



# STÉPHANE DENÈVE

## CONDUCTS ROUSSEL

### Albert ROUSSEL (1869-1937)

#### Le festin de l'araignée (The Spider's Banquet)

#### Padmâvatî Ballet Suites Nos 1 and 2

Royal Scottish National Orchestra · Stéphane Denève

One of Roussel's most performed orchestral works, *The Spider's Web* was composed during his earlier impressionistic period, and depicts the beauty and violence of insect life in a garden. Roussel's experiences as a lieutenant in the French Navy first introduced him to Eastern influences, and the 'operaballet' *Padmâvatî* was inspired by his later visit to the ancient city of Chittor in Rajasthan state of western India. It uses aspects of Indian music to evoke this city's legendary siege by the Mongols. This is the fifth and final volume in Stéphane Denève and the RSNO's acclaimed survey of Roussel's orchestral works. "An excellent disc, splendidly and idiomatically performed and a superb advertisement for composer, conductor and orchestra. Highly recommended." (Gramophone on Vol. 4 / 8.572135)



Listen to an excerpt from *The Spider's Banquet*:

Booklet notes in English  
 Catalogue No: 8.572243  
 Total Playing Time: 54:53



### About Stéphane Denève

Stéphane Denève is the newly-appointed Chief Conductor of the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra (SWR) and, since 2005, Music Director of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. He has made regular appearances with the Scottish orchestra at the Edinburgh International Festival and BBC Proms and the Festival Présences, and at celebrated venues throughout Europe including the Vienna Konzerthaus, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. He and the orchestra have made a number of acclaimed recordings together, including a survey of the works of Albert Roussel for Naxos, the first disc of which won a *Diapason d'Or de l'année* in 2007. A graduate and prize-winner of the Paris Conservatoire, Stéphane Denève began his career as Sir Georg Solti's assistant with the Orchestre de Paris and Paris National Opéra, also assisting Georges Prêtre and Seiji Ozawa during this time. In recent seasons he has appeared as a guest conductor with orchestras including the Boston Symphony, Bavarian Radio Symphony, London Symphony Orchestra, NDR Symphony Hamburg and Maggio Musicale Florence, with return engagements with the Philharmonia Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Toronto Symphony, and Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin among others. In the field of opera he has led productions at the Royal Opera House, Glyndebourne, Opéra National de Paris, Netherlands Opera, La Monnaie, the Barcelona Gran Teatre de Liceu, the Teatro Comunale Bologna and Cincinnati Opera. He has also worked with a distinguished list of solo artists including Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Leif Ove Andsnes, Piotr Anderszewski, Emanuel Ax, Lars Vogt, Nikolai Lugansky, Paul Lewis, Frank Peter Zimmermann, Yo-Yo Ma, Nikolaj Znaider, Pinchas Zukerman, Leonidas Kavakos, Hilary Hahn, Vadim Repin, Gil Shaham, Nathalie Dessay and Nina Stemme.



# STÉPHANE DENÈVE

## Talks to Jeremy Siepmann

The names of Stéphane Denève and Albert Roussel have become inextricably linked, though Denève is by no means a specialist. Indeed their paths crossed, figuratively speaking, at the very outset of Denève's road to stardom (one of the first pieces he ever conducted was by Roussel). We began our conversation, however, by looking back still further, before thoughts of conducting ever entered his head. Just how did Denève become a musician?

'I was at a Catholic school and there was an old nun who played the organ. I was very, very impressed. I would hide to listen to her, and it was just incredible. I had some piano lessons with her, though we had no piano at home. After a few lessons she noticed that I had a musical ear, and some musical ability, so she urged my parents to buy a piano and then as soon as possible to send me to the Conservatoire in the northern French city of Tourcoing – the same city as Roussel. And in this conservatory there was a class offering an initiation to conducting. Unfortunately, I was too young to be admitted, but I was so interested and my mother was so insistent that I think the director accepted me just as a way of getting rid of her! So I was just 13½ when I had a little test in front of an orchestra – obviously nothing big – and the conductor noticed that I had an ability to communicate through my hands, and so he decided to keep me – which was surprising since I was officially too young. When I was eighteen I entered the Paris Conservatoire, and opportunities quickly followed. I began to guest with small orchestras in France, I conducted at an opera festival when I was 22, very young, and then, as pianist of the chorus of l'Orchestre de Paris, I met Sir Georg Solti, who helped me to be engaged both at the Paris Opera and with the London Philharmonic, as his assistant. And from there it just snowballed, really.'

And was Solti a formative influence? 'Oh a great influence, yes. I loved his sheer energy. This was something very special for me – and his extreme attention to detail, even when he was a very old man. There was a kind of sacred fire in him that made a huge impression on me. And not just him, but the other great conductors of his generation. I'm thinking also of Karajan and Giulini.'

How, I wondered, did Solti's influence differ from Giulini's? 'Oh Giulini was very different. With him I discovered that you can actually believe in miracles. As a conductor you must believe in the miracle of others. In the miracle of what the players in an orchestra

can give. And I'm still inspired by that – thinking that the great way of conducting is accepting more and more what the musicians can give *you*. Letting them express themselves more and more. I'm not there yet. I'm still a driving conductor, but I know that over the decades this will probably change. When you listen to recordings and see films of the young Giulini, for instance, you see that in those days he used very strong, personal, authoritative gestures, and it's incredible to see how he changed over the years. In the end he was just really *revealing* the music. It was very inspiring. And it still is.'

So here we have a French conductor influenced by a Hungarian, an Italian and a German. Is this significant, or are the national schools of old now a thing of the past? 'Well there are certainly schools of conducting, but it's no longer, perhaps, quite so much a matter of *country*. It's more about a style of conducting which is passed from a great master to other people. Think of all the people who've been inspired by Musin in Russia, for instance – of whom Gergiev is perhaps the first that comes to mind. Then there are all the people who have been influenced by the model of Rattle and Abbado – Daniel Harding and Gustavo Dudamel, for instance, are very clearly inspired by Rattle and Abbado. But it's not just a matter of personalities. There are significantly different ways of understanding music. I would say, the Russian repertoire and the French repertoire are perhaps the most distinctive repertoires. Partly because of their idiomatic sound worlds – something that many people don't seem to get. There's a connection between them, of course, because a lot of French was spoken in Russia in the 19th century, so I think that someone like Mravinsky, say, had a lot of elegance that you could call French, in a way – you can hear this very clearly in his recordings – but the Russians, in general, have a very meaty sound, that starts from the bass. A very dark, rich sound, well suited to expressing intensity of feeling – a big, singing sound. This very emotional lyricism is like painting in oils – and using a lot of it, creating big, thick textures. Whereas the French style is much more like watercolours – much more ambiguous in its emotion; there are more layers that have to be heard at the same time. It's very obviously a different sound world. I think French music is more "visual". In France we love visual art. Of course we love Impressionist painting, but we also love dance, which is also visual, likewise fashion, and so on. And I think the music tends to reflect this. Even the way we make rhythms in French, because of the *soffège* system – this kind of abstract way to name the notes makes us tend to think of rhythm too as a kind of visual entity. There's much less pulse in French music, and much more individualistic way of phrasing a line – as you would paint.'

And at what point did Albert Roussel become a significant force in Denève's life? 'Pretty early, actually. Roussel was a very big figure in Tourcoing, where I too was born and grew up, and some of the very first pieces I worked on as a young trainee conductor were by him. And I took to his music at once. To this day, I totally identify with it, and with its particular character. Part of this is geographical. Tourcoing is very near the Flemish border, the borderline between Flanders and Wallonie. Look northwards and you find a more Protestant world, of great seriousness, often very organised, a little bit sentimental, a rather understated style of humour, sometimes a bit austere, a bit mathematical. Look southwards and you have the Latin, Gallic, more southern style of France: more colourful, more full-blooded and direct, more outspoken, quick and enlivened by fantasy – you know, these kind of more Latin qualities. Tourcoing combines them both. As does Roussel.'

Roussel's earliest interest was not in music but mathematics. A fact, Denève believes, clearly reflected in his music. 'Oh yes. He loved to make mathematical exercises, and I'm sure if he were living now he'd be the best Sudoku player! And the music – particularly, perhaps, in the case of the symphonies – has a very precise organisation. As in so many respects it's perhaps more in the harmonic dimension than any other that you can see how the music is laid out, how it's composed, in a very logical way. The beauty of mathematics is in its reduction of the world's forces in a very elegant, very simple way. It's almost incredible that Einstein could sum up the whole world in the simple equation  $e=mc^2$ . There's something so amazingly *beautiful* that the forces of the world can be reduced into something so small, so simple. In the same way, Roussel has a way of reducing very complicated harmonies into a very elemental force without any trace of self-indulgence. In this, I would say he is the absolute opposite of Mahler. Roussel's music is not self-indulgent at all. You know there is never more than what is needed to express very precise musical aspect.'

Roussel, once an officer in the French Navy, was much travelled in the East, both Near and Far. Did his interest in, and experience of, its several great cultures (Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist) have a lasting influence on his music? And if so, where and how? 'Well once again I'd start with the harmonic aspect. I'm tremendously impressed by his harmonic world. And I doubt that he'd ever have had this freedom and imagination if it weren't for his travels. It's very clear that he wasn't overly influenced by academic studies, which would almost certainly have made him more straightforward, more conventional, in accord with the style of his time. He had a very independent mind. And for me, his harmonies are stranger and more idiomatic even than Ravel's (and God knows how much I love Ravel!). In this respect he reminds me a bit of Berlioz and Mussorgsky. His harmonic world was tremendously individual, hardly related to traditional approaches. He really discovered for himself what harmony is. What *music* is. And I love that.'

And how does he rate as an orchestrator? 'Again, absolutely first class. I still don't see why we talk so regularly about "Debussy and Ravel", not "Debussy, Ravel and Roussel". He was greatly revered by his colleagues, all of whom admired his artistry in this regard. As with his harmonies, I find his vision of the orchestra absolutely fascinating, both in the early impressionistic style and, later, in the more neoclassical works. It's utterly masterful – very well-balanced; you can really hear everything. And for a conductor it's really fantastic: you don't have to *help* the music too much; you can just interpret and do pretty much what you want with it.'

But why is such a masterly composer so relatively underrated? What makes him elusive? 'Well I keep coming back to it, but it could have something, I suppose, to do with those surprising, unconventional harmonies. And his way of writing melodies, too, is a little less obvious than Debussy or Ravel. There's sometimes something a little eccentric in his ways of *shaping* melodies which maybe makes him less easily accessible than most, which is a shame. And I think, too, that he was just a little behind the times. Somehow he started his career a bit late, putting him out of sync with Debussy and Ravel. If he'd written exactly as he did but 10 years earlier, he would almost certainly have been more successful with the media, if I can put it that way. Not that he was ignored. He was actually very successful in his lifetime and his importance was widely acknowledged – *not* just in the realm of orchestration. After the Second World War, however, people rather tended to forget him. Today, though, I'm very happy to say, there's a real revival of interest in his music – something which I hope I've played a modest but helpful part in. When I first began my career in the states ten years or so ago Roussel's *Bacchus et Ariane* was virtually unknown, and unplayed. Today it's appearing quite often. Which is nice.'

Denève's role in the Roussel revival has been equally conspicuous in the concert hall and on record. His comprehensive survey of the orchestral music on Naxos has earned the highest critical praise from the outset. Yet, as with many musicians, the transition from the more public medium to the sequestered objectivity of the recording studio has not always been a comfortable one. 'It's fantastically interesting. It reveals so much, expands one's perspectives, affords new insights and so on. It's a continuous educational experience. But as you suggest, it can be disconcerting. I'm mainly a concert conductor. I'm very excited by the audience and by the stimulus of live performance. In public I take a lot of risks in my conducting. I feel quite free. So I was actually very nervous at first about how this could be recaptured in a recording. I had to educate myself to see how I could combine the kind of spontaneity and excitement that I love so much with the clinical accuracy required by recording. This was revelatory. It's also helped me a lot to understand the perception of tempos. When you do a piece many times you can sometimes feel (because your brain is so used to the piece and your body gets used to certain kinds of reflexes) a kind of disconnection from the experience of the listener. I recently recorded a piece I've conducted many times in concert and when I went to listen back I was quite horrified. I thought it was much too slow, which somehow I hadn't noticed when I was conducting. So I changed tack right away, went back and conducted it 20 or 30% faster! Because I'd conducted the piece many times before and knew just what I wanted to do – anticipating just what was supposed to happen where, and concentrating on its preparation – I was inadvertently slowing down without realising it. So yes, recording is a very healthy and useful way to improve your interpretation, and I'm always glad to have this opportunity.'

A conductor who continually relishes the opportunity to learn – from his experiences, from the 'miraculous' expertise, wisdom and musicianship of the players with whom he works, from the composers whose music he interprets, whatever their era ... Of such artists there can never be too many.

*Jeremy Siepmann is an internationally acclaimed writer, musician, teacher, broadcaster and editor.*

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'As always, Denève is wonderfully strong in this music ... the RSNO come into their own in the Suite, where their playing is virtuosic in the extreme.' – *The Guardian*

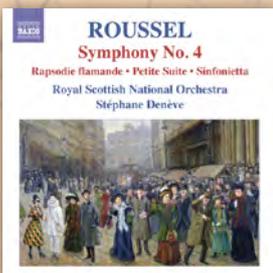


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'Denève and the RSNO have already proven themselves to be fine advocates of Roussel's music, and this is no exception, with plenty of colour and panache.' – *BBC Music Magazine*

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'The fourth instalment of Stéphane Denève's Roussel cycle is, if anything, even better than its predecessors. The music's idiom, at once tight reined and richly inventive, brims with opportunities for the woodwind and brass section principals which the RSNO's classy line-up takes superbly.' – *Classic FM*

'Stéphane Denève's Roussel cycle for Naxos easily has been the finest ever recorded, and this concluding disc fully lives up to expectations ... Great sound, great music, great performances—a great series.' – *ClassicsToday.com*



### About **Royal Scottish National Orchestra**

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra is one of Europe's leading symphony orchestras. Formed in 1891 as the Scottish Orchestra, the company became the Scottish National Orchestra in 1950, and was awarded Royal Patronage in 1991. Throughout its proud history, the orchestra has played an important part in Scotland's musical life, including performing at the opening ceremony of the Scottish Parliament building in 2004. Many renowned conductors have contributed to its success, including Walter Susskind, Sir Alexander Gibson, Bryden Thomson, Conductor Laureate Neeme Järvi, Conductor Emeritus Walter Weller and Conductor Emeritus Alexander Lazarev. Stéphane Denève, who became Music Director in September 2005, concludes his tenure at the end of the 2011-12 Season. This partnership has enjoyed great acclaim, at home and abroad, and has brought one of the most successful periods in the organisation's recent history. British-Canadian conductor Peter Oundjian will take over as RSNO Music Director in September 2012. The orchestra has a worldwide reputation for the quality of its recordings and has been nominated for eight GRAMMY® awards in the last eight years. Over 200 releases are available, including the complete symphonies of Sibelius (Gibson), Prokofiev (Järvi), Nielsen and Martinů (Thomson). The RSNO is one of Scotland's National Performing Companies, supported by the Scottish Government. For more information, please see [www.rsno.org.uk](http://www.rsno.org.uk).