

Roussel - Symphonies No. 1 Op.7, 'Le poème de la forêt' & No.3 in G minor Op.42 (Dutoit) [1987]



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Forced by ill-health to give up his naval career at 25, Roussel's late start as a composer is well known. Touching the preliminaries with Eugène Gigout, he began studies with Vincent d'Indy in 1898 at the latter's newly founded Schola Cantorum, where he faced a dauntingly thorough course which would occupy him for a decade. D'Indy was quick to recognize ability, appointing Roussel professor of counterpoint in 1902, and acknowledging him as a creative artist. When D'Indy received the symphonic poem *Renouveau* in 1905, he remarked to Marcel Labey, "Roussel has sent me an utterly delightful orchestral piece that is still in progress; if he weren't so distrustful of himself and could really let himself go, he could do some quite splendid things!" Such lack of confidence is difficult to credit, given the expressive power of works such as *Résurrection* (1903), a "symphonic prelude" after Tolstoy's novel, or the high finish, originality, surefire verve, and glowing tonal palette of the *Divertissement* for piano and winds, composed in 1906, as he was engaged with his *Symphony No. 1*. Nonetheless, the symphony's composition slowly proceeded, and with misgivings. *Soir d'été*, completed in October 1904, was heard at one of Alfred Cortot's lectures -- "hearings" of works by young composers given at the Nouveau-Théâtre -- on December 15. While Roussel gained some assurance regarding the effectiveness of his orchestral writing, another symphonic movement, *Vendanges* (Harvest), was rejected and destroyed after performance at the lectures on April 18, 1905. *Renouveau* was completed in July 1905, and *Forêt d'hiver* in June 1906. With three movements in hand suggesting the round of the seasons, Roussel joined *Forêt d'hiver* and *Renouveau* in a single movement -- the former as an atmospheric introduction, the latter in proper first-movement sonata form. *Soir d'été* is a ternary adagio showing strong affinities with D'Indy's *Jour d'été à la*

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Thursday, 11 August 2011 12:58 - Last Updated Saturday, 19 April 2014 23:57

montagne, composed at the same time. Throughout, the orchestral writing is evocative, pictorial, and exquisitely poetic, if not highly original -- Roussel exercising up-to-the-minute craft with a deft touch. Only in the final movement, "Faunes et dryades," completed in September 1906, does one feel Roussel "really let himself go." A rondo, the dance-like and suavely propulsive returning portions enclose reminiscences from previous movements to realize a cyclic design, the Holy Grail of form chez D'Indy and Schola adherents. The work's premiere was given at the Concerts Populaires in Brussels on March 22, 1908, conducted by Sylvain Dupuis. D'Indy led the Paris premiere on February 7, 1909, with the Lamoureux Orchestra. --- Adrian Corleonis, Rovi

At every stage of his career, Roussel's best work is masterly finished, engaging, surefire. But for the connoisseur, tracing his stylistic evolution possesses a fascination of its own. If the opera-ballet *Padmāvātī* (1914-1918) crowns his second manner, making explicit the preoccupation with instinct and annihilation ironically broached in the ballet *Le Festin de l'araignée* (1912), his *Symphony No. 2* (1919-1920) encapsulates the period with formal yet disturbing point. The ironic detachment of *Le Festin* gives way to dark (and harmonically adventurous) foreboding, while the irrepressibly animated episodes are fraught with frenzied feverishness. But by the mid-1920s the skies had cleared, so to speak, and Roussel entered his final, neo-Classical, phase with the orchestral *Suite in F* (1926) whose three movements -- two in Baroque dance forms -- afford a foretaste of the *Symphony No. 3* in their effortless combination of energy and serenity. Commissioned by Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the *Suite* received its premiere by those forces January 21, 1927, continuing a Francophile tradition that had seen Henri Rabaud and Pierre Monteux as chef d'orchestre, and entertained Roussel's teacher and colleague, Vincent d'Indy, in 1905 and 1921.

To celebrate the B.S.O.'s 50th anniversary, Koussevitzky commissioned a number of works including Honegger's *Symphony No. 1*, Prokofiev's *Fourth*, Hindemith's *Concert Music, Op. 50*, Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, and Roussel's *Symphony No. 3*. The Third occupied Roussel from August 1929 through March 1930. Roussel and his wife were present for the Boston premiere, October 24, 1930, the composer remarking that Koussevitzky had conducted "with an extraordinary care and enthusiasm," and noting the day after, "As far as I can gauge after this hearing, it is the best thing I have done...." That, indeed, has been the consensus of critics and listeners alike -- only the ballet *Bacchus et Ariane*, which followed it immediately, has rivaled it in popularity. From the sardonic strut of the opening, the Third is immediately arresting, while its tightly coiled argument -- compact even for the form-conscious Roussel -- compels by its melding of logic and vivacity, sophistication and primitivism. The second movement transcends counterpoint in a miracle of passionate, ostinato-driven polyphony, while the scherzo and final

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Allegro con spirito -- elegant and rumbustious by turns -- are wrought with colossal playfulness. Albert Wolff and the Concerts Lamoureux gave the Paris premiere on November 28, 1931, and made a classic recording of the work the following year. --- Adrian Corleonis, Rovi

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