

Book Review

Laura Watson, *Paul Dukas: Composer and Critic* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2019). xiv + 289 pp. £80.00 (£24.99 ebook).

I was attending a recent university commencement ceremony when an unexpected event occurred. The ceremony began, and instead of the customary trio from Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March*, the ensemble played the *Fanfare pour précéder La Péri*, the sole recognizable excerpt from Paul Dukas's ballet. As the piece concluded, I was reminded of the liminal position this composer occupies in contemporary musicology and the public consciousness, with the *Fanfare* and *L'Apprenti sorcier* his only well-known works among seven major compositions and a smattering of smaller ones. A lack of recognition for Dukas's musical and critical contributions are precisely what Laura Watson, in her rich and timely new study, seeks to overcome.

The first major Dukas biography in English, Watson's monograph amplifies previous contributions by Jacques Helbé and Gustave Samazeuilh and complements the author's own co-edited collection of essays on the composer.¹ The composer had a modest output and an ambivalent approach to French modernism, and the details regarding his personal life are sketchy. Watson divides her attention between his musical and critical output, which includes more than 400 articles, many written between 1892 and 1905. Highly self-critical and known for destroying as many scores as he completed, Dukas remained an active composer and teacher until his death in 1935, mentoring students as diverse as Elsa Barraine, Joachim Rodrigo and his best-known pupil, Olivier Messiaen.

The opening chapter centres on Dukas's formative years, including his studies at the Paris Conservatoire (1880–1889), his first efforts as a critic for *La Revue hebdomadaire* and his enthusiasm for symphonic composition at a time when the genre was often viewed with suspicion, even by his own professors.² Dukas's critical efforts were known for their prolificacy and tact, and he remained at *La Revue hebdomadaire* until November 1901. By devoting the majority of his critical efforts to a single journal, Watson finds parallels in Debussy's longstanding association with *La Revue blanche*.³ With a lack of interest in vocal composition beyond a few minor examples and the opera *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, he composed an *Ouverture du roi Lear*, his first orchestral work, in 1883. The *Polyeuchte* overture (1891), his first publication, which was strongly influenced by Berlioz and the Corneille tragedy, is examined in detail, its complex structure revealing an overall 'modified rondo' (p. 33) form. Reflecting an ambivalence to Wagner at odds with many colleagues,

¹ See Jacques Helbé, *Paul Dukas, 1865–1935* (Paris: PMP, 1975); Gustave Samazeuilh, *Un musicien français: Paul Dukas* (Paris: Durand, 1936); and Helen Julia Minors and Laura Watson, eds. *Paul Dukas: Legacies of a French Musician* (London: Routledge, 2019).

² We might recall here Ambroise Thomas's famous statement: 'what musician would want to debase himself to teach the symphony?' Cited in Brian Hart, 'Vincent d'Indy and the Development of the French Symphony', *Music and Letters* 87 (2006): 237.

³ In addition to *La Revue hebdomadaire*, he also wrote for *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*.

Dukas wrote that 'Wagner's poetic genius originated in his symphonic language' (p. 45). In short, the idea of belonging to a specific school of composition held no interest for him, with sincerity the most important virtue for a composer.

Turning in Chapter 2 to the unjustly neglected Symphony in C (1896), Watson reminds us of the challenges faced by composers of symphonic music during this period, with differing opinions on the popular symphonies of Brahms; Dukas divides such works into 'dramatic' and 'symphonic' camps (p. 57). Deeply impressed by Saint-Saëns's 'Organ' Symphony, he also revered Franck, Chausson, Lalo and d'Indy; in fact, d'Indy himself encouraged the younger composer to write a symphony as early as 1894. Modelled on Franck's Symphony in D Minor, Dukas's work retains his colleague's three-movement structure but not his use of cyclicism, which Dukas also found lacking in Guy Ropartz's Symphony No. 1 (1896) and Henri Rabaud's Symphony in E Minor (1900). No such reservations existed for d'Indy, whom Dukas proclaimed 'one of the greatest musicians this country has produced' (p. 61) and whose *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard français* (1886) he admired unreservedly. As Watson writes, while the composer chose to not employ a strict cyclical approach, 'meaningful thematic reminiscences confer a Franckian formal unity' (p. 65). Despite the work's many merits, it was largely dismissed by performers and critics alike and is rarely heard to this day. At the same time, the symphony provided a significant foundation for Dukas's best-known composition, *L'Apprenti sorcier*. Uncovering intervallic and rhythmic similarities between the two, Watson argues that 'much of the composer who Dukas became over the next decade is contained within this work' (p. 69).

Given the status *L'Apprenti sorcier* holds as an orchestral showpiece – not to mention its longstanding association with Walt Disney's film *Fantasia* (1940) – it is not surprising that Watson dedicates her third chapter to this work, with the title '*L'Apprenti sorcier* and Theorising a Theatre of Programme Music'. First performed in 1897, the work quickly eclipsed the rest of his output. Appearing in the same generation as Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) and Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegels lustiche Streiche* (1895), *L'Apprenti* reflects the 'picturesque power of music' (p. 82) as Dukas asserted in an 1894 article titled 'Musique et comédie' for *Revue hebdomadaire*. Arguing that 'the best symphonic poems were on par with dramatic music' (p. 84), he was equally taken by Russian repertoire, including Rimsky Korsakov's *Antar* and Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, with their whole tone scales and enchanted milieux.

Drawing inspiration from Goethe's *Die Zauberlehrling*, Dukas employs a 'modified sonata-rondo' structure (p. 97) with echoes of other French orchestral works, especially Franck's *Le Chasseur maudit* (1882), with whom it shares a German origin (in Franck's case, *Der wilde Jäger* by Gottfried August Bürger), supernatural plots elements, and a dramatic conclusion. On the complex question of the work's narrative and musical realization, Watson diverges somewhat from the scholarly views offered by Carolyn Abbate, Carlo Caballero and James Parakilas. While Abbate centres her reading on the literal power of narrative and Caballero focuses on elements of the uncanny, Parakilas views the entire work through the lens of a pair of commands, with 'the apprentice setting the broom to work and the master stopping it'.⁴ Watson writes that 'I analyse *L'Apprenti sorcier* as programme music that is less textual than theatrical, not so much linear as three-dimensional' (p. 96).

⁴ See Abbate, 'What the Sorcerer Said' in *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): 31–58; Caballero, 'Silence, Echo: A Response to "What the Sorcerer Said"'.

She argues that Dukas's colourful use of instrumentation and timbre tell the story, and shows how the composer employs pedal points to ground the constantly shifting harmonies. The speedy four-note closing flourish is interpreted as the broom scurrying away at the behest of the sorcerer. The work provided a steppingstone for his next major works, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* and *La Péri*. Watson closes this chapter with a brief commentary on the use of Dukas's music in *Fantasia*.⁵ Although his daughter Adrienne objected to employing her father's score in a film, its appearance bolstered interest in Dukas's music.

Chapter 4 is titled 'Piano Works in Dialogue with Tradition'. She begins with the Piano Sonata, among Dukas's most important and least-known works and still inexplicably underperformed. As his only effort in the genre, the Sonata reveals the influence of Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' and a 'symphonic ideology' (p. 111) drawn from resemblances between the work's themes. Indebted to large keyboard works including Liszt's majestic Sonata in B minor, Dukas's Sonata was seen by contemporary critics as a revival of the sonata genre that had been absent since the violin and piano sonatas of Fauré, Saint-Saëns and Franck. At the same time, both the sonata and its Beethovenian models were often viewed in gendered terms, emblems of 'masculinity' and 'male directness' (p. 114), especially as performed by Eduoard Risler, the sonata's first interpreter. Turning to Dukas's smaller keyboard works, Watson begins with the *Variations, interlude et finale sur un thème de J-Ph. Rameau*, a work composed as the Sonata was nearing completion. An example of 'historical interplay', Watson shows how the *Variations* 'recontextualised Rameau for contemporary audiences' (p. 130), while also paying tribute to Franck's *Prelude, Aria, and Fugue* and his larger *Variations symphoniques*. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of the *Prélude élégiaque sur le nom de Haydn*, one of a collection of smaller works by Debussy, Hahn, d'Indy, Ravel and others written for the 1909 centenary of the elder composer's death. While Watson convincingly argues that the advanced harmonic language of Dukas's *Prélude* may have more to do with the 1907 death of his brother Adrien than with Haydn, the work is also among the composer's most advanced creations, including the use of quartal and quintal sonorities.

Dukas's only full-length opera, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* (1907), merits the close attention Watson grants in her fifth chapter. Situating the opera as a 'sister work' (p. 165) to d'Indy's quasi-Wagnerian *Fervaal* (1895), her overall assessment includes a probing interpretation of the work's gendered milieu:

As a study of disintegrating, dysfunctional marriage and the parallel liberation of its female protagonist, this opera portrayed how the erosion of restrictive gender roles went hand in hand with a society beginning to acknowledge a range of female subjectivities, including women's autonomy in their private lives, same-sex desire and increased access to the public sphere. With just one opera Dukas made an impact (p. 142).

19th-Century Music 28/2 (2004): 160–82; and Parakilas, *Ballads without Words: Chopin and the Tradition of the Instrumental Ballade* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992): 223–4.

⁵ Mark Clague views the use of *Apprenti* in an animated film as 'building on nineteenth-century conceptions of art music as a moral force for community uplift'. See 'Playing in "Toon": Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) and the Imagining of Classical Music', *American Music* 22/1 (2004): 92.

A representative of the '*femme nouvelle*' (p. 142), *Ariane* reflects the importance of Debussy, whose *Pelléas et Mélisande* premiered five years earlier, and similarly highlights the 'individual pursuit of freedom' (p. 155). At the same time, the use of symbolic key centres – F-sharp minor for darkness and F-sharp major for light and freedom – further shows Debussy's influence. Although *Ariane* received a mixed reception, accused of being overly symphonic and lacking arias, the work allowed Dukas to escape the shadow of d'Indy and Wagner and earn the respect of composers beyond France, including members of the Second Viennese School, who praised the opera at the time of its Austrian premiere.

With *La Péri* (1912), the subject of Watson's sixth chapter, the composer embarked on a 'dual-purpose' score for the Ballets Russes, conceived 'less as a ballet than as a symphonic poem that included dance' (p. 187). Watson highlights the significance of dancer Natalia Trouhanowa, with whom he had a brief affair, for the trajectory of the work, as well as the focus on another female protagonist. Created as a vehicle for Trouhanowa, the story is based on Persian mythology with strong influences from the Russian school, Debussy, and Ravel. To these I would add a foreshadowing of Messiaen's colourful harmonic palate in the ballet's closing pages. Eventually severing ties with Diaghilev, Dukas named Trouhanowa his artistic partner, granting her exclusive rights to perform the title role for a period of five years. After *La Péri*, Dukas began work on a '*poème chorégraphique*' to be titled *Le sang de Méduse*. Drawing on Greek subject matter recalling Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (which like *Péri* premiered in 1912), the source material for *Méduse* includes a signed contract with Durand, a detailed libretto, and several proposed set designs. Regrettably, no music is extant.

Watson's final chapter is titled 'After the First World War: Creative Renewal and Return to Music Criticism'. In the eight years following the premiere of *La Péri*, Dukas composed no music. Deeply affected by Debussy's passing, he composed a short keyboard work titled *Tombeau pour Claude Debussy: La Plainte, au loin, du faune* – one of ten commissioned by *La Revue musicale* in 1920 in the late composer's honour. Challenging the notion that Dukas abandoned composition in the 1920s and 1930s, Watson shows how *Plainte* reflects the 'promise of a late style' (p. 222) that never materialized. Asked to write for a gala at the Opéra-Comique and to consider additional music for the stage, the composer declined, a reluctant collaborator to the end of his career. Returning to criticism in 1923, he found the musical scene fragmented and the growth of neoclassicism troubling, a view echoed by Messiaen and worthy of deeper contemplation. And yet, works such as Stravinsky's *Les Noces* made a powerful impression; as Watson puts it, Dukas remained curious, if at times sceptical, of new music but 'never stopped trying to renew his art' (p. 250). He continued working as a critic until 1932, three years before his passing.

In a brief conclusion, Watson highlights the twin careers that allowed Dukas to compose and critique free of allegiances to any specific style or school. A complicated and uncompromising artist, he nevertheless remains mysterious, deeply critical of his own work and revealing little of a romantic life beyond the brief dalliance with Trouhanowa. While Watson's analyses assist us in better understanding the composer's oeuvre, much remains to be done regarding his significance as an editor and teacher. More space should have been devoted to these topics even within the constraints of a relatively compact study. Nevertheless, Watson's meticulous research, richly illustrated with score examples and primary source excerpts – including numerous French review texts – reveals a multifaceted artist worthy of reappraisal well beyond the use of his music in a popular Hollywood film. A

distinguished resource for twentieth-century French studies as a whole, *Paul Dukas* must be regarded as indispensable for future work on this gifted and perplexing composer.

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