CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dancing on the Edge
(1912)

The 1912 social season in Paris set a new standard for reckless extravagance, with Paul Poiret leading the pack. The central motif for his glittering June ball, held in the forest of Versailles, was *Les Festes de Bacchus*, a resurrected Lully ballet from the court of the Sun King. In tribute to this theme, his three hundred guests (costumed as nymphs and gods) consumed several hundred gallons of champagne while watching dancers from the Paris Opera, accompanied by forty musicians, perform Lully’s opulent celebration of Dionysus. After partaking of a “grandiose buffet” beneath “tunnelèd trellises,” the guests then wandered off into the decorated forest until the first rays of dawn, when lobster, melon, foie gras, and ices were served.

Poiret later protested that “the scene was so beautiful and the spirit of the fête so elevated that no scandal, no unpleasantness occurred,” but the entire affair was an outsized tribute to decadence, complete with rumors of orgies (Poiret himself described transporting back to Paris “the half-unclothed nymphs and their slightly rumpled gods” after the party was over). By now, opium and cocaine circulated openly at the most exclusive Paris parties, and sexual scandal had become an essential element of life in the fast lane. Life for this brilliant set had become intensely theatrical, and it was no surprise that the worlds of theater and society overlapped ever more closely.

It was in this overheated environment that Diaghilev presented a ballet of *Après-midi d’un faune* set to Debussy’s music. The choreographer was Diaghilev’s protégé, the astonishing Nijinsky, who danced the role of the Faun—easily the most scandalous of the season. His costume, complete with
a bunch of grapes over the genitals, was by itself sufficiently suggestive; but it was the ballet's ending, with the Faun having graphically depicted sex with the veil of one of the departing Nymphs, that set off an uproar. The audience was stunned, and critical reaction soon split into two diametrically opposed camps. Among the detractors was Debussy, who had only reluctantly given permission to use his music, and who detested the choreography, criticizing the "atrocious dissonance" between it and the music.1

Debussy did not, however, get involved in the subsequent uproar, which featured Gaetan Calmette, editor-in-chief of Le Figaro, and Auguste Rodin, whom Diaghilev had lined up in advance to defend the ballet if needed. Calmette (who had angrily substituted his own review for that of his critic) wrote, "No decent public could ever accept such animal realism... as those vile movements of erotic bestiality." Rodin responded, citing his admiration for Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, and "the last in this line, Nijinsky, [who] has the added advantage of physical perfection and... also the extraordinary capacity to give expression to a wide range of feelings." Continuing in his praise, Rodin enthused that "no role has shown Nijinsky in such an extraordinary light as his last creation, L'Après-midi d'un faune." In particular, Rodin singled out for praise the ballet's most controversial part: "One can imagine nothing more arresting," he wrote, "than his impulsive gesture at the conclusion of the ballet when he again stretches himself out... on the stolen veil which he now embraces and greaps with voluptuous fervor."2

"Voluptuous fervor" was exactly what Calmette found objectionable, and he immediately turned on Rodin, lambasting the aging sculptor for exhibiting a series of deeply objectionable drawings in the former chapel and rooms of the ruins of Sacré-Coeur. Calmette then expressed his amazement that the French state and the French taxpayers were currently subsidizing "our richest sculptor" by allowing him to stay in the Hôtel Biron. Suddenly the fracas had turned into something nasty. At a time when Rodin was doing everything in his power to assure his lifetime tenure at the Hôtel Biron, his letter in defense of Nijinsky's choreography threatened to undermine his cause.

As it turned out, Rodin had not even written the letter to which he signed his name. He really had slight idea of what he was talking about, having had little previous exposure to ballet—although in recent years he had expressed some interest in dance. Yet he had the necessary credentials for Diaghilev's purposes, as a surrealist who had long shown a predilection for eroticism in art. Unfortunately, Rodin also was aging, and the journalist (Roger Marx of Le Matin) sent to collect supportive statements from him quickly discovered that he had slim pickings. The outcome was a rebuttal to Calmette signed by Rodin but written by Marx.3

Fortunately for Rodin, this melee did not derail his prospects. In July, the Council of Ministers finally agreed to let him remain at the Hôtel Biron for life, with the prospect of a Rodin museum on the premises after his death.4 Widespread support from Rodin's friends helped secure this decision, but an undoubtedly important factor was a political one: Rodin's longtime friend and admirer, Raymond Poincaré, had recently become prime minister of France.

While Rodin was reading off attacks in the public sphere, his private life was also undergoing severe strain. The actual events of this episode remain murky, but they seem to have involved the disappearance of some of his drawings, for which Claire de Choiseul blamed Rodin's current secretary. Instead, Rodin's friends as well as the secretary blamed Choiseul, and feared she was robbing Rodin. The matter was so grave, they insisted, that it required police intervention.

The situation may have involved more than simple theft: according to one close friend, Claire de Choiseul had persuaded—or was attempting to persuade—Rodin to bequeath to her and her husband the rights of reproduction for the works Rodin intended to leave to the state. Although there is no written evidence to support this accusation, unquestionably Choiseul had no interest in Rodin's dream of a Musée Rodin. Something of the magnitude of the future ownership of his work seems to have been operating here, to bring their relationship to such an abrupt end.

Whatever the exact details of the rupture, Rodin left it to others to tell Choiseul of his decision and to take back her key to the Hôtel Biron. Then, in a characteristic move, he left Paris. He agreed to send Choiseul monthly payments in support, but the break was final. It evidently was a wrenching decision for him: "I am like a man who walks in a woods overcome by darkness," he wrote a friend several months later.5 Choiseul was distraught and for years unsuccessfully attempted to reestablish their former relationship, but Rodin's friends were greatly relieved.

That June, Debussy had a stark vision of the future, and it shocked him. He joined Stravinsky in a remarkable play-through of the piano four-hand version of the completed parts of Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du printemps). Stravinsky played the treble and Debussy the bass, and Louis Laloy (at whose country house this event took place) later recalled that those present "were speechless, crushed as if by a hurricane from the depths of the ages, come to seize our lives by the roots."6 As for Debussy, he later wrote...
Stravinsky that this performance "haunts me like a beautiful nightmare and I try in vain to recall the terrifying impression it made." He promised to anticipate its performance "like a greedy child who's been promised some jam," but it was clear that the experience had unsettled him. From then on, as one biographer notes, "he had in his mind the unpleasant premonition of a musical world that might be not only past Debussy but since Debussy."  

Stravinsky's own impression of Debussy was that he was "not especially interested in new developments in music," and "in fact my own appearance on the musical scene must have been a shock to him." A major event in Stravinsky's own musical life that year was the performance of Arnold Schoenberg's Pierrot lunaire, which he heard Schoenberg conduct in Berlin. (Pierrot lunaire would not be performed in Paris until 1922, when it started a riot.) This work, which is atonal and performed in Sprachumforme or spoken singing, was unquestionably challenging, but Ravel was enthusiastic. Debussy, on the other hand, responded to Stravinsky's description of the new work simply by starting at Stravinsky and saying nothing.

Soon after the Ballets Russes premiered L'Après-midi d'un faune, Diaghilev presented Ravel's Daphnis et Chloé to Paris. Ravel was disappointed in the outcome, especially since he regarded Daphnis et Chloé as his "most important work." Fokine was the choreographer, and the growing conflict between him and Nijinsky exacerbated an already difficult situation. The many rehearsals that Faune required left little time to rehearse Daphnis et Chloé; in addition, Diaghilev had pushed Daphnis et Chloé to the end of the Ballets Russes season, which meant that it received only two performances.

Most critics were favorably impressed with Ravel's score, but Ravel did not like Léon Bakst's sets and costumes or Fokine's libretto. As he told Jacques Rouché (who was then director of the Théâtre des Arts): "The precedent of Daphnis et Chloé... has made me extremely reluctant to undertake a similar experience again." Debussy had been similarly burned by his experience with Après-midi d'un faune, but—beset by bills—in late June he signed a contract with Diaghilev to write the ballet that would eventually have the title Jeux (Games). "At lunchtime one has to eat," Debussy would tell Le Main upon the occasion of Jeux's 1913 opening, and "one day I happened to lunch with Serge Diaghilev, a terrifying but irresistible man able to instill the spirit of the dance into lifeless stones." Stravinsky preferred the title Le Parc, but Debussy assured him that Jeux was better. "For one thing it's shorter," he wrote Stravinsky. "For another it's a convenient way of expressing the 'horrors' that take place between the three participants."

In August Debussy wrote Jacques Durand that recently he had received a visit from Nijinsky and his nanny (meaning Diaghilev), who were in a great hurry to have the music for Jeux. Nijinsky wanted to work on it during his upcoming stay in Venice ("apparently the peaceful air of the lagoons will inspire his choreographic reveries"). Debussy refused to play for them what he had already written, "not wanting Barbarians sticking their noses" into his still-developing work, although he had every intention of completing the score shortly. "May God, the Tsar and my country stand by me in my hour of need," he added.

He finished it quickly, and in late August was able to write André Caplet that he was amazed that he was able to "forget the troubles of this world and write music which is almost cheerful, and... [containing] that orchestral colour which seems to be lit from behind." Nevertheless, the troubles of this world continued to plague him: a sick wife, an unhappy marriage, and insufficient income, in addition to the harsh criticism that continued to come his way, despite his hard-won eminence as a composer.

That April, Ravel came to Debussy's defense in a review in which he lambasted the press and the ignoramuses in it who insisted on writing about the arts. Debussy, he concluded, "remains the most important and profoundly musical composer living today." Yet at year's end, after Pelléas et Mélisande was performed for the one hundredth time at the Opéra-Comique, Debussy's promotion from Chevalier to Officer in the Legion of Honor—which should have been a shoo-in—did not happen. Instead, in what appeared to be a deliberate snub, the honors went to that bastion of musical conservatism, Vincent d'Indy, and a light opera composer whose name no one remembers.

Jean Cocteau's first big assignment for Diaghilev, writing the libretto for Le Dieu bleu, fell flat. The ballet—an Oriental fantasy, whose score, by Reynaldo Hahn, was no more interesting than Cocteau's libretto—was not a success and soon disappeared from the Ballets Russes repertoire. It was around this time that Diaghilev, walking home with Cocteau and Nijinsky after a performance, famously told Cocteau: "Astonish me! I'll wait for you to astonish me."  

It would be fully five years before Cocteau would in fact astonish Diaghilev, but Cocteau later attributed his abrupt break with frivolity to this command. "I was quick to realize that one doesn't astonish a Diaghilev in a week or two," he later wrote. "From that moment I decided to die and be born again. The labor was long and agonizing."  

In the meantime, Anna de Noailles was mentoring Cocteau, and his third volume of verse, La Danse de Sphocle, published in 1912, showed signs of her influence, both in its subject matter and its newfound seriousness of tone. It