



Maurice RAVEL

Ma mère l'Oye

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) occupies a singular position in the history of early twentieth-century music as a composer whose aesthetic combined meticulous craftsmanship, formal clarity, and an unparalleled sensitivity to orchestral color. Born in Ciboure, near the Spanish border, Ravel was exposed from an early age to a wide range of musical influences, including Basque and Spanish folk traditions, which later surfaced in works such as *Rapsodie espagnole* and *Boléro*. He entered the Conservatoire de Paris at the age of fourteen, where he studied piano and composition, though his relationship with the institution was often fraught due to his independent artistic outlook and resistance to academic convention.

Despite a relatively small output, Ravel's catalog includes masterpieces across virtually every genre: piano works of extraordinary technical and expressive range, chamber music of crystalline clarity, and orchestral scores renowned for their brilliance and transparency. As an orchestrator, Ravel was peerless, capable of transforming even the simplest melodic material into a luminous tapestry of sound. His orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* remains one of the most celebrated examples of orchestral reimagining. Ravel's career was curtailed by illness in his later years, and he died in 1937, leaving behind a body of work that continues to exemplify elegance, imagination, and technical perfection.

Ma mère l'Oye (Mother Goose) occupies a unique and deeply poetic place within Ravel's output. The work was originally composed in 1910 as a suite for piano four hands, written for the children of close friends, Jean and Mimi Godebski. Ravel conceived the music with deliberate simplicity, aiming to evoke the innocence and fantasy of childhood fairy tales rather than virtuosic display. The source material draws from stories by Charles Perrault and Madame d'Aulnoy, figures closely associated with the French fairy-tale tradition.

Recognizing the evocative potential of the music beyond the piano, Ravel orchestrated *Ma mère l'Oye* in 1911 and later expanded it into a full ballet. In its orchestral form, the suite reveals Ravel's extraordinary command of color and texture. The scoring is delicate and economical, favoring muted strings, harp, celesta, and carefully blended woodwinds to create an atmosphere of enchantment and refinement. Each movement functions as a musical vignette, capturing the essence of a specific tale or scene without literal narration.

The opening movement, *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant*, unfolds with restrained elegance, its slow tempo and sparse textures suggesting timeless stillness. This is followed by *Petit Poucet*, in which wandering melodic lines and subtle harmonic shifts mirror the story of the lost child scattering breadcrumbs along the forest path. Perhaps the most striking movement, *Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodes*, employs pentatonic scales, percussive effects, and exotic orchestral colors to evoke an imagined Far Eastern sound world, reflecting early twentieth-century fascination with non-Western cultures.

The final movements, *Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête* and *Le jardin féerique*, bring the suite to an emotional and musical culmination. In the former, contrasting instrumental timbres represent the dialogue between Beauty and the Beast, culminating in a radiant transformation scene. *Le jardin féerique* expands gradually from hushed beginnings to a glowing orchestral apotheosis, symbolizing awakening, renewal, and wonder. Throughout the suite, Ravel demonstrates how musical restraint can yield profound expressive impact.

In its orchestral incarnation, *Ma mère l'Oye* stands as a testament to Ravel's belief that sophistication need not be incompatible with simplicity. The work's enduring appeal lies in its ability to speak simultaneously to childlike imagination and adult sensibility, offering listeners a sound world of rare delicacy, balance, and poetic charm.