Les Ballets Russes Vol. 2 (2008)

Ravel – Daphnis et Chloé - Symphonie choréographique for orchestra with choir *1 Part I: Introduction et danse religieuse 00:08:13 2 Part I: Danse generale 00:02:57 3 Part I: Danse grotesque de Dorcon 00:02:32 4 Part I: Danse legere et gracieuse de Daphnis 00:03:16 5 Part I: Danse de Lycenion 00:04:45 6 Part I: Danse lente et mysterieuse des nymphes 00:05:12 7 Part II: Introduction 00:03:40 8 Part II: Danse guerriere 00:04:48 9 Part II: Danse suppliante de Chloe 00:06:03 10 Part III: Lever du jour 00:06:03 11 Part III: Pantomime 00:06:47 12 Part III: Danse generale 00:04:29*
Poulenc - Les Biches - Suite for orchestra
13 I. Rondeau 00:03:28 14 II. Adagietto 00:03:45 15 III. Rag-Mazurka 00:06:10 16 IV. Andantino 00:02:37 17 V. Final 00:03:25
EuropaChorAkademie - Choir/Chorus (1 – 12) SWR Baden-Baden and Freiburg Symphony Orchestra Michael Gielen - Conductor (1 - 12) Marcello Viotti - Conductor (13 – 17)

When selecting an orchestra to record works associated with Les Ballets Russes, SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg might not be one's first choice. What, after all, would a German radio orchestra best known for its recordings of post-modernist masterpieces by the likes of Boulez and Stockhausen do with Ravel's Daphnis et Chloé and Poulenc's Les Biches? As this 2008 Hänssler disc shows, they do just fine. Led by seasoned German conductor Michael Gielen in the Ravel, the orchestra plays with a smoothly polished, brightly colored tone that perfectly suits the score. Though their colors are neither as individually piquant nor as collectively blended as a French orchestra's might be, the German musicians play with the kind of tight ensemble and hair-raising virtuosity that most French orchestras can't match. Led by masterful Swiss conductor Marcello Viotti in the Poulenc, they turn in smart, stylish, and snappy performances with less irony but more sincerity than a typical French performance -- check out their absolutely straight-faced Rag-Mazurka. Recorded in cooperation with the Südwest Radio, Hänssler's digital sound is big, crisp, and clear. ---James Leonard, Rovi

Serge Diaghilev had the almost unique gift of discovering the doyens of early-20th-century composers before the rest of the world, and although he was primarily concerned with his Ballets Russes, he was responsible for much great music coming into being which otherwise may not have been composed at all. The first volume in this series offered his greatest of all promotional discoveries, Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring (and also Debussy's Jeux). Vol 2 now offers Ravel's radiantly magical Daphnis et Chloé complete, in a glowing, ecstatic choral performance, with a glorious "Daybreak" and a thrilling closing "Danse générale". Not long before he died Ravel went to a performance of Daphnis and he came out with tears in his eyes. "It really is beautiful," he said. And so it is here, one of the most miraculously lovely, transluscent and sensuous 20th century scores.

Its coupling is Poulenc's witty Les Biches ("girls of independent spirit and virtue"), and its catchily audacious opening trumpet theme and luscious Adagietto are part of a suite full of piquantly affecting nostalgia and sparkle. Some years ago the Royal Ballet mounted an unforgettable triptych of Diaghilev ballets at Covent Garden, including the original sets, costumes and (Nijinskaya's) choreography for Les Biches, and we discovered that this centres on amorous diversions between a group of bathing belles and males, and notably some ridiculous antics on and around a sofa. The Hostess in the Rag Mazurka is somehow more of a madame than she at first seems, hinting at eroticism as only the French can titillate. How surprisingly well Poulenc's frivolous music fitted the ridiculous action, yet how delectably it stands up away from the ballet, especially when played with such spirited insouciance and plangent lyricism as here. The recording of both ballets is justly colourful, full-bodied and vivid, and Vol 2 makes a splendid successor to Vol 1. ---Ivan March, gramophone.co.uk

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