

Paul Dukas' approach to orchestration

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From the time of the première of *L'Apprenti sorcier* in 1897 through to the orchestral highpoint reached with *La Péri*, Paul Dukas was recognized for his qualities as an orchestrator, being variously praised for the 'richness', the 'excellence', or the 'dazzling nature' of his orchestration. Dukas' early orchestral works bear witness to the development achieved by a young composer who was a contender for the Prix de Rome. Within the space of just a few years his orchestral writing becomes sharpened through skills gained firstly as an inheritance from the French school and then through coming under the influence of Wagner.

IN PURSUIT OF ORCHESTRAL COLOURS

Orchestral configuration

In part, the special characteristic sound of the Dukasian orchestra stems from the composer's unique and expert selection of timbre, and from a highly-individual pursuit of securing colours. Thus, the difference between *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* and other dramatic compositions from the time lies in its use of a much expanded range of percussion instruments (timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, Basque drum, side drum, tambourine, glockenspiel, celesta, chimes and tam-tam). *La Péri* is scored for as many as eight percussion instruments, but above all it is the colour produced

in the fanfare which is so startling, based on an orchestral strength which includes three trumpets, four horns, three trombones and a tuba, each desk being divided.

Where the cantatas which were written as part of the Prix de Rome were subject to an orchestral size determined by the Institut de France for the purpose of any possible first performance, the same criterion did not apply for the choruses (which were not performed, merely judged by the panel at sight). Even so, the selection of timbres employed there does not appear to be especially striking and the most original piece in terms of its instrumentation is Dukas' orchestral *mélodie L'Ondine et le Pêcheur*, whose scoring incorporates alto saxophone, glockenspiel and piano. Features heralding the composer's maturity come through in this piece in his handling of the orchestral texture: his control of the interplay between piano, harp and glockenspiel, and the partnerships between the saxophone with flutes and clarinet, or bassoon, all prefigure the talents of a master colourist. Whilst this *mélodie* was written around the same time as the Prix de Rome competition compositions, it has no connection with those tests; nonetheless, it illustrates the way in which Dukas was experimenting outside the 'official' scores which he was composing.

The instrumental combinations

From the clear and moderately-sized orchestra derived from the French tradition found in Dukas' *Pensée des morts*, utilizing numerous solo passages, instruments grouped in families dialoguing between themselves, up to the dense, heavy orchestra in *Polyeucte*, which contrasts the orchestral forces and combines different timbres under the influence of the Wagnerian model, Dukas' early orchestral works demonstrate an uncommon diversity in the handling of textures, of layers, of the orchestral forces or the combination of timbres.

In the second chorus, *La Fête des myrtes*, the partnership of trumpet, woodwind and violins is expressly called into existence by the text:

Let the trumpet sound,
but let its warlike strains
be tempered by the simple, graceful
melodies of the sweet and tender flute!

In the succeeding choruses as in the cantatas, however, the timbres start being associated by instrumental ranges freely combining flutes, clarinets and oboes with the violins, tuba and trombones with the cellos and double basses in the *Hymne au soleil* and *Velléda*. These passages are adjacent to other sections where the orchestra is divided by groups and families, with the woodwind facing the violins. Such combinations are varied gradually and the orchestral texture becomes thicker whilst retaining its qualities of clarity. Nevertheless, the 'pointillist' texture (utilizing the orchestral palette by means of scattered touches from across the instruments) is demonstrated as being a more personal and specific characteristic of the Dukasian orchestra, in a way which is clearly at work in *L'Apprenti sorcier*. The basis for this can be seen in the handling of the majestic and solemn theme of the *Hymne au soleil*, which first appears in a solid fashion from the whole orchestra in the introduction, and is then shaped below the words:

O sun, you appear!
Let us celebrate the power of the reborn sun,
with all the world let us celebrate its return...

The beginning of the theme is heard *ppp* in the lowest register of the bassoon's range, and interspersed with long note values. Next, an ascending cell from this theme rises *crescendo* in the violins, violas, cellos and oboes, before the flutes join in. Finally, the bassoons, horns, cellos and double basses sound out *forte* in counterpoint. This pointillist texture is truly to be heard, however, in *L'Ondine et le Pêcheur*. A motif is formed from the introduction onwards: a surge of demisemi-quavers in the flutes, clarinet and glockenspiel; it shines out next in the flute parts (which are divided

into two), oboes in trills, demisemiquavers from the clarinets and *pizzicati* from the violins. Here, we seem already to be hearing the sparkling character of *L'Apprenti sorcier*, where each instrument brings its own personal and essential touch to the elaboration of a melodic idea. This control of the texture is accompanied by a requisite mastery of each instrument's potential and by a good knowledge of the ways that they may be played.

The orchestral language

L'Ondine et le Pêcheur, together with *Velléda* and *Sémélé*, demonstrates a very precise handling of the brass instruments (with mute or in stopped sounds), but also a rigour in the treatment of the strings – in the ways they are played and divided, as well as the numbers of them used. The entrance of Jupiter in *Sémélé* is accompanied by long held notes from the flutes and clarinets above a particular manner of playing from the strings: sextuplets from the first violins, *tremolos* from the second violins, violas and cellos dialoguing in triplets accompanied by two double basses. A few bars later the reunion of Jupiter and Semele occurs with *tremolos* from the violins *sul tasto*, violas, cellos and double basses divided in long note values, with only two of the double basses holding the bottom line. Dukas makes use of an idiosyncratic form of playing here bespeaking a sizeable precision of sound. This particular care brought to the writing for the strings foreshadows later of Dukas' works, such as the third dance variation of *La Péri*, written for eighteen string parts: three parts of solo first violins with mute, the rest divided into four, their bows playing near the bridge *ppp*, the second violins divided into two; three viola parts of which two are playing *pp* in *tremolos sul tasto*; three solo cello parts, the rest playing *p* in *pizzicati dolcissimi*, one single double bass playing on a held note, a second one also on the first beat of each bar.



THE DRAMATIC ROLE OF THE ORCHESTRA

Narrative potential of the orchestra

His mastery of the orchestral ensemble and the variety of the timbres and styles of playing that he requested from it allowed the still-young Dukas to develop the descriptive or narrative character of the orchestra by way of applying it to the emotions or to the scenery. In *L'Ondine et le Pêcheur*, a *crescendo-decrescendo* rhythmic swaying in semiquavers from the violas and cellos allows the movement of the waves to be heard. As soon as the introduction commences, the sparkling nature of the water is represented as a result of the combination of flute, oboe and clarinet, accompanied by demisemiquavers on the piano and with support from violin trills. A short motif in conjunct motion shared between bassoon and oboe conveys the fatal turmoil of the fisherman. When played on the bassoon, this motif is accentuated with hand-stopped notes from the horn and an accompaniment of *tremolos* from the cellos and double basses, whilst trills from clarinet and violins accompany it when it is heard on the oboe.

The individual characters appearing in the cantatas have tonal colours associated with them: Semele is accompanied by the flutes and clarinets, while Juno is supported by the brass, the harp being used to express sentiments of love. It is the rendering into music of the storm in the introduction to *Sémélé* which commands, however, the listener's attention in a more surprising manner. The scene commences with a timpani roll supported by double basses creating a tonal underlay throughout its duration. The cellos enter on whirling semiquavers moving in conjunct motion. Next, it is the turn of all the strings to be agitated with *tremolos* (at that point the cellos are divided into three parts). The gradual entry and build up of the woodwinds combined with the horns and the tuba develops and thickens the sound texture. An orchestral *crescendo*, going from a *pianissimo* to a *fortissimo* erupting into a *tutti* provides all the force for the phenomenon. It gives way to low *tremolos* from the flutes as though prolonging the panic in a state of confusion.

The 'motifs de rappel' (leitmotifs)

If no *motifs de rappel* strictly speaking are to be found in the choruses, the handling of the themes is already formed and structured: from the simple movement from one instrument to another in *Pensée des morts* to their construction by the entire orchestra in *L'Hymne au soleil*. The use of motifs spins a veritable dramatic and musical web in the cantatas.

In *Velléda* and *Sémélé*, the manner of writing of the motifs is precise and thought through in terms of the dramaturgy: they are assigned to characters, to dramatic situations, to the particular atmosphere of a scene. If the instrumental colour and the writing are subjected to relatively little variation in *Velléda*, with *Sémélé* the dramatic role of the *motifs de rappel* is more precise and well thought-out within the work. To be encountered here already are the bases of the motivic treatment later developed in *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*. Four of Dukas' motifs, clearly recognizable are to be heard, both narrative and expressive:

- the first belongs to the species of *motif de situation* and describes the storm by a whirling of semiquavers in the cellos. Sometimes it can be passed to the quartet, but it always comes back to the cellos and, on the other hand, never appears in the wind instruments. Through its harrowing character it invigorates the introductory and finale scenes.

- a second motif, short, ascending and accented, is given over to the brass, trombones, tuba, trumpets and hand-stopped horns above timpani rolls marking the recounting of Juno's anger and of the macabre test which awaits her.

- the theme of love, sung by Semele, is promptly repeated by the flute, the horns and the oboe (these instruments which are allotted, moreover, to this character).

- finally, the theme of Juno's vengeance – the fanfare of revelation – electrifies the whole orchestra. It is only during Semele and Jupiter's love duet that it is absent. First of all appearing in a brief and characteristic form in the introduction from the flutes and the violins, this then is sung and expanded upon by Juno on the words 'Ô vengeance'. Repeated in

sequence form, this core motif supports the entire dramatic tension of the cantata. It is present as a subtle *piano* in the wind instruments when Sémélé confesses her doubts to Jupiter or as a blazing *fortissimo* from the whole orchestra at Juno's final words, 'Je suis vengée'.

The dramatic handling of the motifs and their colouring foreshadow the work which Dukas will carry out in *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* in earnest. The motifs are not all treated in the same way. They become attached to ideas, feelings, actions or stage scenery. Some of them have an ambivalent meaning. Contrary to a Wagnerian handling, the same motif describes the anger of Juno, the death of Semele and the despair of Jupiter since these three ideas are interconnected. Dukas is already moving away from the Wagnerian *leitmotiv* but shares with him the desire to mould and shape the musical dramaturgy. Thus, these motifs are highly reminiscent of words which Dukas would later write in 1902, concerning Wagner's *Siegfried*:

The manner in which these guiding ideas are linked together and juxtaposed, the unique orchestration which colours them with the most delicate nuances or stirs them with the most striking tones, the incredible ease with which their musical discourse permeates the deep sense of each part of the poem represent, in short, what the score of *Siegfried* offers in the most wonderful way.

(*La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*)



THE EARLY ORCHESTRAL WORK: *POLYEUCTE*

First performed in January 1892, *Polyeucte* was accused by the critics of the time of being 'Wagnerian pastiche' (*Le Siècle*) and Dukas as being a young composer 'full of Wagnerian theories' (*L'Intransigeant*). 'Fashionable chromaticisms' (*Le Guide musical*) and 'themes more tortured than the unfortunate martyr himself' (*L'Écho de Paris*) were said to exist in the work. However, the qualities of orchestration are also remarked upon. *Le Journal*

des débats noted that ‘the orchestra is deftly handled’, at *La Liberté*, Victorin Joncières pointed out the ‘the young composer’s qualities as a dramatic symphonist’, whilst finally, for Ernest Chausson, ‘the orchestration is perfect’. Indeed, the orchestral writing for *Polyeucte* implemented an aesthetic strongly influenced by the German master and within a style which had become more personal.

The thematic work is logical and meaningful: two principal themes support the substantial and restless orchestral discourse, making use of all the colours available from the orchestra. The first theme – sometimes called that of *La Foi* – is heard in the introduction from the cellos and immediately repeated by the woodwind, before, however, being broken up between the oboe and clarinet prior to being brought to a conclusion by the flute. It is then passed through the entire orchestra, attacked by the first violins, violas and cellos, returned to by the oboes and clarinets, and then by the flutes. The second theme, *L’Amour de Pauline*, is also submitted to a meticulous treatment: spreading through the whole orchestra, with variations to its intervals, rhythms and accompaniment. How Dukas shades his expressivity can be seen in the way he notates these themes. By introducing the *Pauline* theme in augmented note values in the strings alone, accentuated by the *tutti fortissimo*, Dukas installs a calm environment for a few moments, before the theme stirs again in the whole orchestra, confronted by the theme of *La Foi*. Juxtaposed, varied, broken up, the two themes come together or struggle in a very tight meshing where all the resources of the orchestra are exploited.

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Fl. *az.* *f* *p*

P.P. *f* *p*

Viol. *f* *p*

Vcl. *f* *p*

Bass. *f* *p*

Harpe

Tromb. en lat.

Cor solo *f* *p* *dim* *pp*

I *f* *p*

II *f* *p*

Calt. *f* *p*

Bass. *p. dim* *pp*

Contrab. *pp*

Odette Metzner's orchestration for Dukas' *Villanelle pour cor*.

Édition Durand.

Orchestration d'Odette Metzner de la *Villanelle pour cor* de Dukas.

Édition Durand.