

SIMON-PIERRE PERRET AND MARIE-LAURE RAGOT, *PAUL DUKAS* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), ISBN: 978-2-213-63329-9, 557 pp, €30

The 2007 centenary of Paul Dukas's masterpiece and only opera, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, proved a timely occasion for a new book about the composer in which the centrality of this theatrical project to his life and career is strongly emphasized. Perret and Ragot have produced a work that, on a larger scale, seeks to set Dukas's various musical activities against the backdrop of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond. A text of ambitious scope (in French), it is divided into two sections: the first, encompassing about four-fifths of the volume, is a biographical study by Perret; the second, penned by Ragot, scrutinizes Dukas's compositional *œuvre* and is supplemented by the reconstituted original Maurice Maeterlinck libretto for *Ariane*. This demarcation of 'life' and 'works' is not always conducive to the reader's enjoyment, especially as far as the opera is concerned. The aforementioned libretto would be better placed following the valuable exploration, in chapter 7, of the literary modifications made to *Ariane*. A more substantial reason for integrating the sections is the thread of Dukas's music criticism that runs through both but is not firmly grasped by either writer. Chapter 5, entitled 'Critic or composer?', seems to promise a detailed consideration of how Dukas balanced his two most pressing occupations, but in confining the discussion to 1890–95 (a period which marks his first professional forays into composition and criticism) there is little opportunity to examine how Dukas's theories about the relationship between music, text and drama (a recurrent theme in his columns) shaped those of his mature works which boldly negotiate this issue. Separating the man from the music, however, has the clear advantage of catering to a broader Francophone audience whose chief interests lie in the life of this enigmatic character. That this text will inevitably be used by more specialized readers too perhaps says more about the deficiency of comprehensive Dukas scholarship, in any language, than its academic value.

The most appealing element of this book is the biography. Dukas's Conservatoire students such as Olivier Messiaen and Georges Favre¹ spoke about their teacher and his art at length, yet it is only now that a vivid picture of this reserved person in his everyday life is emerging. Perret counts Dukas's grand-niece and great-grand-niece amongst his sources, which explains a few of the personal stories he has uncovered and justifies the attention given to the composer's close companions. While Dukas's devotion to his older brother Adrien has long been known, thanks to letters edited by

¹ George Favre wrote what are still the most significant works on Dukas: *Paul Dukas: sa vie—son œuvre* (Paris: La Colombe, 1948) and *L'Œuvre de Paul Dukas* (Paris: Durand, 1969).

Favre, the extent to which his sibling and father influenced him is explicitly illustrated here. Another relationship to come under scrutiny is Dukas's brief dalliance with the mysterious woman, 'Wanda de N,' to whose memory *Ariane* is dedicated. We learn that the composer first met Wanda de Naley Zawistowska, a singer, in 1902 and was left distraught by her tragic death in 1904. Friends such as Paul Poujaud and Claude Debussy were more permanent figures in his life. Perret traces the occasionally uneasy relations between the very different personalities of Dukas and Debussy, but also draws upon their public endorsements of each other in the Parisian press to illuminate their shared goal of musical renewal. At times, though, Perret is excessively reliant on critical commentary, as in part of chapter 13 which purports to discuss *Ariane* 'in its time'. One anticipates some acknowledgment of the feminist debate that the opera sparked, but excerpted reviews from 1907 that concentrate almost exclusively on the music comprise the bulk of the discussion instead.

Dukas's compositional accomplishments can seem limited: he finished just one symphony, sonata, opera and ballet, despite further plans in each of these genres. It is only in the realm of programme music that he had multiple successes. Nonetheless, as Ragot illustrates in the 'works' section, the output is unified in a few different ways. A fascination with femininity marks *Ariane* and *La Péri* (1912), while curiosity and the quest for power come to the fore in *Ariane* and *L'Apprenti sorcier* (1897). Technically, the music is linked by a predilection for variation form, a vivid orchestrational sense and rhythmic precision. The discussions of Dukas's twelve published works (as well as one unpublished Prix de Rome cantata, *Sémélé*) take into account these interrelationships. The full programme, scenario and song text for *L'Apprenti sorcier*, *La Péri* and *Sonnet de Ronsard* (1924) are usefully provided too. With the exception of *Ariane*, though, the analyses are quite short and superficial, with little in the way of musical examples. No rationale is given for granting *Sémélé* (1889) its own chapter—as the appended catalogue indicates, Dukas's other Prix de Rome score, *Velléda* (1888), is of equal importance, having also been preserved and publicly performed. All the same, it is encouraging to note that both Perret and Ragot display more than a token interest in the composer's unedited early works and incomplete later efforts.

Drama, Ragot remarks, 'constitutes one of [Dukas's] principal areas of interest' (388). This truism serves as the focus for her examination of the composer's output, rightly so in the case of *Ariane*, but less convincingly elsewhere. Analysing the Symphony in C Major (1896), for example, she takes Dukas's assessment of Brahms's Second Symphony—'always ingenious, often interesting...never moving or poignant'—as evidence that his own excursion into the genre aimed to render it a 'spiritual drama' (401). This choice of term overlooks the symphony's inherent drama and confusingly calls to mind Dukas's 1891 *Polyeucte* Overture, which is based on a Corneille play about Christian martyrdom in Ancient Rome. Ragot dwells on the second move-

ment in her quest to extricate evidence of extra-musical planning in the work, claiming that it provides the symphony with its closest parallelism to programme music (405). In support of this, she quotes Favre, who finds suggestions of nature in the music. The subjectivity of the symphony, its capacity 'to signify this or anything else' to listeners,² was precisely what Dukas cherished most about it; to impose any extra-musical meaning, let alone a specific idea, is contrary to its creator's aims.

The Piano Sonata in E Flat Minor (1900) is also considered for its poetic and dramatic content, to the extent that the neologism 'sonatic poem' (*poème sonatique*) is coined to describe it (416). The argument for this interpretative strategy rests on the observation that 'in each of its movements, there is a prodigious coherence to the "dramatic" development of the original "idea"' (417). Dukas, however, was not opposed to the concept of the purely musical 'idea', despite the impression that one might gather from Ragot. His other major piano work, *Variations, interlude et finale sur un thème de Rameau* (1903), does not elude programmatic evaluation either. Variation 11 is described as a 'tableau in its own right; an evocation worthy of Dante, a poet revered by Dukas' (428). On the other hand, Ragot's application of Jumeau-Lafond's theory that the wordless voice evokes the inhuman and the supernatural to the *Alla Gitana*, vocalise-étude (1909) is intriguing. One only wishes that it had been explored further: it raises issues that concern not just this abstract piece, but also the distorted vocality mimicked in *L'Apprenti sorcier* and the role of the voice in *Ariane*.

The main strengths and weaknesses of the book are simultaneously showcased in the *Ariane* chapters. It has long been acknowledged by Dukas scholars that the composer convinced Maeterlinck to sanction modifications to his libretto:³ the *Ariane* text performed in 1902 as a play and subsequently published in the authoritative *Théâtre* is somewhat different to the definitive opera edition.⁴ Perret and Ragot augment this knowledge with their discovery that Maeterlinck published an embryonic

² Paul Dukas, 'Le *Faust* de Goethe dans la musique', in *Les Écrits de Paul Dukas sur la musique* (Paris: SEFI, 1948), 521–9.

³ See Catherine Lorent, '*Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*. Dossier sur le conte lyrique de Paul Dukas' (diss., Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique, Paris, 1978); William Angus Moore, 'The Significance of Late Nineteenth-Century *Wagnérisme* in the Relationship of Paul Dukas and Edouard Dujardin. A Study of their Correspondence, Essays on Wagner, and Dukas's Opera *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*' (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1986); Laura Watson, 'Paul Dukas's Music-Text Aesthetic: A Study of its Sources, Theory and Practice, 1891–1907' (PhD diss., University of Dublin, Trinity College, 2008).

⁴ Maurice Maeterlinck, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue, ou la délivrance inutile*, in *Théâtre*, III (Geneva: Slatkine, 1979).

version of *Ariane* in 1899, in German, in the review *Wiener Rundschau*. Although the original French text is now lost, the 1899 translation is used to recreate and publish it here, in its entirety, for the first time. Chapter 8, 'Naissance d'un poème', probes the extent of the composer's contribution to Maeterlinck's final 1902 text by bringing to light letters written by the playwright that reveal how much he was willing to accommodate his musical collaborator. We are told, for instance, that Maeterlinck wrote to his translator in 1900:

There will be some quite important modifications to *Bluebeard*. The first act, amongst others, was completely redrafted according to Dukas's desire. There will probably be more changes to come.
(119)

It is a startling admission from a writer famed for his hostility towards musical interference with his work. Never reported in Dukas scholarship before, this claim has the potential to alter radically how we view the authorship of the opera, yet its significance is strangely understated, with the source not even acknowledged in a footnote. This lack of scholarly rigour is a serious problem with the text. A sizeable bibliography, including lists of the main journals consulted and various archives visited, does not compensate for the fact that a wealth of correspondence, criticism and other documents cited throughout almost always goes unreferenced. The novelty of much of the material compounds the problem.

Overall, the authors deserve credit for a lively, wide-ranging study which will be welcomed by Dukas enthusiasts seeking an overview of the composer. Apart from the new revelations regarding *Ariane*, however, those demanding academic depth, clarity and analytical insight will not be fully satisfied with what this book has to offer.

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