

Maurice Ravel

COMPLETE WORKS FOR PIANO SOLO



Håkon Austbo

MAURICE RAVEL

(1875-1937)

HÅKON AUSTBØ

PIANO

CD 1

Gaspard de la Nuit (1908) 22:33

1 I Ondine 07:01

2 II Le Gibet 05:54

3 III Scarbo 09:38

Miroirs (1905) 30:06

4 I Noctuelles 05:14

5 II Oiseaux tristes 03:43

6 III Une barque sur l'océan 07:51

7 IV Alborada del gracioso 06:44

8 V La vallée des cloches 06:34

Sonatine (1903-05) 12:43

9 I Modéré 04:28

10 II Mouvement de Menuet 03:41

11 III Animé 04:34

CD 2

- 1 **Sérénade grotesque (1893)** 04:09
- 2 **Menuet antique (1895)** 06:46
- 3 **Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899)** 06:08
- 4 **Jeux d'eau (1901)** 05:51
- 5 **Menuet en ut dièse mineur (1904)** 01:05
- 6 **Menuet sur le nom de Haydn (1909)** 01:53
- Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911)** 15:00
 - Adélaïde*
 - 7 I. Modéré - très franc 01:27
 - 8 II. Assez lent 02:10
 - 9 III. Modéré 01:27
 - 10 IV. Assez animé 01:16
 - 11 V. Presque lent 01:27
 - 12 VI. Vif 00:44
 - 13 VII. Moins vif 02:54
 - 14 VIII. Épilogue. Lent 03:35
- A la manière de... (1913)** 03:54
 - 15 Borodine 01:58
 - 16 Chabrier 01:56
- 17 **Prélude (1913)** 01:17
- Le Tombeau de Couperin (1914-17)** 26:09
 - 18 I. Prélude 03:16
 - 19 II. Fugue 03:29
 - 20 III. Forlane 06:03
 - 21 IV. Rigaudon 03:32
 - 22 V. Menuet 05:19
 - 23 VI. Toccata 04:30

Maurice Ravel: The Complete Works for Piano Solo

— BY GEORGE HALL —

What sort of pianist was Maurice Ravel? Certainly good enough to be a piano student at the Paris Conservatoire, where in 1891, at the age of 16, he won a competition whose other entrants included Alfred Cortot. Later on he dropped the piano and ceased to practise; but he was still capable of playing *Jeux d'eau* – published in 1902, and a highly demanding piece technically – to the other members of his Bohemian artistic collective Les Apaches and to those present at his teacher Gabriel Fauré's composition class (the piece was dedicated to Fauré).

Ravel's first (extant) piano piece was the *Sérénade grotesque* (the manuscript, in fact, is simply headed *Sérénade*), written around 1893 when he was 17, though it remained unpublished until 1975. It was in 1893 that Ravel had become personally acquainted with both Erik Satie and Emmanuel Chabrier, and as he himself acknowledged he was particularly influenced – as in this instance – by the latter, though its Spanish-guitar-like inflections are already typical of Ravel.

In more formal educational terms Ravel enjoyed a distinctly chequered

relationship with the Paris Conservatoire, leaving the institution for the first time in July 1895 – though the following year he returned to make a new start as a composition student of Fauré's. The charming *Menuet antique* was completed by the end of 1895 and both performed (by the dedicatee and fellow Apache, Spanish virtuoso pianist Ricardo Viñes) and published in 1898; it shares a sense of neo-Baroque archaism with the better known, gently sombre *Pavane pour une Infante défunte* (1899).

Ravel's first notably original work for piano was *Jeux d'eau*, completed in November 1901 when he was 26. Over the next few years rivalry between the supporters of Debussy and Ravel (rather than between the composers themselves) rose steadily to the point where it became impossible for the two figures to remain entirely aloof.

In 1906 Ravel wrote to the critic Pierre Lalo pointing out that various features of his work could claim priority over Debussy in the 'special manner of writing for the piano'. '*Jeux d'eau*', he insisted, 'stands at the beginning of all the pianistic innovations that have been noted in my work. Inspired by the sound of water and the musical sounds emanating from fountains, waterfalls and brooks...'

The quotation from the poet Henri de Régnier's *Fête d'eau* (1902) that heads

the score reads: 'Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui chatouille...', which might be translated as 'River god laughing at the water that tickles him': in his poem Régnier was referring specifically to the fountains at Versailles, and in particular to the Latona Basin. The crystalline liquid textures of *Jeux d'eau* were first heard in public as played by Viñes at the Salle Pleyel on April 5 1902.

Ravel's next major piano work, the semi-neo-classical Sonatine (1903-5), harmonised with entrancing delicacy, was purely abstract. Its first movement was written at the suggestion of the musicologist Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi as an entry for a competition organised by the Anglo-French magazine *Weekly Critical Review*, which managed to go bankrupt before a winner could be announced. The completed three-movement piece was first performed by Paule de Lestang, partner and future wife of the critic Léon Vallas, in Lyon in 1906 and dedicated to Ravel's close friends Ida and Cipa Godebski, for whose children Mimi and Jean the suite for piano duet *Ma mère l'oye* was originally intended.

As the composer himself noted, *Miroirs* (1904-5) marked 'a considerable change in my harmonic evolution, one that disconcerted even those musicians who had been most familiar with my compositional style up to then.' Viñes played the set in public at a concert of

the Société nationale de musique on 6 January 1906. The individual movements were dedicated to fellow members of Les Apaches – a group that had taken its name from a slang term for a particularly rough and borderline criminal type from the meaner streets of Paris.

The lightly fluttering first movement, *Noctuelles* (Moths) was dedicated to the poet Léon-Paul Fargue, from one of whose poems comes the line, ‘In the sheds the night moths take off in awkward flight and circle around other beams’.

The mildly disorienting *Oiseaux tristes* was dedicated to Viñes. Its unusual title refers to ‘Birds lost in the torpor of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer’ (Ravel’s own description): according to the writer and critic Emile Vuillermoz the forest full of sad birds was specifically Fontainebleau.

Ravel inscribed the fluid and spacious *Une barque sur l’océan* to the painter Paul Sordes: in autumn 1906 he arranged the piece for orchestra, then withdrew the arrangement, which remained unpublished until 1950. Its title is self-explanatory.

One of Ravel’s most unusual pieces is *Alborada del gracioso* – literally the dawn-song of a ‘gracioso’ – specifically a Spanish court jester – here parodying the morning song of a knight. The result is

full of allusions to Spanish music of various kinds – an ongoing preoccupation for Ravel, whose mother was Basque and who himself hailed from near to the Spanish border.

The *gracioso* himself – a regular character in Spanish courtly drama – is a kind of licensed clown allowed with impunity to poke fun at his betters and traditional moral codes. Ravel’s American biographer Benjamin Ivry has noted that some of the composer’s friends believed that he was here attempting a kind of musical self-portrait. The *Alborada* was dedicated to Calvocoressi and arranged for orchestra in 1918.

Ravel’s pupil Maurice Delage received the dedication of the broadly phrased *La vallée des cloches*. According to the pianist Robert Casadesus – who studied *Miroirs* with the composer – it had its origins in the sound of the bells of Paris at midday, its final chords emulating the gigantic example known as the Savoyarde in the Basilica Sacré Coeur.

Subtitled ‘Three Poems for Piano after Aloysius Bertrand’, *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908) represents another key work in Ravel’s output. He told Delage that he wanted to write something of transcendent virtuosity – even more demanding than Balakirev’s notoriously challenging *Islamey*: and in that he clearly succeeded.

Much influenced by E. T. A. Hoffmann, but now little known beyond specialists in 19th-century French literature, Bertrand (1807-41) was an archetypal Romantic poet whose collection of 53 prose poems entitled *Histoires vermoulues et poudreuses du Moyen Age* and subtitled *Fantasies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot* was published posthumously in 1842: greatly admired by such free spirits as Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the poems were introduced to Ravel by Viñes in 1896.

The fictional character Gaspard of the Night is a mysterious old tramp who has supposedly given Bertrand a manuscript containing the poems themselves: the latter, who is never able to find him again, identifies Gaspard as the devil.

In his published score Ravel included Bertrand's poetic texts by way of explaining the musical contents. Her palace lying at the bottom of a lake, *Ondine* is a water-sprite who approaches the writer's stained-glass windows and begs him to marry her, thrusting towards him a ring; when he refuses she weeps and then laughs before finally disappearing in a wash of white water that flows down the blue-stained glass – all conveyed in infinitesimally detailed piano textures.

In *The Gibbet*, the poet senses the tiniest noises emanating from some mysterious source in the distance – the sound of a fly

blowing its horn, perhaps, or a beetle, or even a spider? None of these, but instead the insistent and literally monotonous tolling of a bell on a city's walls near the horizon where a hanged man's corpse appears, reddened by the setting sun. Depicted by Ravel with thrilling hyper-precision, *Scarbo* is a sinister dwarf who manifests himself repeatedly and in various guises to the poet during nocturnal hours, a creature of weird, ungainly movements and sinister sounds who eventually fades away with the coming of the light. It was once again Viñes who premiered *Gaspard*, at the Salle Erard on January 9 1909.

That same year, to mark the centenary of the death of Joseph Haydn, the magazine of the Société internationale de musique commissioned various composers to contribute short memorial pieces based on the composer's name, with musical letters standing in for the letters HAYDN. The notes to be used were BADDG, which in Ravel's *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn* are cleverly threaded through the piece in this order, as well as backwards and upside down: other composers who produced pieces for the occasion included Debussy, Hahn, Dukas, D'Indy and Widor.

It was Schubert's publishers who utilised the titles *Valses nobles* (published 1825) and *Valses sentimentales* (published 1827) for two of his sets of dances for solo piano. Ravel's sequence of eight

Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911) is a conscious act of homage. At the request of the dancer Natacha Trouhanowa Ravel orchestrated the work in 1912 to become the score to the ballet *Adélaïde, ou le langage des fleurs*; his own scenario describes a coquette of around the year 1820 attending a ball, where a young lover and an old man pay her court.

As the pianist Marguerite Long wrote in her invaluable volume *At the Piano with Ravel* (1971), the piece is ‘a *fête galante*, with an air of indifference, lest we should perceive, with [the poet Tristan] Klingsor, “the ironic and tender heart that beats under the velvet jacket of Maurice Ravel”’.

Ravel himself inscribed the score with the words (once more from Henri de Régnier) : ‘... le plaisir délicieux et toujours nouveau d’une occupation inutile’: ‘... the delicious and always novel pleasure of a useless occupation’. The sequence of waltzes themselves cover a wide range of emotion in their combination of evanescent fantasy and suggestiveness, even hinting at one point at the much later and bigger *La Valse* (1919-20), and ending with an Epilogue that reviews all that has gone before.

The Valses were launched in a highly unusual manner. The Société musicale indépendante had decided to give a concert on May 9 1911 without naming the composers involved. Ravel’s new work was duly performed by Louis Aubert, and

members of the audience were invited to guess its creator. Many critics and other professionals in the audience were proved wrong: Kodály and Satie were amongst the names suggested.

In 1912 the Italian Alfred Casella published a successful volume of six pastiches, subsequently asking his friend Ravel to contribute to a second volume. The French composer responded with *A la manière de Borodine* and *A la manière de Chabrier*, both expert tributes to their respective subject’s styles and the latter simultaneously a parody of Siébel’s aria from Gounod’s *Faust* – as Chabrier might have rewritten it. Ravel’s small but delicious *Prélude* was written that same year (1913) for a sight-reading prize for lady (!) pianists at the Paris Conservatoire; it was won by Jeanne Leleu and the piece was dedicated to her.

Ravel’s final work for solo piano was the six-movement suite *Le tombeau de Couperin*, begun in 1914 but temporarily put aside in March 1915 when Ravel became a truck and ambulance driver for a French artillery regiment, thereafter spending much of the war tending the wounded just behind the lines. The work was eventually completed by 1917.

In terms of its title as well as its musical style and content, *Le tombeau* initially appears to have nothing whatsoever to do with the war, consisting as it does of a homage to a French composer of a

previous century – François Couperin, alias Couperin Le Grand (1668-1733) – in its use of Baroque dance forms; but the choice of a French composer and the French genre of the *tombeau* themselves clearly possessed significance for Ravel, and in fact each of the six movements was dedicated to the memories of lost compatriots.

The suite – which shows the composer at his most brilliantly entertaining – was premiered at the Société musicale indépendante on April 11 1919 by Marguerite Long, whose husband – Captain Joseph de Marliave – was one of the individuals therein immortalised. Describing it, she later wrote that in it ‘the grace of movement and the love of life possessed by these young men reign supreme.’

That same year Ravel orchestrated *Le tombeau*, omitting the Fugue and Toccata. Later on he turned the remaining four movements into a ballet, of which he conducted the 100th performance in 1923.

Interpreting Ravel

———— HÅKON AUSTBØ ————

Ravel is supposed to have said that his music needs not be interpreted - the musician should just do what is marked in the score. Although he marked his scores in extreme detail, I consider it an injustice to any composer not to try to go deeper than the surface of the notes.

The more one penetrates into the complex and mysterious universe of Ravel as revealed to us through his music, the more one is left with riddles never to be solved. I must confess, having played his music all my life, that there are aspects about him still puzzling me.

: Stravinsky's description of Ravel as "the
: Swiss clockmaker" doesn't really give a
: satisfactory answer to any of this
: (Stravinsky was more of a clockmaker
: himself). This statement has been widely
: misunderstood, as if Ravel's music were
: mechanical and devoid of emotions.
: True, in several of his works there is a
: predilection for *ostinato* rhythms that
: should suffer no inflexion whatsoever.
: The most famous example is undoubtedly
: *Boléro*, but there are also instances on
: this album, such as the Toccata from
: *Tombeau de Couperin*, or *Le Gibet* and
: parts of *Scarbo* from *Gaspard de la Nuit*.

There is more than mechanical calculation involved here. It is too simplistic to reduce this kind of manic obstination to mere libidinal drive, of whatever sexual disposition (although Ravel did say *Boléro* was sexual). There is an element of ritual in his music, a kind of dehumanisation into other realities, as it were.

In such motoric pieces, Ravel's metronome markings are often on the high side, and the challenge here is to marry the sense of relentless momentum to one of natural breathing. In slow pieces, though, some markings are extremely slow, as in *Le Gibet*, that needs absolute control of tempo to get across, *sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin*. The *sans ralentir* is often used by Ravel, more as a refusal to indulge in mannered, late Romantic clichés. In the second movement of the *Sonatine*, for instance, the *a Tempo* four bars before the recapitulation, followed by *sans ralentir*, is typical of this refusal. On the other hand, at the end of the same movement, there is an exaggerated slowing down to *Très lent*, which is equally unconventional.

The opposite of *tempo ostinato* is *tempo rubato*, also abundant in Ravel's works. It's indeed hard to imagine *Valses nobles et sentimentales* played without the sense of Viennese *schwung*. Vlado Perlemuter, who worked with Ravel, once confided in me that he found *Valses*

nobles his most demanding work, precisely because of this. The *joie de vivre* expressed through these rhythms, that Ravel "valued so much more than Franckist puritanism", also has its darker counterpart. This emerges more strongly in its larger pendant *La Valse* (initially called *Wien*). The harmony here is Ravel at his subtlest, which adds to the challenge.

Ravel probably did conceal some of his darkest sides behind a brilliant technical mastery. "My goal is technical perfection", he stated, well aware that this would never be achieved. Still, many of his pieces put the dark corners of his world on display, as in the haunting *Scarbo*, or behind a mask as the tragic *gracioso* in *Alborada*. About the latter, I wrote myself in a sleeve note to my first recording of *Miroirs* back in 1976, that it probably is a self-portrait. Others have since joined me in this view. It is one of the few pieces where Ravel unveils himself to us, and the cataclysmic ending is not a nice sight: the buffoon's world falls to pieces. In a way, we are all this buffoon: who hasn't experienced this existential fear? His indications are often extreme, like *avec une expression intense*, in the second *Valse*. In the early *Sérénade grotesque* (the title is already extreme) he indicates *très rude*, later *très sentimental*. Could this be an ironical pose?

Ravel contradicts himself on these issues: on the one side, he claims to be "artificial by nature" and condemns sincerity, on the other hand he says "there is the music of instinct and feeling, which is mine (..), and then there is the music of the intellect". Many of his contemporaries must indeed have been misled by his own superior intellect and concluded that it proved a lack of emotions. In my view, there is no contradiction here: intellect, on the contrary, enhances emotion in art.

Some contemporaries, like his severest critic Pierre Lalo, went as far as saying, "M. Ravel is all insensitivity, borrowing without hesitation not only technique but the sensitivity of other people". Again, there is some truth in the fact that he loved pastiche, like the two *A la manière de...*-pieces. But they are still unmistakably Ravel, certainly the Borodin one. Chabrier had been too much of a model not to leave an imprint on that imitation, still Ravel did regret that *Pavane pour une infante défunte* was too influenced by Chabrier. As was the *Menuet Antique*, in my opinion: Chabrier's *Menuet pompeux* was clearly a model here.

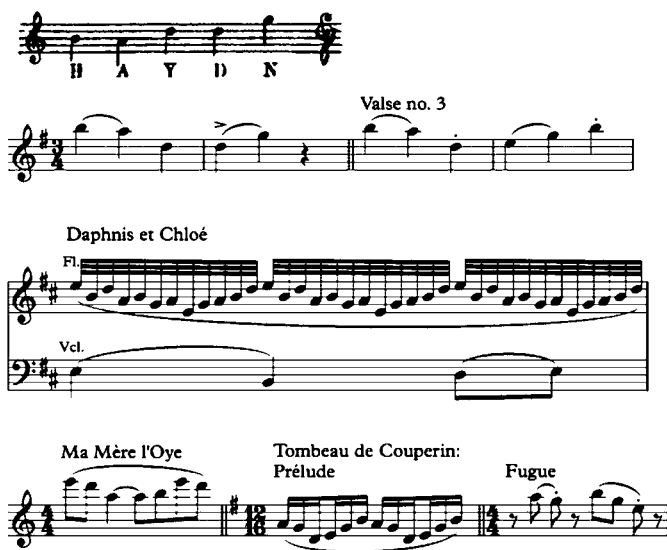
If the *Sonatine* is a tribute to Mozart, the *Tombeau de Couperin* is a homage to all 18th century composers, in particular French harpsichord music. At the same time, though, due to the simultaneous homage to his friends deceased in WW1,

there is an emotional duality that cannot be neglected. In accordance, the use of pedal should be balanced in order to preserve both the expression and the somewhat appropriated harpsichord sound. The Baroque style is further underlined by means of ornaments that should be played explicitly on the beat.

The minuet was probably Ravel's favourite Baroque dance, and the one in *Tombeau* is particularly moving, as is the tender little *Menuet en ut dièse mineur* that I decided to include in this album. It was apparently scribbled down on one of his student's exercise books, but he must have had it in his head, perhaps as a possible second movement of the *Sonatine*, on which he worked at the time? Anyway, it couldn't match the *Mouv't de Menuet* that he ended up with, which unifies with the other movements in terms of thematic material, combining the cyclic theme from the first movement in a canon by augmentation.

Ravel was fond of playing around with material like this, and he certainly did it with the motif derived from Haydn's name in the minuet to his memory, putting it backwards marked as NDYAH, or upside down (see the figure below), which yields the inverted cancrizan, marked in the score with

NDYAH



The Haydn motif must in fact have turned around in Ravel's head for a couple of years. In all the works that follow, we find it back in some form or other, often with an E added, as in the third *Valse noble*. Recently, a theory has been launched that there is a secret message in these motifs to a lady called Misia Sert, alias Maria Godebska. If you translate the name Misia with French notenames, you may get Mi-Si-La (E-B-A). Combined with the Haydn motif this gives pentatonic material that Ravel had been using for a long time, but it is striking how he returns to the same pitches again and again, and always with the combination fourth and second, an archetypical motif throughout much of his music. Messiaen calls it "that formula beloved of Ravel". In any case, the message might as well be for Haydn; some will claim that Ravel wouldn't

be too interested in secret messages to ladies. I think the most probable reason for all this is that the Haydn motif, combined or not with Mi-si-la, fitted into the kind of material Ravel liked to use, and beyond doubt pentatonic material from this point on became more important in his music, at the cost of chromatic material.

Ravel's piano writing is as subtle and colourful as his orchestra writing. He used to say that the pedal was the "orchestrator" of the piano; indeed his use of resonance evoking bells or water is unthinkable without ample use of pedal. Good examples are *La Vallée des cloches* or *Une Barque sur l'Océan*. Ondine also evokes water with its ingenious rhythmic pattern of the right hand. The gentle shift in accentuation of this pattern in bars 5-8 (and later in bar 24) also subtly shifts the lighting of the harmony as it is about to modulate. According to some sources, Ravel claimed these pattern changes were mistakes, but this is hard to believe given Ravel's meticulous attention to detail in his scores, and since they work so wonderfully. To my surprise, some recent editions adopt this hardly documented variant, without the changes, as their main text.

Marguerite Long quoted Ravel as having said: "One doesn't have to open up one's chest to prove one has a heart". As an interpreter, finding the heart then becomes the main issue.



Photo: Arne Akselberg

Håkon Austbø has been active as a pianist for over 50 years. His first performance with an orchestra in Bergen in 1963, and his first recital in Oslo in 1964, earned him much acclaim at an early age.

In 1974 the Daily Telegraph, London, characterized Håkon Austbø as the "possessor of towering talent worthy of international recognition". Since then

critics from the Carnegie Hall, New York, to the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, have given him rave reviews. Due to his unusual versatility and the originality of his repertoire, Håkon Austbø has held a coveted position in the world of music.

He is particularly renowned for his work on Messiaen's music. His personal contact with the composer made him one of the

bearers of an authentic tradition, confirmed by the first prize in the Messiaen competition at Royan in 1971, and by several other prizes for his Messiaen performances, such as the Edison prize, Amsterdam 1998.

Another focus of Austbø's work has been the music of Skryabin. By coincidence, both these composers have combined colours and sounds, and Austbø has made this an important part of his work and studies. He realised the first authentic performance of the colour part of Skryabin's *Prométhée* in the Netherlands in the 90s, and, more recently, visualisations of the colours in several of Messiaen's works.

The latter was the subject of a research project at the Norwegian Academy of Music, Oslo, in 2013, the results of which have been published recently. Austbø has later been engaged in another project, The reflective musician, aiming at the unveiling of forces which lead to genuine and personal interpretations of classical and contemporary works. This implies looking with fresh eyes at well-known repertoire, free from the ballast of tradition. Austbø has always cherished this attitude and challenged the conformity of the music business, crossing borders well before this became mainstream. He has worked with poets, actors, choreographers, artists and jazz musicians and included unusual repertoire in his creative programming.

Håkon Austbø spent most of his life outside his native Norway. Studies brought him to Paris, New York and Munich, before he settled in the Netherlands in 1974. In 2005 Austbø returned to Oslo when he is currently residing. Here he continues to tour the world with concerts and master classes, while he pursues his recording activities, resulting so far in about 45 CD's as well as several LP's, with repertoire ranging from Schumann to Rolf Wallin.

Beside the Messiaen prize, Håkon Austbø was the first non-French national to win the "Concours National de la Guilde Française des Artistes Solistes" in Paris (1970). He was prize winner of the international Munich competition (in piano duo with Marina Horak, 1974), of the Ravel Competition in Paris (1975), and, as a member of Trio du Nord, of the UNESCO International Rostrum, Bratislava (1975). He received the prize of the Norwegian music critics in 1989 and was chosen "Performer of the Year" in Norway in 1992. In 2003 he received the prestigious Grieg prize, and was nominated for the prize of the Nordic Council in 2013. He bears the French title of "Chevalier de la Légion des Arts et des Lettres".

COMPLETE RAVEL PIANO MUSIC

1-3 GASPARD DE LA NUIT 22:33

4-8 MIROIRS 30:06

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1 SÉRÉNADE GROTESQUE 04:09

2 MENUET ANTIQUE 06:46

3 PAVANE POUR UNE INFANTE DÉFUNTE 06:08

4 JEUX D'EAU 05:51

5 MENUET EN UT DIÈSE MINEUR 01:05

6 MENUET SUR LE NOM DE HAYDN 01:53

7-14 VALSES NOBLES ET SENTIMENTALES 15:00

15-16 A LA MANIÈRE DE... 03:54

17 PRÉLUDE 01:17

18-23 LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN 26:09

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