified by the text and are also musically apt, calming the orchestra and thus providing a break from the initial agitation and fanfares. Comparing the two versions today, we cannot help doubting the objectivity of the Académie's decision. Dukas's chorus is without any question more varied and more convincing, which supports the idea that the jury's decision had more to do with a bias against Wagnerism than with any alleged weaknesses in his composition.



1888

Undiscouraged, the young composer tried again in 1888. The text for the first-round exercise in choral composition was taken this time from *Le Paria*, a five-act tragedy with choruses by Casimir Delavigne, first presented in Paris in 1821. Delavigne was regarded as one of the first French emulators of Byron, at a time when Berlioz too was showing great interest in the English poet's work with its new strains of Romanticism. Unfortunately, the few lines chosen for the competition of 1888 are somewhat lacking in poetic depth. Dukas's setting of *L'Hymne au soleil* is very similar in style to *La Fête des myrtes*, his 1887 contribution. There are fine passages for the orchestra alone and the vocal parts are often very attractive (broad legato intervals, solos for complete vocal sections). The overlapping of melodic phrases offers interesting dynamics and a continuous musical line (without necessarily any trace of Wagnerism). The brief tenor solo, central to the piece as in *Pensée des morts* of 1886, is delicately accompanied by the harp and winds. A gradual crescendo brings us back to the

full chorus for the return of the sun, appearing at its zenith as the score ends. This piece took Dukas through to the second round of the competition (he came third), but *La Fête des myrtes* of 1887 is just as fine a piece and just as deserving of recompense. In 1888 the jury was possibly reassured by the apparent absence of Wagnerian influences.

In the second round Dukas spent twenty-six days (19 May - 13 June) in the cramped conditions of the *loges* of the Institut de France, working on a cantata entitled *Velléda*. The other candidates that year included Camille Erlanger, Gaston Carraud and Alfred Bachelet – all of whom, by dint of perseverance, eventually succeeded – unlike Dukas – in obtaining the coveted Premier Grand Prix de Rome. The text of *Velléda*, written by Fernand Beissier, who borrowed the characters from Chateaubriand's epic *Les Martyrs*, published in 1809, tells of the impossible love between the Roman chief Eudorus (Eudore) and the Gallic priestess Velleda, who in the end is driven to suicide by her father, Segenax. Dukas's version, very modern in its orchestration and harmony, nonetheless did not win the composer a prize. The prizewinners of the years 1880-90 included Alfred Bruneau, Gabriel Pierné, Claude Debussy, Xavier Leroux and Gustave Charpentier – some of the most innovative young composers of their generation. Curiously, the winner of the Premier Grand Prix in 1888 was Camille Erlanger, who had received the Deuxième Second Prix in 1887 and was to have little impact on the history of French music.

Dukas's introduction shows fine orchestration: note the positioning of the chords for the winds, the melodic lines for the flute and solo violin, the chromatic density created by the violins and violas. However, there is occasionally a little 'awkwardness', so to speak, in the writing (this can be masked by a skilful conductor): the fast passage for the second violins and the violas, for instance, is almost impossible to play accurately in the specified tempo. We sense here the limitations of a young composer who had rarely had the opportunity to hear his orchestral works performed. The tenor's entry and first aria ('C'est ta beauté fière et touchante') are characterised by melodies with disjunct and often chromatic lines. Wagner is present here, effectively adapted to suit the situ-

ation. The experimenting with orchestration is everywhere in evidence, even in the resounding explosion of the storm signalling Velleda's arrival ('Mais qu'entends-je? La foudre gronde, l'éclair brille!'). The love duet was a key moment in the Prix de Rome cantata; its text enabled the composer to convey contrasting emotions. Here there is temptation, the pull of duty, sensuality, surrender, and the music has to have great seductive power as well as being capable of expressing violence. Particularly inspired is the Allegro, 'Ah! Prends pitié, je t'en conjure', with its fine dramatic upsurge. The scene is momentarily slowed down by Velleda's premonitory vision ('Du haut de ces rochers sauvages'), before Eudorus's passionate confession ('Je t'aime, je t'adore') plunges the priestess into the most languorous ecstasy. The cantabile 'À l'appel bien-aimé de la voix qui m'est chère' multiplies the hazy textures from the strings and the delicate dissonances of the winds. The harp colours the cantabile 'Douce extase! Ô félicité!' while violins then solo horn recall – like in some delightful memory – the motif that preceded it. The entry of Segenax conforms to some of the conventions of *grand opéra* of that time. But soon brilliant chords from the brass, preceding the curse ('Anathème sur toi!'), increase the dramatic tension impressively. The trio continues with the presentation of the main motif by all three voices, separately at first (with colour ingeniously provided by the scansion of the wind instruments as Eudorus takes up 'Ô dieu qui voit mon âme'), then the repeat of this motif *tutti* marks the apotheosis of the work. With brutal ferocity Segenax announces his intention of killing his own daughter ('La victime est prête et courbe la tête'). Eudorus intervenes; the orchestra accumulates thematic repeats, becoming a dramatis persona in its own right in an ever more intense discourse. Delightful harmonies punctuate Eudorus's plea to Velleda to become a Christian ('Velléda, sois chrétienne!'), but Segenax's cruel theme returns with even greater force. Then suddenly the delicate motif that accompanied Velleda's first appearance is heard again, like a vague memory of a bygone time. The cor anglais adds nostalgia to the priestess's final words, pronounced *mezza voce*, before she cuts her throat with the golden sickle.

The journalist Eler (*L'Art musical*, June 30, 1888) showed enthusiasm for Dukas's composition:

Since M. Debussy competed, we had heard nothing as fresh and youthful as this cantata by M. Dukas. The charming phrases, treated with delicacy, reveal the intense sensibility of this young musician, who also seems to be blessed with a fine sense of drama. Was he hoping perhaps to win the Premier Prix? Very little came between him and that prize: only the fact that he is 22 [the age limit was 30, so he still had time to try again] and M. Erlanger's imminent military service [winning the Prix de Rome meant exemption]! M. Guiraud's teaching may still be useful to him, and we shall not regret seeing him spend one more year with that excellent teacher, whose qualities include that of not trying to alter his students' natural inclinations.



RENUNCIATION (1889)

Like Berlioz in 1829, Dukas was so close to his goal that winning was almost certain the next time he competed. Indeed candidates – especially when they had already won a second prize in the competition – were generally rewarded for their determination. In 1889 the set piece for the first round was *Les Sirènes* by Charles-Jean Grandmougin, and this time Dukas's modern tendencies were clear in the melodic chromaticism and the textures. Was he cheekily thumbing his nose at the Institut de France? Or was it a natural progression in his art? With their gently unfolding melodic lines and cries of 'Ah!' the sirens, divided into three parts, entice, while a soloist uses the sensuality of her mezzo-soprano voice to lure the lost mariner (or the listener). We can almost see the sleek, scaly bodies glistening in the sunshine and the voluptuous movements of these beings, half human, half fish, as they sing 'Nous voltigeons sans avoir d'ailes / Nous sommes les sœurs immortelles'. Significantly more advanced in its orchestration and harmonies than his three previous choral offerings for

the competition, this piece placed Dukas in first position after the qualifying round, leaving him to approach the cantata with confidence. Furthermore the libretto appealed to him. Likewise in 1829 Berlioz had been stimulated by the text of *Cléopâtre* and setting it had given him such great pleasure that his hopes had been raised, only for these to be dashed by the jury's decision. Dukas was to prove that history repeats itself.

Either individually or together, Eugène and Édouard Adenis had made a speciality of providing the Institut with cantata texts, and they were particularly inspired when they came to tackle the story of Semele, one whose dramatic potential had given rise to Baroque operas and Romantic paintings. The usual trio of singers – soprano, tenor and baritone – was changed for the occasion to soprano, mezzo-soprano and baritone: soprano for naive Semele, mezzo-soprano for the goddess Juno (the betrayed wife, who appears in the guise of Semele's nurse) and baritone for the god Jupiter (hopelessly in love with Semele). Seeking revenge, Juno sows doubt in Semele's mind: is her lover really Jupiter, or an impostor? The goddess suggests that she make him swear by the Styx (an irrevocable oath) that he will grant whatever she wishes, whereupon she will ask him to appear to her in all his glory as a god. Semele is unaware that mortals cannot look upon Jupiter without being burned to death; she learns this as she dies in his arms.

Dukas produced a cantata that is absolutely dazzling, both dramatically and musically, with a perfect balance between intimate poetry (the entrance of Semele, the lovers' reunion) and fierce theatricality (the prelude, Juno's first aria, the final storm). Furthermore the transitions suggested by the libretto take on their full meaning in his setting, giving the piece as a whole the natural articulation and fluidity that are the hallmark of accomplished works. Several recurring motifs (Juno's anger, Semele's love, the fanfares of the 'revelation', etc.) are used to connect the different narrative stages in the action, which – unlike *Velléda* the previous year – move in a very effective progression. But why then did the Académie fail to reward Dukas's *Sémélé* with a prize? Why was the work left lying dormant in a box at the Paris Conservatoire for almost a hundred and

thirty years, without ever being played by an orchestra? Wagnerian influence is to be dismissed as an explanation: Dukas shows perfect respect for the French dogmas of the time (the style of Massenet in particular); moreover Charpentier had made much greater use of leitmotif and modern Germanic texture in *Didon*, the winning cantata of 1887. Nor did Dukas make any alterations to the set text: the regulations specify that doing so could lead to disqualification. There remains only one possibility: the difficulty of the vocal parts. Indeed, they were considered too demanding, with the part of Juno well nigh impossible to sing. As we discovered when we came to make this recording, the vocal ranges are of a width that was very rare at that time, and the singers are not aided in their task by the density of the orchestral texture. Juno uses the lower extreme of her vocal range or the area in the lower middle register that has a tendency to sound muffled or weak, while Jupiter has to face several sustained high Gs. Curiously, for the part of Semele (a lyric soprano), alternative passages are given in the score to facilitate performance. Dukas possibly added them when the singer who was to take that part, when the piece was given with piano accompaniment before the jury, proved to be unequal to the task.

No Premier Grand Prix was awarded that year, and no Premier Second Prix either. Only one prize was awarded: the Deuxième Second Prix, which went to a student by the name of Alix Fournier. It was therefore his cantata that was performed with the orchestra of the Institut de France at the annual public event organised by the Académie des Beaux-Arts at the Palais des Quatre Nations. The account of that work (*L'Art musical*, 31 October 1889) makes it even harder to understand why Dukas was not among the prizewinners: Fournier's cantata is described as 'merely a passable exercise', 'the work of an unsure, anxious, often pretentious school-boy!' The critic felt that it showed no sensitivity, no feeling, no poetry, and that it was 'science', not 'art'! We are left feeling perplexed.



'ROMAN' POST SCRIPTUM

Dukas was long embittered after having been denied the scholarship that would have enabled him to spend three years at the Villa Medici. The first major work he composed after that unfortunate episode was his *Polyeucte* overture, inspired by Corneille's tragedy of that name, which was première at the Concerts Lamoureux on 23 January 1892. Did he choose that genre deliberately in the knowledge that third-year students at the Villa Medici were required – it is stipulated in the regulations – to produce such a piece for performance at the annual graduation ceremony that was held in great pomp beneath the golden dome of the Institut on the first Saturday of November? Strangely enough, had Dukas won the scholarship with *Velléda* in 1888, he would have been in his third year at the Villa Medici in 1891. Furthermore the subject of the overture, inspired by a Classical play, was perfectly in keeping with the Institut's prescription: other examples include *Minerve* (Henri Busser), *Persée et Andromède* (Jules Mouquet), *Balthazar* (Georges Marty) and *Françoise de Rimini* (Gaston Carraud).

Dukas's score exceeds the limits of the traditional overture – and not only in its length (fifteen minutes). Did the nobility and seriousness of the subject serve as an inspiration? Was he trying to shake off the French colouring advocated by the Académie? Be that as it may, the orchestration of this piece is particularly dense right from the opening bars and the German model is clearly present, with signs of a perfectly assimilated Wagnerian influence. The sinuous lines of the strings, the increasingly broad expressive intervals in the slow introduction, the chords from the brass, all contribute to the density and intensity of the discourse. Disillusioned love, dreams of glory, the struggle between duty and passion, are all interlinked in the music, which makes fine use of dramatic resources (changes of tempo, rests, sudden breaks), expressive textures (cor anglais, bass clarinet, strings in unison) and contrasting motifs.

A page from the manuscript score of Paul Dukas' cantata Sémélé. The page features multiple staves of musical notation, including vocal lines with lyrics and orchestral accompaniment. The tempo marking 'Allargando' is visible. The lyrics are in French: 'et me s'écroulant sous son poids / et se débattant dans la tourmente / s'égarant dans l'obscurité'.

A page from the manuscript score
of Dukas' cantata *Sémélé*.

Une page du manuscrit de la partition d'orchestre
de la cantate *Sémélé* de Dukas.