

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Gershwin: Piano Concerto in F Major; Ravel: Daphnis et Chloe – May 22-23, 2026

By Jonathan Berkowitz

Prelude: Gershwin and Ravel are a very appropriate pairing for a concert program. They admired each other and influenced each other's music. They met when Gershwin visited Paris and again when Ravel visited New York.

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898 to 1937)

George Gershwin occupies a singular place in American music: a composer who moved with unusual fluency between Broadway and Carnegie Hall, between popular song and classical form. Gershwin came very close to finding a musical voice to reconcile European inheritance with American experience. He did it by ignoring the distinction.

George Gershwin was born Jacob Gershwine (pronounced "Gershvin") in Brooklyn in 1898 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents. He changed his surname to "Gershwin" when he became a professional musician. One of four siblings, he and his eldest brother, Ira, loved to frequent the local Yiddish theatres.

Gershwin did not begin as a prodigy. He lived a typical boyhood in New York tenements. His first serious encounter with music came around the age of ten when he attended a friend's violin recital. George's parents had just bought a piano for Ira, but it was George who was most intrigued by it. Formal musical training began a few years later. He was introduced to technique and classical repertoire, especially Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy. He was also encouraged to attend orchestral concerts. At the same time, Gershwin absorbed the sounds of New York: ragtime, early jazz, vaudeville, and popular song. This dual education—formal and informal, European and American—would define his career.

At 15, Gershwin left school to become a "song plugger" in Tin Pan Alley. His job was to promote newly-published music by playing and singing for potential buyers. He learned to improvise and write music with immediate impact, and began writing his own songs. Gershwin left the publishing firm to travel the vaudeville circuit as a pianist. He made 140 piano rolls. and by 1919, he was composing Broadway theatre works.

Collaborating frequently with his brother Ira, he produced a remarkable catalogue of standards: including *Swanee* (introduced by Al Jolson, and Gershwin's his first big hit), *I Got Rhythm*, *Embraceable You*, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, and *I Got Rhythm*. These songs are often described as "popular", but their craftsmanship is anything but casual. Gershwin's melodies were shaped with a composer's ear for contour and balance; his harmonies are accessible but often carry subtle complexity. Listen closely to hear the seeds of his larger works: unexpected modulations, rhythmic vitality, and a sensitivity to phrasing that sounds symphonic.

Together, George and Ira became the dominant Broadway songwriters to emerge during the 1920s, creating a ceaseless flow of brisk, infectious rhythms and affectingly poignant ballads. Ira's words fit George's melodies perfectly. Together they, with contributions from other lyricists, composed 22 highly successful musical comedies, including *Lady Be Good!*, *Oh, Kay!*, *Funny Face*, *Strike Up the*

Band, Girl Crazy, and *Of Thee I Sing* (the first musical comedy to win a Pulitzer Prize). These shows starred most of the famous stage performers of the time, including Ruby Keeler, Fred Astaire, Jimmy Durante, Fanny Brice, and Gertrude Lawrence. Songs from his shows became standards of the popular music performing world.

The turning point came in 1924, when bandleader Paul Whiteman commissioned Gershwin to write a work that would bridge jazz and classical music. Right from the start of his career Gershwin had his eye and ear on composing serious music. The result, *Rhapsody in Blue* for orchestra and piano, begins with one of the most recognizable hooks in music: a spine-tingling clarinet glissando that ushered in a new era in American music. The work is neither a traditional concerto nor a jazz improvisation. It is a new hybrid of blues-tinged melodies, syncopated rhythms, and orchestral development. What makes *Rhapsody in Blue* enduring is not novelty, but integration. The piano writing is virtuosic but idiomatic, drawing equally from Liszt and Harlem.

In the mid-1920s, Gershwin moved briefly to Paris, hoping to study composition with Nadia Boulanger, and others. Everyone turned him down, worrying that his jazz-influenced style would be ruined by classical study. Maurice Ravel, in particular, was impressed with Gershwin's works, whose influence on Ravel's two piano concertos is marked. In response to a request from Gershwin to study with him, Ravel, who had heard how much Gershwin earned, commented that Gershwin should give Ravel lessons. This story has been corroborated by Igor Stravinsky.

In 1925, New York Symphony conductor Walter Damrosch commissioned Gershwin to compose a piano concerto. Gershwin's *Piano Concerto in F* is considered by many to be his finest concert work. Gershwin's time in Paris led to him to compose the ambitious orchestral work, *An American in Paris*. Along with the *Second Rhapsody* (1931), these three round out Gershwin's top great orchestral compositions

Gershwin loved Dubose Heyward's novel *Porgy*. A 1934 visit with the author in South Carolina inspired Gershwin to write music for the magnificent opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Co-written by Dubose, Dorothy Heyward, and Ira Gershwin, this "folk opera" was ideal for incorporating blues and jazz idioms. It was ambitious, tightly integrating unforgettable songs and drama. The work met with a mixed reception at its premiere. It was praised for its aspirations but questioned for its stylistic synthesis. Critics could not decide whether it was an opera or a Broadway musical. However, with the crossover from jazz to classical the boundaries between "popular" and "classical" dissolved. Instantly recognizable arias such as *Summertime* functioned both as operatic set pieces and standalone songs. *Porgy and Bess* came to be regarded as one of the central works of American opera and a cultural classic. It was eventually made into a major motion picture in 1959.

After *Porgy and Bess*' poor financial returns, Gershwin moved to Hollywood to write scores for film musicals. His and Ira's songs included a remarkable number of popular hits and future jazz standards, such as *They All Laughed*, *Let's Call the Whole Thing Off*, *They Can't Take That Away from Me*, *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, *A Foggy Day*, and *Love Is Here to Stay*.

In 1937, at the height of his career, he began experiencing increasingly severe headaches and dizzy spells. While working on the score of *The Goldwyn Follies*, he collapsed into a coma caused by a brain tumour and died; he was only 38. Around the world, people were stunned by the news as if it had been their personal loss. American writer John O'Hara is quoted as saying, "George Gershwin

died July 11, 1937, but I don't have to believe it if I don't want to." Gershwin was buried in New York. A memorial concert was held at the Hollywood Bowl.

Gershwin died without a will. His mother inherited his estate which continues to collect royalties in the United States from the copyrights on his post-*Rhapsody in Blue* work. In 2005, *The Guardian* determined, using "estimates of earnings accrued in a composer's lifetime", that George Gershwin was the wealthiest composer of all time.

Gershwin matters because he demonstrated that American music need not choose between popular appeal and artistic ambition. He showed that a melody could be both memorable and structurally meaningful, that rhythm could drive both dance and development, and that a composer could speak in multiple idioms without losing coherence. Gershwin's genius bridged the distance between Broadway and the concert hall. Although he seldom made grand statements about his music, he believed that "[T]rue music must reflect the thought and aspirations of the people and time. My people are Americans. My time is today."

Today, Gershwin's works are performed more often than during his brief lifetime. His songs and concert pieces continue to fill the pages of discographies and orchestra calendars.

Postscripts

- The biopic *Rhapsody in Blue* was made in 1945, starring Robert Alda as George Gershwin.
- The soundtrack to Woody Allen's 1979 film *Manhattan* is composed entirely of Gershwin's compositions.
- Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys released *Brian Wilson Reimagines Gershwin* in 2010.
- In 1985, the Congressional Gold Medal was awarded to George and Ira Gershwin. Only three other songwriters, George M. Cohan, Harry Chapin, and Irving Berlin, have received this award.
- In 2007, the Library of Congress named its Gershwin Prize for Popular Song after George and Ira Gershwin. The annual prize is given to a composer or performer whose lifetime contributions exemplify the Gershwins' standard of excellence. Paul Simon was the first winner.
- Gershwin and Arnold Schoenberg were friends; they played together—not music, but tennis.

Piano Concerto in F Major – George Gershwin (1925)

Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, bells, xylophone, triangle, and strings

George Gershwin's *Piano Concerto in F*, written just over a century ago, is a declaration that the energy, colour, and rhythm of American jazz could sustain a full-scale concerto in the European tradition as serious, enduring art. It followed immediately after the sensational success of *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was orchestrated by Ferde Grofé. That earlier work, a hybrid of jazz and symphonic poem, constituted Gershwin's initial introduction to symphonic audiences.

The day after Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra, attended the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* he commissioned Gershwin to write a full-scale classical piano concerto, to be orchestrated by the composer. This was a daunting task since Gershwin had not been formally trained in orchestration. In a retrospective, Gershwin wrote, “Many persons had thought that the Rhapsody [in Blue] was only a happy accident. Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was plenty more where that had come from.” Indeed there was. At the time of the commission Gershwin was working on three different Broadway musicals so work on the Concerto had to wait until May 1925. He completed the full orchestration by November of that year. At the premiere, the composer was the soloist and Walter Damrosch conducted. Damrosch famously remarked that Gershwin had “shown himself to be a composer of genuine genius.”

This Concerto is distinctive in how thoroughly jazz elements are integrated into classical form. Blues harmonies, syncopations, and dance rhythms lead the musical conversation. Along with a traditional orchestra, Gershwin uses instruments associated with jazz: muted brass, prominent percussion, and piano writing that alternates between percussive and lyrical. Orrin Howard, writing for the LA Phil, commented, “He didn’t change his musical persona for the concert hall. Whereas most American composers of his era... were writing in the fashionable European styles, Gershwin cultivated his mother tongue—the one truly original American vernacular: jazz.” He wrote his remarkable “jazz concerto” at the ripe old age of 27. With jazz influences throughout, each movement has a subtle structural integrity rooted in the classical tradition.

Here is a description of the first movement—***Allegro***—in Gershwin’s own words: “*The first movement employs the Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young enthusiastic spirit of American life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettle drums... supported by the other percussion instruments and with a Charleston motif introduced by bassoon, horns, clarinets, and violas. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano.*”

The Concerto opens with rhythm rather than melody. Three themes are woven together. The timpani hammer out the opening motif, immediately establishing the music’s driving energy. The orchestra presents a pentatonic (five-tone scale) melody, with the Charleston rhythm in the horns and percussion. After a back and forth between timpani and orchestra, the piano enters with a sultry main theme that will be heard throughout the work. The piano is more a participant in the rhythmic conversation than a delicate soloist.

The theme then repeats while the orchestra plays a countermelody. After pentatonic runs and a chromatic scale, the piano brings back the sultry theme using Charleston syncopation. Next, the piano plays the countermelody while the orchestra takes the theme. Variations on the Charleston accompaniment and pentatonic melody lead to the climax, marked *Grandioso*. And it is, indeed, grand! Fast-paced triplets, speeding chords, repeated Charleston rhythms, and modulations build to the final section, ending with a coda. This author even hears hints of *Rhapsody in Blue*. The movement’s finishing flourish feels triumphant, urban, kinetic, and unmistakably American.

Listen for how the syncopation destabilizes the beat, creating forward momentum; the contrast between percussive piano writing and the more flowing, melodic passages; and the cadenza, where the soloist seems to improvise, although every note is carefully composed.

Next comes the **Adagio – Andante con moto**—about which Gershwin wrote, “*The second movement has a poetic, nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they [blues] are usually treated.*”

This is the emotional heart of the Concerto: intimate, nostalgic, and quietly sophisticated. Gershwin uses two blues themes with a lively middle section. The movement has a highly original construction and shows Gershwin at his most inventive. His admiration of French music—Debussy and Ravel, in particular—appears in the long introduction played by the winds and brass, but without the piano. A blues chord progression kicks things off; a muted solo trumpet follows that introduces a blues-inflected lament somewhat similar to the sultry theme in the first movement.

Then come variations of the blues melody that sound improvised. The trumpet repeats the first theme. Finally, the piano enters with a faster, upbeat second theme that foreshadows the melody of the third movement. A violin solo provides a bridge from this theme to a restatement of the first one; it sets the stage for a piano cadenza replete with fast arpeggios accompanying the theme. That, in turn, leads to an irresistible Gershwin tune which gets the grand concerto treatment, alternating between piano and orchestra that builds to a climax. It ends abruptly with a brief and nostalgic return of the opening motif played by the piano, flute, and strings. The arrestingly beautiful and peaceful cadence concludes the movement.

Listen for the “blue notes” that bend the pitch between major and minor; the orchestral colour from the muted brass and delicate woodwinds; the piano as a storyteller, weaving around the main theme; and Gershwin’s hallmark sense of improvisation within structure.

The finale—**Allegro agitato**—bursts in with restless and syncopated exuberance. Gershwin described it this way, “*The final movement reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping to the same pace throughout.*”

The first movement established the Concerto’s energy; now the third unleashes it. Themes are short, punchy, and rhythmically charged. The piano writing becomes increasingly virtuosic, demanding brilliance and stamina. Buckle up. This movement is a rapid-fire rondo. Themes from previous movements reappear, transformed, but there is new material too, including several references to ragtime.

The orchestra begins with the main theme of the movement, which is then repeated by the piano playing a rat-a-tat rhythm accompanied by the orchestra offering a countermelody. A piano glissando reintroduces the theme from the first movement played by the orchestra, before returning to the main theme. Now the orchestra plays a second theme accompanied by the piano. Variations of the main and secondary themes return. In a different key, the orchestra plays the second blues theme heard in the second movement. It’s the piano’s turn to respond with the secondary theme. The rat-a-tat rhythm in the piano returns to link the blues theme and the repeated note melody from the second movement, played by the orchestra. (Reprises like this, are common both in orchestral concert music and in American musical theatre; Gershwin’s brilliant career spans both.) An impressive run of rapid octave scales is a false climax that may fool the listener, because they evolve into another build-up to the true pinnacle of the Concerto.

Listen for the relentless propulsion and the interplay of jazz rhythms with classical counterpoint; the reappearance and transformation of earlier ideas that give the work a sense of unity; and the exhilarating final pages, where the soloist and orchestra race to the finish. I picture Gershwin smiling to himself as he composed this; I smile when I hear it, and I'm certain you will, too.

The *Piano Concerto in F* is great not simply because it is effective or entertaining—it is both—but because it solved a problem that had preoccupied American composers: how to create a concert work that speaks in an authentically American voice without abandoning classical rigour. Gershwin's answer demonstrated that jazz—still young and evolving in the 1920s—possessed the structural and expressive depth to sustain large forms. The work endures because it captures the sound of a culture discovering itself. The concert hall opens its doors to Broadway, to Harlem, and to the pulse of New York City. Gershwin did not merely bring jazz into the Concerto; he made the Concerto speak jazz.

The premiere and several sold-out performances that followed were very well received by the public. As usual, reviews were mixed, mostly because critics were unable to classify the Concerto as jazz or classical. Sergei Prokofiev found it "amateurish". But Arnold Schoenberg praised it, saying, "[Gershwin] is a composer... who lives in music and expresses everything, serious or not, sound or superficial, by means of music, because it is his native language."

The last words go to Walter Damrosch, who praised Gershwin's work in very charming language.

"Various composers have been walking around jazz like a cat around a plate of soup, waiting for it to cool off so that they could enjoy it without burning their tongues, hitherto accustomed only to the more tepid liquids distilled by cooks of the classical school. Lady Jazz ... has danced her way around the world ... but for all her travels and sweeping popularity, she has encountered no knight who could lift her to a level that would enable her to be received as a respectable member of musical circles. George Gershwin seems to have accomplished this miracle ... boldly by dressing his extremely independent and up-to-date young lady in the classic garb of a concerto. ... He is the Prince who has taken Cinderella by the hand and openly proclaimed her a princess to the astonished world, no doubt to the fury of her envious sisters."

MAURICE RAVEL (1875 to 1937)

Note: The following biography first appeared earlier in the 2025-26 season.

Joseph-Maurice Ravel was born in 1875 in the French Basque town of Ciboure to a Swiss father and Basque mother. The family was artistic and cultivated. In later life, Ravel recalled, "Throughout my childhood I was sensitive to music. My father, much better educated in this art than most amateurs are, knew how to develop my taste and to stimulate my enthusiasm at an early age." From his mother he learned a love of Spanish folk rhythms and song.

Soon after Maurice's birth, the family moved to Paris where his musical talent quickly became evident, and he began piano lessons. He wasn't a child prodigy but had a natural conception of music. At age 14, Ravel entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied piano, composition, and counterpoint. Ravel spent nearly 16 years connected to the Conservatoire; but his unusually long time there was punctuated by expulsions and reinstatements. He was never a brilliant pianist; he wanted to be a composer.

His teachers included Gabriel Fauré, whose refinement and harmonic subtlety deeply influenced him. Ravel was not a star student—his perfectionism and independence sometimes frustrated his professors—but he was already forging a unique artistic voice. There he produced a series of early masterpieces that revealed his meticulous technique and vivid imagination. Among them are *Pavane pour une infante défunte* and *Sonatine*, both for piano, the *String Quartet*, and *Jeux d'eau*. While other composers were exploring stormy emotions Ravel preferred restraint. He once said, "My ambition is to write music that is perfectly constructed and emotionally sincere." These early works show the astonishing perfection of style and craftsmanship that are the hallmarks of Ravel's entire oeuvre. He is one of the rare composers whose first works seem as mature as those of his later years.

Ravel's time at the Conservatoire ended in controversy. He repeatedly entered the Prix de Rome competition, France's most prestigious composition prize, but never won. The works he submitted were considered too "advanced" by ultraconservative members of the jury. By 1905, after several attempts, the jury's refusal to award him even a finalist position caused a public scandal. The resulting outcry forced the director of the Conservatoire to resign and cemented Ravel's reputation as both victim and hero of artistic integrity. The directorship of the Conservatoire was taken by Gabriel Fauré. Ravel was not by inclination a teacher but gave lessons to a few young musicians he felt could benefit from them. Like his teacher, Fauré, he was concerned that his pupils should find their own unique voices and not be excessively influenced by established masters.

Ravel's life was largely uneventful. He never married but enjoyed the company of friends. Finding city life fatiguing, Ravel moved to the countryside where he lived for the rest of his life. His personal life remains a mystery. Ravel served as a truck driver in World War I, despite being in his forties. The experience left him shaken and physically exhausted. The war's aftermath, combined with the death of his mother and many friends, deepened the introspective tone of his later music.

In the 1920s, Ravel toured internationally, including a four-month tour of Canada and the United States in 1928, where he met George Gershwin. Audiences were enthusiastic and the critics complimentary; but Ravel was unmoved by his new international celebrity. He commented that the

critics' recent enthusiasm was of no more importance than their earlier negative judgment. However, he was fascinated by the dynamism of American life, its huge cities, skyscrapers, and advanced technology, and was impressed by its jazz, Negro spirituals, and the excellence of American orchestras.

One of his major works from the 1920s was the orchestral arrangement of Mussorgsky's piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Another was *Boléro*, which became a global sensation much to Ravel's bemusement. He insisted that it was "one long crescendo, and absolutely nothing else." He commented, "I've written only one masterpiece – *Boléro*. Unfortunately, there's no music in it."

Ravel's final years were cruel, for he began to gradually lose his memory and some of his coordination, a condition he was quite aware of it. He began to show symptoms of aphasia perhaps due to a car accident in 1932. Although no longer able to write music or perform, Ravel remained physically and socially active until his last months. His intellect and hearing remained sharp, as well as his ability to hear music in his head. In 1937, surgeons attempted a risky brain operation, but Ravel never regained consciousness and died in Paris in December 1937 at the age of 62. He was buried in the Paris suburb where he had lived.

Ravel and Claude Debussy's music is often called "Impressionist," a label Ravel disliked. The term, borrowed from painting, refers to a style that emphasizes atmosphere, colour, and suggestion rather than structure or narrative. Like the brushstrokes of Monet, musical Impressionism relies on shimmering harmonies, ambiguous tonality, and delicate textures to evoke moods rather than tell stories. Ravel shared some of these qualities, but his approach was more structured and precise than Debussy's. Whereas Debussy aimed to dissolve boundaries, Ravel sought balance and proportion. Debussy was the poet of blurred edges, Ravel the craftsman of crystalline design.

The two composers' careers intertwined for decades. They moved in similar circles and were influenced by Symbolist poetry, exoticism, and non-Western music. They admired each other's work but were often set up as rivals by critics and the Parisian press. In truth, their relationship was respectful but cautious, a mixture of mutual admiration, artistic difference, and occasional tension. When asked about their supposed rivalry, Ravel remarked, "If there were no Debussy, there would be no Ravel." It was both an acknowledgment and a gentle deflection.

Ravel's output was not large. Famously meticulous, he destroyed works he found unsatisfactory. But nearly everything he published is considered a gem. His orchestral palette was revolutionary in its clarity and colour. He once said, "The art of orchestration is the art of transparent illusion." He was not a revolutionary musician, yet he adapted the traditional musical idiom into a language unmistakably his own. Igor Stravinsky compared Ravel to "the most perfect of Swiss watchmakers."

Among his works to enter the repertoire are pieces for piano, chamber music, two piano concertos, ballet music, two operas and eight song cycles; he wrote no symphonies or church music. Many of his works exist in two versions: first, a piano score and later an orchestration. Some of his piano music is exceptionally difficult to play, and his complex orchestral works require skillful balance in performance.

Maurice Ravel was a man of paradoxes—precise yet passionate, modern yet classical, French yet cosmopolitan. He once said, "The only love affair I have ever had was with music." His exquisitely

crafted music, perfectly balanced between intellect and beauty, remain among the most beloved and enduring creations of the twentieth century.

Daphnis et Chloé – Ravel (1909-1912)

Orchestration: 3 flutes (2nd and 3rd = piccolo), alto flute, 2 oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (antique cymbals, bass drum, castanets, glockenspiel, low snare drum, snare drum, tambourine, triangle, and wind machine), 2 harps, celesta, strings, and chorus

Daphnis et Chloé constructs an entire world. It goes far beyond the stage for which it was conceived. It is less a conventional ballet than an immense fresco of sound: light, landscape, myth, and human feeling rendered with an orchestral palette of almost unearthly refinement.

The work was commissioned by Ballets Russes, under the formidable impresario Sergei Diaghilev. Ravel began composing it in 1909, working with choreographer Michel Fokine and designer Léon Bakst. The scenario was based on the ancient Greek pastoral romance written by Longus during the Roman Empire. It is a tale of innocent love, abduction, peril, and eventual reunion.

The subject suggests Arcadian simplicity, but the process was anything but. Ravel laboured over the score for nearly three years, often in tension with Fokine, whose demands for dramatic clarity did not always align with Ravel's musical ambitions. In a letter to a friend Ravel wrote, "What particularly complicates matters is that Fokine doesn't know a word of French, and I only know how to swear in Russian. Even with interpreters around you can imagine how chaotic our meetings are."

The composer later described the work as "a vast musical fresco... less concerned with archaism than with fidelity to the Greece of my dreams, which identifies willingly with that imagined and depicted by French painters at the end of the 18th century." Ravel called it a "choreographic symphony." He explained, "The work is constructed symphonically, according to a strict plan of key sequences, out of a small number of themes, the development of which ensures the work's homogeneity." Those themes or leitmotifs identify characters and recurring moods. They are a perfect complement to the spectrum of sounds and colours.

For this work, Ravel used a large orchestra, and, crucially, a wordless chorus that does not narrate but rather adds a halo of sound that blurs the boundary between human voice and instrumental colour. Everything in *Daphnis et Chloé* is about texture and light. Strings shimmer, often divided into multiple parts. Woodwinds flicker like reflections on water. Harps ripple and glisten. The chorus floats above, neither earthly nor fully divine.

The work is renowned for its demanding woodwind writing, featuring rapid, whirling arpeggios that mimic flowing water and nature. These passages require exceptional breath control, finger dexterity, and technical facility. A friend of mine and accomplished clarinetist, Stanis Smith, commented, "It's as if Ravel deliberately set out to write some of the most difficult woodwind passages he could imagine."

Part I: Innocence and Awakening: The ballet opens in a sacred grove. Daphnis and Chloé, two young shepherds, move within a world of ritual, dance, and burgeoning emotion. A slow, mysterious

introduction evokes dawn and the sacred landscape. Dances unfold that are graceful, stylized, and placed in an imagined antiquity. The central dramatic thread emerges: Chloé is courted, Daphnis is jealous, and pirates ultimately abduct Chloé.

Listen for the opening sounds of the strings and chorus merging; the use of modes that suggest antiquity, the delicate dance rhythms; and the gradual shift from pastoral calm to dramatic tension as the abduction approaches. Even in its most dramatic moments, the music remains refined, with passion filtered through colour and texture, a hallmark of Ravel's writing.

Part II: Night, Fear, and the Supernatural: This is the most atmospheric and enigmatic portion of the work. Daphnis searches for Chloé; when night falls, danger and the supernatural intrude. The music becomes darker, more fragmented. The pirates' camp introduces exotic, even grotesque elements. A ritual dance unfolds, culminating in a divine intervention by the god Pan.

Listen for the contrast between sparse, shadowy passages and sudden bursts of colour; the exotic sounds and rhythmic freedom; and how the atmosphere changes to represent Pan's appearance. There is drama here, but the tension is psychological, and, not surprisingly since it's Ravel, almost impressionistic.

Part III: Dawn, Reunion, and Apotheosis: Few passages in all music are as celebrated as the "Lever du jour" (Daybreak) that opens Part III. Dawn gradually breaks, portrayed through one of the most extended and meticulously crafted crescendos in the repertoire. Daphnis and Chloé are reunited. A series of dances culminates in the ecstatic "Danse générale."

Listen for how individual instrumental lines accumulate to represent the slow unfolding of dawn; the delicate and precise birdsong-like woodwinds; the return of earlier motifs; and the rhythmic brilliance and exhilaration of the final dance. The conclusion is tremendously joyful as if the entire landscape has been illuminated from within.

With three main sections and a dozen scenes, most of them dances, the full ballet is nearly an hour long. The complete work is more often performed in concert than staged as a ballet. Ravel also extracted two orchestral suites. The second, essentially Part III of the ballet, is more popular and is a staple of the concert hall.

The premiere took place in 1912, a year after Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and a year before the momentous premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring (Le sacre du printemps)*. It was admired, though perhaps not fully understood. Stravinsky, known for being stingy with compliments, said that *Daphnis et Chloé* was "not only Ravel's best work, but also one of the most beautiful products of all French music." It is a unique musical monument and arguably the summit of French orchestral art in the early 20th century.

Many others agree with Stravinsky and regard *Daphnis et Chloé* as Ravel's crowning achievement, and with good reason. It demonstrates his orchestral mastery, emotional range, unified structure despite the work's length and complexity, and integration of an unprecedented type of chorus. And the "Lever du jour" is a perfectly realized passage that has become a benchmark for orchestral writing. Above all, the work shows Ravel at his technical, imaginative, and expressive best.