



Ravel, Maurice (1875-1937)

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Maurice Ravel in 1915.
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One of France's most distinguished composers, Maurice Ravel was a prolific and versatile artist who worked in several musical genres, creating stage music (two operas and several ballets), orchestral music, vocal music, chamber music, and piano music. His unique musical language, employing harmonies that are at once ravishing and subtle, made him one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century.

Ravel's sexuality has been the subject of intense speculation. Although it is not certain that he was gay, he was rumored to be so. Fiercely protective of his privacy, his most significant emotional relationship seems to have been with his mother. At the same time, however, he embraced a public identity as a cultured dandy, a dapper man-about-town of refined taste and sensibility.

A life-long bachelor, Ravel had several significant relationships with men, including one with pianist Ricardo Viñes, a fellow dandy and bachelor, but it is not certain whether these friendships were sexual.

He was born Joseph Maurice Ravel on March 7, 1875 at Ciboure, France, near St. Jean de Luz, Basses-Pyrénées, a village close to the French-Spanish border, to a Swiss father and a Basque mother.

Ravel's father, who was talented musically, was an engineer. The composer may have inherited from his father the devotion to craftsmanship and meticulous detail that led Igor Stravinsky to describe him as the "Swiss watch-maker of music."

Although he was raised in Paris, Ravel was very conscious of his Basque heritage. He always felt a special affinity with Spanish and Basque culture.

Ravel studied music at the Conservatoire de Paris with Emile Decombes, Charles-Wilfrid Beriot, Emile Pessard, and Gabriel Fauré. An accomplished pianist, he took courses at the Conservatoire in both piano and composition.

As a young man, Ravel joined a circle of avant-garde writers and composers called Les Apaches. This group included Viñes and the composers Manuel de Falla, Florent Schmitt, and Stravinsky. Several members of the circle, including Ravel, developed an interest in the new American form of music, jazz. Not surprisingly, jazz rhythms entered some of Ravel's compositions, such as his late *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, which includes a jazzy movement called "The Blues."

Ravel's career and life can be divided into two parts, separated by World War I, which had a traumatic effect on him. Before the war, he was an important presence in French musical circles, often conducting his own works, giving piano concerts, and collaborating with Sergei Diaghilev on commissions for the Ballets Russes. After the war, however, the composer's physical and emotional health deteriorated. He retreated from Paris and spent the last decade of his life in semi-retirement.

Ravel is most famous for instrumental works that capture the music and culture of Spain. His interesting uses of harmony and subtle orchestration have added to the distinctive quality of his highly sophisticated music. His music also often refers back to earlier French composers such as Couperin and Rameau. In addition, it reflects Ravel's enduring fascination with the East and its cultures and music.

Among Ravel's earliest compositions are *Schéhérazade* (1898) and the *Rapsodie espagnole* (1908), both of which are distinguished by exotic settings. His stately *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (1910) also grows out of his interest in Spanish history and culture.

Perhaps Ravel's most famous early composition is *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912), a ballet piece which was originally commissioned by Diaghilev and choreographed by Michel Fokine for the Ballets Russes. The music for *Daphnis and Chloé* is particularly noteworthy for its eroticism and mystery.

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-1917) beautifully indicates his interest in French music of the neoclassical period, while the ballet *La Valse* (1919), originally choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska, reflects his enduring desire to create music for the dance.

Ravel's most familiar work to contemporary audiences is the *Boléro* of 1928, which he considered something of a well-orchestrated joke because of its constant repetitions of the same melody. Commissioned by the dancer Ida Rubinstein for a ballet choreographed by Nijinska, the *Boléro* is a bravura work built on a relentless rhythm that culminates in the wild abandon of Dionysian revels. It is certainly one of the most widely performed and recognized pieces of classical music.

In 1930 Ravel wrote his *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* at the request of pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm in World War I.

Ravel also wrote two interesting operas. Although they are minor works, they continue to please contemporary audiences. *L'Heure espagnole*, which premiered in Paris in 1911 at the Opéra Comique, tries to capture a day in the life of a bored, unfaithful wife of a clockmaker in eighteenth-century Spain. *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, with a libretto by Colette, had its first performance at the Monte Carlo Opera in 1925 and explores a child's relationship with his mother, his environment, and his fantasies.

Near the end of his life, Ravel received numerous accolades. The French government planned to award him the Légion d'Honneur. Unfortunately, the honor was announced publicly before Ravel had been informed of the decision. Infuriated, the composer declined to accept the award. In 1931, however, he accepted an honorary doctorate from Oxford University.

In 1928, Ravel made a triumphant four-month tour of the United States, where he met many musical notables, including George Gershwin, whom he admired greatly.

In his final years, Ravel suffered a series of health problems and gradually lost the ability to communicate with others. He died in Paris on December 28, 1937 after a series of strokes and an unsuccessful brain operation.

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