

Daphnis et Chloé

7.30PM, Thursday 7 August
Auckland Town Hall

Conductor Jun Märkl
Piano Javier Perianes

Choir Sydney Philharmonia Choirs

Programme Notes

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Piano Concerto No.5 'Egyptian' (1896)

- I. *Allegro animato*
- II. *Andante — Allegretto tranquillo quasi andantino — Andante*
- III. *Molto allegro*

DURATION: c.27'

An imposing façade at 22 Rue Rochechouart, the 550 seat Salle Pleyel of 1839 was touted as the world's first auditorium dedicated to music. It was here that Chopin, dedicated enthusiast of Pleyel pianos, gave all his Parisian performances, and it was here, in 1846, that a diffident 11-year-old Saint-Saëns made his astonishing debut as a pianist.

Fifty years later, Saint-Saëns' performance success had been eclipsed by his fame as a composer and Pleyel pianos were winning awards for their innovations in design and had produced a record number of over 100,000 pianos. Pleyel pianos were renowned for lightness, roundness, a powerful bass and a sparkling treble — all features exploited to advantage in Saint-Saëns' Fifth Piano Concerto, which premiered in the Salle Pleyel with the composer at the keyboard, at a concert in celebration of his career.

That career included many travels — separated from his wife after the tragic deaths of their two young sons, Saint-Saëns travelled the world, visiting all continents except Australia and Antarctica, and making 179 trips to 27 countries. He particularly enjoyed wintering in northern Africa; the Fifth Piano Concerto was composed in Luxor, site of the Ancient Egyptian city of Thebes on the Nile. Saint-Saëns overtly referenced his experience of travel in this concerto, leading to its nickname. In the central movement, he quotes a Nubian love song he heard sung by boatmen on the Nile while cruising the river in a dahabiya (a barge-like passenger vessel powered by sail). In the finale, he alludes to another kind of boat travel, this time the rumbling propellers of the ship that took him across the Mediterranean. Despite being over 60, Saint-Saëns' fingers were as quick as ever — the rapid passagework of the finale saw it used as an examination piece at the conservatoire.

INTERVAL

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Daphnis et Chloé (1912)

Part I: *A meadow at the edge of a sacred wood*

1. *Introduction and Religious Dance*
2. *General Dance*
3. *Dorcon's Grotesque Dance*
4. *Daphnis' Light and Graceful Dance*
5. *Lyceion's Dance*
6. *Nocturne. Slow and Mysterious Dance of the Nymphs*

Part II: *The Pirates' Camp*

1. *Introduction*
2. *War Dance*
3. *Chloe's Pleading Dance*

Part III: *The Setting of Part I at the End of the Night*

1. *Sunrise*
2. *Pantomime. The Love of Pan and Syrinx*
3. *General Dance (Bacchanale)*

DURATION: c.56'

Written less than 20 years after Saint-Saëns' Fifth Piano Concerto but inhabiting a completely different sound world, Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, (based on an ancient Greek romance attributed to Longus), belongs to the select group of pioneering works commissioned by the Ballet Russes, rubbing shoulders with Debussy's atmospheric *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) and Stravinsky's primal *Rite of Spring* (1913).

The Ballet Russes took Paris by storm in 1909 with their exceptional technique, evocative (and provocative!) costumes, sets, and choreography. The production of *Daphnis et Chloé* had Ravel in a challenging collaboration with choreographer Michel Fokine and costume and set designer Léon Bakst. The three had different visions of classical Greece, as well as language barriers: "Things are even more complicated because Fokine doesn't know a word of French and all I know of Russian is how to swear in it," wrote Ravel.

While Fokine wanted to return to the pagan eroticism, clean lines and bold contrasts of Ancient Greek vases, Bakst's colourful and geometric patterned costumes invited a more modern view of the ancient tale. Ravel went in a third direction, seeking to evoke, "a vast musical fresco... similar to that imagined and painted by French artists at the end of the 18th century." Ravel referred to artists such as the neo-classical painter Jacques-Louis David, whose portrayals of antiquity were characterised by draped robes, supple lines and floating fabric.

Ravel succeeded admirably in his goal; the score is lush without ever being overwhelming. Astonishing writing for woodwind soloists takes the fore, most especially the flute solo representing the Greek god Pan in the penultimate movement. A bevy of percussionists are tasked with creating halos of sound while the striking wordless choir sees Ravel using voice as a haunting, veiled orchestral colour.

The drama of the ballet follows the goatherd Daphnis and shepherdess Chloé as their young bond is challenged first by rivals and then by pirates who abduct Chloé. The god Pan intervenes and reunites the lovers in the final part before the entire company revels in a wild bacchanale. This finale took Ravel 18 months to perfect, evolving into a hectic five-beat structure which choreographer Fokine responded to with a striking 'whirlpool' choreography.

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