

Parisian Glimmers

GUILLAUME CONNESSON

***A Glimmer in the Age of Darkness* (2005)**

Guillaume Connesson's sumptuous orchestral music follows in the path blazed by fellow French composers Berlioz, Debussy, Ravel and Dutilleux. Like his predecessors, Connesson emerged from the conservatory system with a deep awareness of sound and texture, and his music offers lucid and attractive surfaces even when grappling with complex ideas and influences, as in his Cosmic Trilogy. He composed the second installment of that series, A Glimmer in the Age of Darkness, in 2005 for the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. The composer wrote the following description of the piece.

400,000 years after the Big Bang, the universe was still cold and dark: this period is known as “the dark age.” During this age of cosmic nonentity, cold gases slowly came together in shapeless masses, caving in on themselves and igniting the first stars. It marked the beginning of a renaissance and the universe sparkled with the light of a thousand galaxies.

A Glimmer in the Age of Darkness was carefully constructed to precede my work entitled *Supernova* (1997), which depicts the explosion and death of a star. As a musician, my imagination has been frequently stimulated by the idea of “immeasurable space” and I wanted this piece to depict the birth of light, the first rays bursting out of the obscurity.

It is rather like “cosmic” pastoral music; a wide-ranging movement, slow and contemplative, articulated around three sections that are preceded by an introduction and end with a coda. The introduction is based on harmonies that ring out around a complete cycle of fifths. A shimmering and infinitely sweet music moves progressively into the first theme, expressed by a brass choir. The sound gradually diminishes into silence; then, within this new, obscure space, the second theme begins, based on an Indian raga (Todi, one of the great morning ragas). This long and sinuous melody slowly grows, and the orchestra takes flight with a long crescendo of sound symbolizing light. The central part of the score is like peaceful water, a serene development of two themes, where an oboe and cello duet alternates with the strings. After a horn solo, a new wave of light is born with a raga theme. The piece climaxes with a blinding light—the superimposition of the two themes. In the coda, the wave of light gradually moves away until it is totally swallowed by space. We hear the beginning theme of *Supernova* and it is on the initial fifth that the piece ends.

A Glimmer in the Age of Darkness is dedicated to Stéphane Denève.

MAURICE RAVEL

***Concerto in G major for Piano and Orchestra* (1931)**

Maurice Ravel, one of the great orchestral colorists, was not inclined toward standard symphonic forms. He adapted most of his large-ensemble music from solo piano pieces, including *Pavane for a Dead Princess*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and *Mother Goose*, and he proved equally adept at orchestrating other composers' piano scores, notably Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Ravel never wrote a symphony, and he avoided concertos until his mid-50s.

After that long wait, Ravel crafted two concertos more or less simultaneously

between 1929 and 1931. First he completed the Concerto for Piano (Left Hand) in D major for Paul Wittgenstein, a wealthy pianist who lost an arm in World War I. At the same time, Ravel worked on a two-handed concerto in G major, one which he might have used as a feature vehicle for himself on future tours had his degenerative brain disease not interfered. He completed this concerto in 1931, and conducted the premiere in 1932 with Marguerite Long, the work's dedicatee, at the piano. It turned out to be Ravel's penultimate composition, followed only by a score for a never-completed film.

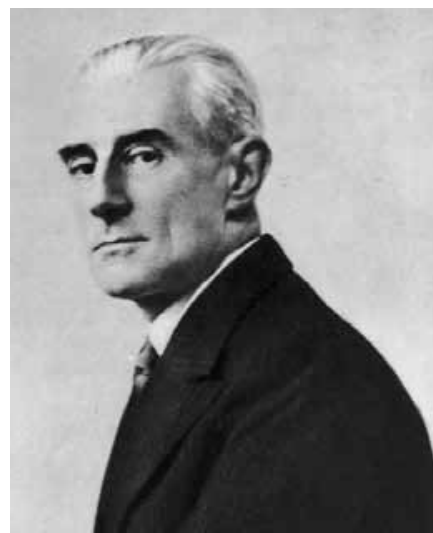
Not long after finishing the G-major concerto, Ravel told an interviewer, "A concerto can be gay and brilliant and need not try to be profound or strive after dramatic effects. It has been said of some of the great classical composers that their concertos were written not *for* but *against* the piano, and I think this is perfectly correct." A key ingredient in the work's "gay and brilliant" language was jazz, which Ravel had heard firsthand on a North American tour in 1928. Ironically, Ravel's expansive harmony was a major influence on George Gershwin, who in turn inspired Ravel to add jazz figurations to his vocabulary. Gershwin reported that, upon asking Ravel for lessons, the Frenchman responded, "Why do you want to become a second-rate Ravel when you are already a first-rate Gershwin?"

The concerto's sparkling introduction first presents a taste of *chinoiserie* with ornate and exotic filigree. Soon, though, the American character emerges, especially with the entrance of a five-note motive characterized by its lowered third scale degree, a classic "blue" note. The slow movement is one of Ravel's great melodic gems, first presented as an understated wordless song and then elaborated with free-flowing linear elaboration and lush orchestral harmonies. The finale features breathless piano progressions with raucous commentary from the orchestra. The bright E-flat clarinet and sliding trombone provide especially saucy outbursts, while the trumpet adds a touch of mock-ceremonial fanfare, fitting the wry nature of this fanciful concerto.

MAURICE RAVEL

Alborada del gracioso (1918)

The Paris Conservatory dismissed Ravel as a piano student in 1895, and when he returned as a composer they ushered him out again in 1900. He applied for the Prix de Rome each year from 1900 to 1905, and his persistent rejections eventually became a minor public scandal. Rebuffed by the establishment, Ravel banded together in 1902 with other musicians and intellectuals in a group called "Les Apaches" ("The Hooligans"). From 1904 to 1905, he composed *Miroirs (Reflections)*, a suite of piano pieces dedicated to fellow "Apaches," including the movement *Alborada del gracioso* in honor of music critic M. D. Calvocoressi.



The *Alborada* of Ravel's title is a Spanish term for a morning song, especially a song of lovers parting at daybreak, the same as a French *Aubade*. The *gracioso* is a clown or buffoon character from old Spanish comedies. Ravel's fascination with Spain ran deep, even beyond the trendy interest in Spanish folk culture among French composers of the era. Ravel's mother, of Basque origins and raised in Madrid, implanted an early love of Spanish folksongs in her son's ear, and he returned to those idiomatic melodies and

rhythms throughout his career.

In 1918, Ravel added *Alborada del gracioso* to his growing list of orchestrations from his own piano music, a collection that already included *Rapsodie espagnole*, *Pavane for a Dead Princess*, and *Mother Goose*. This dawn-song awakens with plucks from the strings and harp that hint at the woody percussiveness of a guitar, kicking off a castanet-infused rhythmic ostinato similar to the iconic *Boléro* from 1928. The sudden bursts of sound and changes of direction reinforce the clowning character suggested by the title, and a sultry bassoon solo adds a dash of romance befitting an *Alborada*. The subtle accompaniment figures that intersperse the bassoon phrases highlight Ravel's sonic finesse; like delicate paint strokes from a miniscule brush, the strings separate into 24 distinct parts. With only a few musical ideas at play, these sensitive colors and textures become the piece's focal point, as varied and singular as the sun rising.

ALBERT ROUSSEL

Symphonic Fragments from *The Spider's Feast*, Op. 17 (1913)

Albert Roussel's childhood near the Belgian border was full of tragedy: First his father died, then two grandparents, and finally his mother when he was eight years old. He lived with his grandfather and later an aunt, and only at age 11 began his first formal musical study, taking organ lessons. He enlisted in the Navy at 18, and his travels to exotic places, particularly India, figured prominently in his musical outlook later in life. He began composing at 23, and left the Navy two years later to pursue a musical life in Paris. While his contemporaries Debussy (older by seven years) and Ravel (younger by six) dominated the French musical landscape, Roussel secured his first orchestral performances, his voice beginning to emerge in works such as the Indian-influenced *Evocations* from 1911.

On the strength of *Evocations*, the Théâtre des Arts in Paris commissioned a ballet from Roussel. With a libretto by Gilbert de Voisins based on writings of French entomologist Jean Henri Fabre, Roussel crafted *Le Festin de l'araignée* (*The Spider's Feast*) as a ballet-pantomime. He also developed a concert version of the score, a set of "symphonic fragments" that retained most of the ballet sequences while cutting much of the pantomime material. After a dreamy prelude that sets the garden scene with flute and muted strings, a drum signals the bellicose "Entry of the Ants." When the music slows to a labored pulse, it captures the toil of the ants attempting to lift a rose petal. The next dance brings in the butterfly, alighting via a high flute solo. The music becomes more ominous when the spider enters and invites the butterfly to come closer, and the fortissimo climax corresponds to the butterfly's struggle in the web; a solo violin marks the moment of death with two plaintive descents. With a brief pause, life begins anew, in the hatching of the mayfly, an insect whose entire adult lifespan passes in a day or less. Emerging in uncertain jerks out of a gauzy cocoon of sound, the mayfly finally begins its animated dance. As it reaches its climax, the winds flutter down and the harp glides up into silence: the mayfly's time has come. Funeral music mourns the ephemeral bug, and then the cortege disperses, the music eliding into a nostalgic reprise of the prelude's flute and strings texture and ending on a sonorous major chord. This unabashedly pretty score is of a different ilk than Debussy's *Jeux* or Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, to name two cutting-edge ballets premiered in Paris within a couple months of Roussel's work. Comfortable in its own skin (or, more precisely, exoskeleton), *The Spider's Feast* is a playful delight from a long-neglected composer.

MAURICE RAVEL

***La Valse* (1920)**

In 1906, Ravel began a piece entitled *Wien* (“Vienna”), intended as an homage to Johann Strauss II, the “Waltz King” who had died in 1899. He temporarily shelved the idea, but was thinking about it again when war broke out in 1914. Too old for combat duty, Ravel volunteered as a truck and ambulance driver. He witnessed gruesome carnage behind the front lines, and ended up hospitalized with dysentery. A number of his friends died (some of whom he memorialized in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*) and in 1917 he lost his mother, with whom he was particularly close.

Still reeling from sickness and mourning, Ravel returned to his waltz concept in 1919 to fulfill a commission from the dance impresario Serge Diaghilev. He completed the orchestral score, recast as *La Valse*, in 1920, and also arranged versions for solo piano and two pianos. Ravel played the two-piano version for Diaghilev, who rejected it, declaring, “it is not a ballet; it is a portrait of a ballet,” a comment Ravel never forgave. Others disagreed, including Ida Rubinstein, who danced it in 1929, and George Balanchine, whose 1951 choreography for the New York City Ballet remains active in the repertoire. Diaghilev’s problem with the score may have been less about ballet and more about aesthetics: his anointed composers, especially Stravinsky and the French newcomers known as “Les Six,” favored irony, austerity and a complete break with the immediate past, while Ravel retained a sincere relationship to Romanticism in all its grandeur and excesses.

La Valse is unapologetically Romantic with its sweeping breadth and echoes of high society, but it is far from an idealized vision. On the surface, it follows a basic scenario outlined by Ravel in the score: “Swirling clouds afford glimpses, through rifts, of waltzing couples. The clouds scatter little by little; one can distinguish an immense hall with a whirling crowd. The scene grows progressively brighter. The light of the chandeliers bursts forth at the fortissimo. An imperial court, about 1855.” On a deeper level, the thrust of *La Valse* is more nuanced. The one undeniable constant is the waltz, pulsing its three beats through lovely melodies and grotesque disturbances. The kaleidoscopic chromatics and counter-voices, ostensibly the “swirling clouds” of Ravel’s program, mutate into drunken smears and expand into a violent climax. There is something heroic and also vaguely disturbing in how *La Valse* grasps at the elusive hilarity of a bygone time, especially when voiced through the forced smile of a waltz.

— Aaron Grad

Aaron Grad is a composer, guitarist and writer based in Seattle. Besides providing program notes for the New World Symphony, he has been the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra’s program annotator since 2005 and also contributes notes to the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and National Symphony Orchestra.

STÉPHANE DENÈVE

Stéphane Denève is Chief Conductor Designate of the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra (SWR), a position he will occupy beginning September 2011. He is also Music Director of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, a post he has held since 2005. Recognized internationally as a conductor of the highest calibre, Mr. Denève has won praise from audiences and critics alike for his performances and programming. With the Royal Scottish National Orchestra he has performed at the BBC Proms, Edinburgh International Festival and the Festival Présences, and at celebrated venues throughout Europe including the Vienna Konzerthaus, Amsterdam Concertgebouw and Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. He and the orchestra have made a number of acclaimed recordings

together, including an ongoing survey of the works of Albert Roussel for Naxos. In 2007 they won a Diapason d'Or de l'année award for the first disc in the series.

A graduate of the Paris Conservatory where he was awarded a unanimous first prize in 1995, Mr. Denève began his career as Sir Georg Solti's assistant for *Bluebeard's Castle* with the Orchestre de Paris (1995) and *Don Giovanni* at the Paris National Opera (1996). He also assisted Georges Prêtre for *Turandot* at the Paris National Opera (1997) and Seiji Ozawa for *Dialogues of the Carmelites* at the Saito Kinen Festival (1998).

At home in a broad range of repertoire and a champion of new music, Mr. Denève has a particular affinity with the music of his native France, and has conducted works by Grétry, Debussy, Ravel, Berlioz, Roussel, Fauré and Poulenc. In recent years he has also premiered a number of works by the contemporary French composer Guillaume Connesson.

Recent engagements have included a major European tour with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Hilary Hahn; debuts with the NDR Symphony Hamburg, Maggio Musicale Florence, London Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Barcelona Symphony, BBC Symphony and Danish National Symphony; returns to the Philharmonia Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic and Rotterdam Philharmonic; and his debut at La Scala, conducting Gounod's *Faust*.

Highlights in the 2010-11 season include a BBC Prom with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Paul Lewis; his debut with the Bavarian Radio Symphony; returns to the Philharmonia Orchestra, Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Toronto Symphony, New World Symphony, and Hong Kong Philharmonic; and his debut at the Gran Teatre de Liceu in Barcelona, conducting Dukas' *Ariane and Blue Beard* in a production by Claus Guth.

Mr. Denève enjoys close relationships with many of the world's leading solo artists, and has performed, among others, with Natalie Dessay, Nina Stemme, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Piotr Anderszewski, Leif Ove Andsnes, Lars Vogt, Nikolai Lugansky, Emanuel Ax, Frank Peter Zimmermann, Nikolaj Znaider, Pinchas Zukerman, Leonidas Kavakos, Hilary Hahn, Vadim Repin and Gil Shaham.

In the field of opera, Mr. Denève has conducted productions at the Royal Opera House (*Così fan tutte*), Glyndebourne Festival (*Carmen*), La Scala (*Faust*), Netherlands Opera (*The Love for Three Oranges*), La Monnaie (*La Traviata*; *La Voix humaine*), Opéra National de Paris (*Don Quichotte*; *La Bohème*; *The Marriage of Figaro*), the Teatro Comunale Bologna (*Béatrice et Bénédict*), and Cincinnati Opera (*Erwartung*; *Carmen*; *Bluebeard's Castle*).

JEAN-YVES THIBAUDET

Hailed as "one of the best pianists in the world," Jean-Yves Thibaudet continues to captivate audiences with his thrilling performances, profound artistry, poetic musicality and dazzling technical prowess. Thibaudet is sought after by today's foremost orchestras, festivals, conductors and collaborative musicians for his enlightened interpretations and charisma. On June 18, 2010, the Hollywood Bowl honored Mr. Thibaudet for his musical achievement by inducting him into the Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame.



Following summer performances at the Festival del Sole, Aspen, Saratoga, and Tanglewood festivals, Mr. Thibaudet began his 2010-11 season in Switzerland with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Charles Dutoit. Mr. Thibaudet's touring highlights this season included a tour of China with the London Symphony Orchestra (September 2010), as well as a German tour with the Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester Berlin (March 2011). Performances abroad include appearances with the Stockholm Philharmonic, Danish National Symphony, Malaysian Philharmonic, Sydney Symphony, Melbourne Symphony, West Australian Symphony, Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, Orchestre National de Lyon, Orchestre National de France, Toronto Symphony, Montréal Symphony, MDR Symphony Orchestra, RAI National Symphony and Orchestre de Paris. This season Mr. Thibaudet also appears in the U.S. with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, New World Symphony and the symphony orchestras of Detroit, Philadelphia, Dallas, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Minnesota and Seattle. A vivid recitalist, Mr. Thibaudet embarked on a two-continent recital tour in January and February 2011, with performances in Berlin, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Spain, California, Missouri, Colorado, Michigan, Florida, and New York's Carnegie Hall on February 2. Chamber music dates in Los Angeles, France and Belgium round out his eclectic schedule.

Mr. Thibaudet is an exclusive recording artist for Decca, which has released over 40 of his albums, earning the Schallplattenpreis, the Diapason d'Or, Choc de la Musique, a Gramophone Award, two Echo awards, and the Edison Prize. In Spring 2010, Mr. Thibaudet released his latest CD, *Gershwin*, featuring "big jazz band" orchestrations of *Rhapsody in Blue*, Variations on 'I Got Rhythm', and Concerto in F live with the Baltimore Symphony and music director Marin Alsop. On his Grammy-nominated recording, *Saint-Saëns, Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 5*, Mr. Thibaudet is joined by long-standing collaborator, conductor Charles Dutoit and the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. Also released in 2007, Mr. Thibaudet's album *Aria—Opera Without Words* features transcriptions of opera arias by Saint-Saëns, R. Strauss, Gluck, Korngold, Bellini, J. Strauss II, P. Grainger, and Puccini; some of the transcriptions are Mr. Thibaudet's own. Mr. Thibaudet was the soloist on the Oscar- and Golden

Globe-award winning soundtrack of Universal Pictures' *Atonement* and the Oscar-nominated *Pride and Prejudice*. Among other recordings are *Satie: The Complete Solo Piano Music*, and the jazz albums *Reflections on Duke: Jean-Yves Thibaudet plays the music of Duke Ellington* and *Conversations with Bill Evans*, his tribute to two of jazz history's greats.

Mr. Thibaudet was born in Lyon, France, where he began his piano studies at age five and made his first public appearance at age seven. At twelve, he entered the Paris Conservatory to study with Aldo Ciccolini and Lucette Descaves, a friend and collaborator of Ravel. At age 15, he won the Premier Prix du Conservatoire and three years later won the Young Concert Artists Auditions in New York City. In 2001, the Republic of France awarded Mr. Thibaudet the prestigious Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and in 2002, he was awarded the Premio Pegasus from the Spoleto Festival in Italy for his artistic achievements and his long-standing involvement with the festival. In 2007, he was awarded the Victoire d'Honneur, a lifetime career achievement award and the highest honor given by France's Victoires de la Musique.

TEDDY ABRAMS

Teddy Abrams performs as a conductor, clarinetist and pianist in addition to composing. The 2010-11 season marks his third season as the Conducting Fellow of the New World Symphony. He has conducted NWS in Miami Beach, Washington, D.C. and Carnegie Hall, and worked with many other orchestras around the country. He made his debut with the Florida Orchestra earlier this season.



An accomplished pianist and clarinetist, Mr. Abrams has soloed with numerous orchestras and performed chamber music with the St. Petersburg String Quartet, Menahem Pressler, Gilbert Kalish, Time for Three, and John Adams in addition to annual appearances at the Olympic Music Festival. He co-founded the Sixth Floor Trio because of his dedication to exploring engaging ways to communicate with

a diverse range of audiences. The Trio has performed around the country, holding residencies in North Carolina, Philadelphia, New York and South Florida.

Mr. Abrams studied conducting with Michael Tilson Thomas, Otto-Werner Mueller at the Curtis Institute of Music, and David Zinman at the Aspen Music Festival; he was the youngest conducting student ever accepted at both institutions. He is also an award-winning composer and a passionate educator and has taught at numerous schools nationwide.