

The Classical Beat

By **STEPHEN DANKNER**

BSO RELEASES FOUR NEW JAMES LEVINE RECORDINGS

Music writers – critics and commentators - if they've been at their trade for even a brief while, find themselves soon enough on every performer's and presenter's email list for promotions, events, news, et al. Whenever I see a press release (always with attention-getting 24-point boldface type) screaming "For Immediate Release," I think, "yeah, sure."

Still, once in a while something genuinely newsworthy does surface. The Boston Symphony recently announced four new recordings with Maestro James Levine and the BSO's first-ever music downloads online. One of the works Levine has recorded is Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloe" ballet. This hour-long Impressionist masterpiece has been a signature BSO score for over 50 years, ever since the landmark 1955 recording by Charles Munch.

Thinking about "Daphnis," which is Ravel's most elaborate work, I recalled that it was composed at a pivotal time that also saw premieres of mega-works by four other great masters of the early 20th century: Stravinsky ("Rite of Spring" – 1912); Richard Strauss ("Elektra" – 1909); Schoenberg ("Gurrelieder" – 1911) and Mahler (Eighth Symphony – 1910). What was it, I thought, about this post fin de siècle, pre-World War I era that created the environment for composers and presenters to produce the most extravagant music and stage productions before or since?

Mahler believed that a symphony should represent, even reveal, the world, and so he embraced both nature and humanity with ever more grandiose all-encompassing symphonies. The Eighth Symphony is also known as the "Symphony of A Thousand," and in fact, the American premiere in 1916 under Leopold Stokowski had 1,016 Philadelphia Orchestra musicians on New York's Metropolitan Opera stage.

The faux-atavistic "Rite of Spring" called forth, ironically, the most sophisticated (for 1912) orchestral sorcery from the mind of the 20th century's greatest composer. As well, both Strauss and Ravel anachronistically "journeyed" to ancient times in opera and ballet, and, like

Stravinsky, utilized the most modern technology – the large orchestra - to sonically depict bronze age cultures.

The First World War put an end to these gargantuan conceits. After the carnage, there wasn't the manpower, money, ego or creative will to produce such colossal testaments.

For the last 100 years, composers have had, for better or worse, to learn to think small. Which is why it's wonderful to re-visit the opulent masterpieces of that age of lost glory – the first decade of the 20th century. Think of the genius of these five masters: to create magical worlds of a bygone age, for audiences of what is now a bygone age. Were their efforts appreciated, scandalous as they were? Yes and no.

“No opportunity for scenic display was neglected,” wrote the New York Times music critic at the 1909 Dresden premiere of Strauss' “Elektra.” “A prodigious orchestral orgy...with 112 players...with nothing that can be called music in the score,” the reviewer lamented. Talk about “shock and awe.”

So yes, it is a big deal – worthy of a “For Immediate Release” – when “Daphnis et Chloe” receives a brilliant performance, much less a recording, in these troubled days for both orchestras and record companies. Every great orchestra and conductor has signature works, and in this case, the BSO's new “Daphnis” with James Levine deserves to be listened to.

James Levine performed “Gurrelieder” and “Elektra” at Tanglewood in succession three summers ago. Maybe these works will also find their way onto a BSO Classics release. Let's hope so.

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