

Program Notes

Piano Concerto in G major MAURICE RAVEL

- Born:** March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France
- Died:** December 28, 1937, in Paris
- Work composed:** between 1929 and November 14, 1931, although for the first and last movements the composer reportedly drew on material he had composed in 1914
- World premiere:** January 14, 1932, at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, with the composer conducting the Lamoureux Orchestra and pianist Marguerite Long (the work's dedicatee)
- New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 7, 1943, conducted by Bruno Walter and with Harold Bauer as soloist

Maurice Ravel was only seven years old when he took his first piano lessons, and a mere five or six years after that he began producing his first compositions—variations and even a sonata movement—not surprisingly for piano. He went on to gain admission to the preparatory piano classes for the Paris Conservatoire, and then entered the Conservatoire itself as a piano major. Although he was obviously a capable pianist, he simply did not display the panache required of a top-flight concert artist around the turn of the century. That became clear by 1895, when he was dismissed from the Conservatoire without having gained a single prize for his piano playing (this when anything less than a Premier Prix pretty much consigned a musician to a secondary sort of career).

Ravel, however, did not take this as much of a set-back. By that time he realized that his real gift lay not in performance but rather in composition. Already in the late 1890s he was producing piano works that still hold a place in the repertoire, such as his *Menuet antique* and *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, as well as his *Sites auriculaires* for piano duet, his Violin Sonata, and several finely crafted songs. He headed back to the Conservatoire in 1897, and ever after cited his work there during the ensuing three years—with Gabriel Fauré in composition, André Gédalge in counterpoint—as critical to the development of his own musical language. Again, no prizes were forthcoming from the Conservatoire, in composition or fugue or anything else, and his five attempts at the Prix de Rome competition (between 1900 and 1905) proved just as fruitless.

Ravel was already on his way as a composer, and in the ensuing three decades or so his work would range through a variety of genres—opera, ballet, orchestral works, chamber music, songs, and song cycles. His output of piano music remained steady through 1920, and in addition to music destined originally for that instrument he translated several of his orchestral pieces into versions for piano or piano duet. Despite his limited success as a concert figure early on, he escalated his touring schedule in the 1920s and early 1930s. Particularly successful was a demanding tour he made through the United States and Canada in 1928.

At last, the piano concertos

Between 1929 and 1931 Ravel composed both of his piano concertos more or less simultaneously: the Concerto in D major for Piano Left-hand and Orchestra (1929-30) and the Concerto in G major (1929-31). At first glance, it seems curious that Ravel waited so long to write a concerto for the instrument he had studied so assiduously. In fact, he did work a good deal on an earlier piano concerto on Basque themes, which he provisionally titled *Zazpiak-Bat*. As early as 1906 he reported to the critic Léon Vallas that he was planning this work, and in 1913 he informed his friend Igor Stravinsky that he was re-focusing his attention on it. But in late 1914 we find Ravel, now installed in the south of France due to the disruptions of World War I, writing to his student and colleague Roland-Manuel that he had to give up work on the piece, having left his sketches behind in Paris. That was the end of it—except that now it appears that some of that project’s material was reworked years later when Ravel wrote his G-major Piano Concerto.

Ravel seems often to have taken people by surprise by revealing that pieces they didn’t know about were well along in their gestation. So it was that the pianist Marguerite Long (a notable interpreter of Fauré’s and Debussy’s music, as well as Ravel’s) recalled a gathering sometime in the 1920s:

One day at a dinner in the house of Mme de Saint-Marceaux, whose salon, according to Colette, was “a citadel of artistic intimacy,” Ravel said to me point-blank: “I am composing a concerto for you. Do you mind if it ends *pianissimo* and with trills?” “Of course not,” I replied, only too happy to realize the dream of all virtuosi.

One heard nothing more until 1927, the date of Ravel’s journey to North America.

But after his return a year elapsed before the Concerto was put in hand—doubtless after [Paul] Wittgenstein had commissioned the Concerto for the Left Hand. Negotiations took place for a first performance of the Concerto in G in Holland, and the Concertgebouw even announced it with the composer as soloist for March 9, 1931.

In fact, Ravel had rather retracted his gift to Marguerite Long and, spurred by the success of his American tour, became fixed on the idea of premiering the new concerto himself. But that was not to be. His health was none too good, and—Long continued:

The long hours spent on the Etudes of Chopin and Liszt greatly fatigued him. ... Even when this was evident he still wished to be the first to play his work, and it was only when pressed by his friends ... that he realized the difficulties confronting him in this formidable undertaking.

It can be understood how I was seized with agitation when on November 11, 1931 Ravel telephoned from Monfort l’Amaury announcing his immediate arrival with the manuscript. I had hardly composed myself when he entered holding out the precious pages. Hastily I turned to the last page to look for the *pianissimo* and the trills: they had become *fortissimo* and percussive ninths!

Ravel was among those composers who found that God (or their Muse) was in the details. “The G-major Concerto took two years of work, you know,” Ravel told an interlocutor, Robert de Fragny. “The opening theme came to me on a train between Oxford and London. But the initial idea is nothing. The work of chiseling then began. We’ve gone past the days when the composer was thought of as being struck by inspiration, feverishly scribbling down his thoughts on a scrap of paper. Writing music is seventy-five percent an intellectual activity. This effort is often more pleasant for me than having a rest.”

And yet, when he described this concerto to his friend, the critic M.D. Calvocoressi, Ravel invoked the spirit of an earlier time. It was, he said, “a concerto in the truest sense of the world: I mean that it is written very much in the same spirit as those of Mozart and Saint-Saëns.

The music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be lighthearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or at dramatic effects. It has been said of certain classics that their concertos were written not ‘for’ but ‘against’ the piano. I heartily agree. I had intended to title this concerto ‘Divertissement.’ Then it occurred to me that there was no need to do so because the title ‘Concerto’ should be sufficiently clear.” One quotes Ravel here from a sense of duty. In fact, his comment confuses more than it elucidates. We may ourselves choose to disagree with what he seems to imply about the piano concertos of Mozart—perhaps even about those of Saint-Saëns—and, indeed, of his own capacity for profundity, not only in his Concerto for Piano Left-Hand but also in the slow movement of the G-major Concerto.

A jazz-inflected concerto

The concerto leaps from the starting block with a bang—or, more literally, a crack, since the opening sound is the percussive snap of a whip. The orchestra is small but full of character, and the initial tune is played by the piccolo (an instrument more often used for highlighting orchestral timbre than for announcing themes). The piano bustles along with the orchestra through the busy opening, but before long it lands on a slow and seductive melody of jazzy contours, recalling more than a little Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* and reminding us that Ravel initially intended to seduce American audiences with this concerto during his 1928 tour.

The *Adagio* is an extraordinary movement, recalling in its deep quietude the contemplations of Satie’s *Gymnopédies*. The piano begins solo, and for three minutes (nearly a third of the movement’s overall length) weaves what is essentially a slow waltz, though it may not feel a waltz at first hearing because of the subtle interplay of cross-rhythms. Time seems suspended, but eventually the orchestra joins in, by way of the woodwinds, and the English horn offers a sedate counter-theme beneath the piano’s filigree. At one point Ravel claimed that his model for this movement was the analogous section of Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet, which he followed as an absolute guide. I don’t doubt him; but neither do I observe the close correspondence he claimed, apart from the general spirit of this peaceful, somewhat nostalgic, movement in triple time.

The spell is broken emphatically with the onset of the finale, a fleeting *tour-de-force* with perpetual-motion figuration at the opening (prefigured in the opening movement) that now evokes the Czerny exercises that enliven conservatory corridors. Jazzy accents impose themselves here, too, and a further crack of the whip helps instill a further touch of unity to this dazzling concerto before it ends with a thunderous thump on the bass drum.

Instrumentation: flute and piccolo, oboe and English horn, B-flat and E-flat clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, wood block, whip, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

— James M. Keller, Program Annotator