

Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose)

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Written: 1908–1911

Movements: Five

Style: Impressionist

Duration: Sixteen minutes

Maurice Ravel was not much taller than a child. He never married and was childless, but he loved children, their toys, playing games with them, and telling them stories. One of his little friends, Mimi Godebski, remembered the Ravel's visits:

I would settle down on his lap, and tirelessly he would begin, 'Once upon a time . . .' It was 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'The Ugly Empress of the Pagodas' and, above all, the adventures of a little mouse he invented for me. I laughed a great deal at this last story; then I felt remorseful, as I had to admit it was very sad.

Mimi had a brother Jean. To entice the two to practice their piano, Ravel wrote a series of piano duets for them. He based them on some fairy tales from the "Tales of Mother Goose." Several years later, the theater manager, Jacques Rouché, asked Ravel to rewrite those piano pieces for orchestra and to recast them into a ballet. Ravel composed a new prelude, added another scene, and provided musical transitions between the various stories. Nowadays orchestras typically perform just the individual movements without those transitions. There are five short musical stories.

Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty introduces Sleeping Beauty with a short, slow, and stately procession. *Tom Thumb* tells the story of the little boy who drops bread crumbs to leave himself a path out of a forest. You can hear little Tom's wanderings by the constantly shifting meter of the music. High harmonics played by the violins imitate the birds, while the oboe and English horn suggest Tom's crying.

Ravel gave a written description of *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*:

“She undressed herself and went into the bath. The pagodas and pagodines began to sing and play on instruments. Some had oboes made of walnut shells and others had violas made of almond shells—for they had to have instruments that were of their own small proportions.”

In the Mother Goose story, Laideronnette was a princess who had been cursed with ugliness by a witch. While hiding in a far-off castle, she falls in love with a green serpent who used to be a handsome prince. Of course the spell is broken, and they live happily ever after. In one of their adventures, the couple comes to the land of living pagodas (small porcelain Chinese figurines with grotesque features). Ravel’s use of only the black keys of the piano (a pentatonic scale) is what gives this piece its Oriental flavor.

In Ravel’s telling of *Beauty and the Beast*, the clarinet takes on the role of Beauty while the Contrabassoon is the Beast. As they fall in love, their melodies entwine, and as the Beast is transformed, his melody gets played by a solo violin.

In the ballet, *The Fairy Garden* tells of Prince Charming awakening Sleeping Beauty with a kiss while all of the characters gather around. The music begins peacefully but grows to provide the perfect storybook ending.

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Concerto No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra in F Minor, Op. 21

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Written: 1829

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 30 minutes

Frédéric Chopin was one of the greatest pianists of all time, but his reputation rests on remarkably few public concerts; he gave only three after the age of twenty-five. Instead, Chopin made his reputation playing for small elite parties at the various salons in Paris. Perhaps that is why his compositions for the piano seems best suited for the smaller hall. He played all of his nocturnes, ballades, impromptus, waltzes, and polonaises in those intimate salons. He wrote only six pieces for piano and orchestra, all of them before he turned twenty-one while he was living in his native Poland, trying to launch his career.

Chopin was almost entirely self-taught. He developed a style in which the melody, most often played in the right hand, had a singing lyrical quality. The rhythm and harmony contained in the left hand was much more complex than in previous generations. Chopin also helped define *tempo rubato*, that “robbing” of time from beat-to-beat or measure-to-measure that gives music from the nineteenth century its breathing or “push-pull” quality. He played very lightly, almost daintily. Once an audience member, outside after hearing a recital by Chopin, started shouting, “I’ve been listening to *piano* all the evening, and now, for the sake of contrast, I want a little *forte*.” (The pun is that *forte* means “loud” and *piano* means “soft.” *Piano* is also the abbreviated name of the solo instrument for the concerto, otherwise known as the *pianoforte*.)

Chopin wrote his second piano concerto when he was nineteen. Actually, it was the first

concerto he wrote, but he published it some years after his only other concerto, which is called his first. (Such are the ways of music publishing.) Unlike most concertos where the orchestra and solo instrument sometimes compete against each other, this concerto is meant solely to display the piano. It has the standard three movements. The first starts with a long orchestral introduction to the two main themes. Then the piano enters, plays the same themes, adds new material, and then develops the first theme. The orchestra and piano then restate the opening.

The second movement has a beautiful slow melody with a dramatic middle section. Chopin's youthful infatuation with the singer Konstancja Gładowska served as the inspiration for this music. He wrote about it to his friend Tytus Wojciechowski:

I have met my ideal, whom I have been faithfully serving for six months without making mention of my feelings. I dream about her, and the *Adagio* of my new concerto has taken shape under her influence. . . . It is unbearable not to be able to free oneself of an oppressive burden. You know to what I am alluding. I am therefore entrusting to the piano what I have sometimes spoken of to you.

The final movement is what the eminent English music critic Donald Francis Tovey called "a delightful example of the long ramble through picturesque musical scenery, first straight up a range of keys and then straight down again, which Chopin, for reasons unknown to history called a rondo."

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Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Written: 1877

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 40 minutes

These days, the popular characterization of Brahms is that of a melancholy, forever-old man: balding, with a long, disheveled gray beard. We listen to his music as if he were always stuck in the autumn of his life. Still, Brahms was young once and, at the time he wrote his *Second Symphony*, even happy! In the summer of 1877, he was in the village of Pörschach, near Lake Worth in southern Austria. There were inspirational views of snow-capped peaks towering over the lake, the eating was good and, as Brahms wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, “The melodies fly so thick here that you have to be careful not to step on one.” Just the year before, Brahms finally broke his decades-long symphonic writer’s block by finishing his *First Symphony*—what Hans von Bülow called “Beethoven’s Tenth.” He was in a cheery mood and produced this light-hearted work, his *Second Symphony*, in about four months.

He was also in a playful mood. This is undoubtedly Brahms’s cheeriest symphony. However, writing to a friend the day before the symphony’s premiere, he claimed that the orchestra would play “with crepe bands on their sleeves because of its dirge-like effect.” He wrote to his publisher, “The new symphony is so melancholic that you can’t stand it. I have never written anything so sad, so minor-ish: the score must appear with a black border.” Writing to another friend, he claimed that his *Second Symphony* wasn’t really a symphony, but more like a serenade:

You have only to sit down at the piano and with your little feet on both pedals

alternatingly, strike the chord of F minor several times in succession, first in the treble,

then in the bass, *fortissimo* (very loud) and *pianissimo* (very soft), and you will gradually get a vivid impression of my latest.

The joke is that the symphony is in D major, containing not one F minor chord!

Maybe Brahms wasn't being so funny when he described this symphony to friends.

There are some dark moments, most notably near the beginning of the first movement when the timpani sound a roll like distant thunder, and the trombones play dark, ominous chords.

Vincenz Lachner wrote to Brahms asking why he injected this darkness into such a lighthearted work. Brahms replied: "I would have to confess that I am . . . a severely melancholic person, that black wings are constantly flapping about us."

After a performance of a Brahms symphony, the critic Virgil Thomson once heard a patron exclaim, "Brahms is so dependable!" This symphony is no exception. All of the movements follow the normal pattern for a symphony. The first movement presents the opening theme right away. In it you'll hear the motives which permeate the entire work. The second theme, played by the cellos and violas is typical for Brahms: soaring and lyrical. The melody in the second movement is an extended one, again played by the cellos. After a contrasting middle section, it comes back at the end of the movement, this time ornamented by the rest of the orchestra.

The third movement is a gentle little Austrian dance with a kick on the third beat, known as a *ländler*. Two faster and more robust episodes interrupt the pastoral setting. The final movement begins in a hushed manner. As it progresses it becomes more ebullient until even the trombones, who were responsible for the only gloom in the first movement, join the merrymaking and go out in a blaze of glory.

