

The Life, Times and Music of Maurice Ravel

The French Connection

The Best of Times and the Worst of Times

Maurice Ravel was born in 1875 into a world that was rapidly changing. Advances had been made in the sciences. In years to come, the world would feel the influence of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein.

It was a strange period for France. The French had suffered a major military defeat at the hands of Prussia (what would later become Germany) in the War of 1870. The moral decay in French politics was exposed in the infamous Dreyfus Case of 1894. Dreyfus, a French army officer, was accused of spying and convicted, not because of evidence against him, but because he was Jewish. The Dreyfus affair became a rallying point for artists and intellectuals who protested his conviction. The case was eventually overturned. Ironically, this was a very fertile period in the arts in France.

This was the climax of the great railway era and the beginning of the aviation age. A Frenchman, Louis Bleriot, had crossed the English Channel in a flying machine. The great ocean liners grew bigger and more luxurious. Ultimately, of course, the world would discover that all these advances hid something more sinister, which would explode with the onset of World War I, and later World War II.

“The Most Perfect of Swiss Watchmakers”

“The Most Perfect of Swiss Watchmakers” is how Igor Stravinsky described Maurice Ravel. Ravel, who was born on March 7, 1875, at Ciboure near the Spanish border, had a father who was Swiss and a mother who was Basque. In fact, Ravel’s father’s family was originally French! In 1878, Maurice’s brother Édouard was born. The two brothers remained close all their lives.

Ravel was very fashion-conscious. He was a natty dresser and sported a meticulously trimmed beard and moustache in the style of the times!

He was not particularly handsome. He was short and wiry, with dark hair and a large head.

The Ravel family was a happy one. Ravel adored his mother in particular, and was devastated by her death in 1917. His father was a highly skilled engineer and inventor.

A Car that Turns Somersaults?

Ravel's brother Édouard also became an engineer and his father's partner in a number of ventures, not all of which were a total success. They invented a car that turned somersaults! In 1903, the car appeared in the United States with Barnum & Bailey's Circus, until it crashed, killing the driver. Ravel himself was interested in mechanics, and during his early concert tours would send his father information on any interesting devices he came across.

The Early Years

At the age of seven, Ravel began piano and harmony lessons, but he was more interested in playing outside than in practicing. In 1889, he enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire, but made erratic progress, failing to distinguish himself academically. At one point he was actually expelled for his inattention! When he rejoined in 1898, he studied under Gabriel Fauré, with whom he formed a lasting friendship in spite of the 40-year age difference. He was a Conservatoire student for 14 years, during which he composed several pieces, but was always rejected for the coveted Prix de Rome.

The Apache Club

In 1900, he became part of a group artists and intellectuals that called themselves the Apache Club. No women were allowed to join. Their activities involved all the arts, and lasted until 1914. Here Ravel met fellow Apache members Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Paul Valéry, Igor Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and Serge Diaghilev, among others. The Apaches would meet at the home of Ida and Cyprien Godebski. It was for the Godebski children that he later composed his *Ma Mere L'Oye* (Mother Goose Suite).

In 1901, he composed *Jeux d'eau*, his first true masterpiece.

Musical Influences

Ravel felt that the main influences on his own music were the composers Chabrier, Satie, Mozart and Saint-Saëns. He and Debussy were credited with influencing one another. They were considered to have been rivals, but the coolness between them was largely for public consumption - there was no real animosity

The “Affaire Ravel”

In 1905, he tried once again for the Prix de Rome. His entry was rejected in the preliminary round, creating a controversy that raged in artistic circles and exposed the politics underlying the competition. To his credit, Ravel remained outwardly detached throughout what became known as the “affaire Ravel.” Ironically, this incident was a turning point for him. It was the beginning of the most fruitful decade in his career.

A Sad Loss

In October 1908, Ravel's father died. This was a sad loss for him. Unmarried, he assumed the role as head of the family. Ravel was to remain a confirmed bachelor for the rest of his life.

The Spanish Period

Ravel entered into what became known as his Spanish period in 1907. Although he had not spent much time in Spain, his mother had grown up in Madrid, and used to sing to him the theatre and folk songs of her own girlhood. He wrote three “Spanish” pieces specifically for orchestra: *Rhapsodie*, *La Valse*, and *Bolero*. During this period Ravel also began his international concert tours, beginning with England in 1909, a country he was to visit often. On one of his trips to England, he met the author Joseph Conrad who gave him a gift of cigarettes - Ravel was a heavy smoker. In fact, during a lengthy tour of Canada and the United States in 1928, his biggest worry was how to maintain a supply of his favourite French cigarettes.

One of Ravel's best ballets, *Daphnis and Chloë*, premiered in 1912. Unfortunately, the production was marred by conflicts with the

company, including Diaghilev and the great dancer Nijinsky. Exhausted and close to a nervous breakdown, Ravel fled to La Grangette, the Godebskis' country home, to recuperate. He then went to the Basque country for a visit. He returned in 1913 with his health restored.

“Driver Ravel” and Adelaide

In 1914, Europe exploded into World War I. Ravel became a truck driver and was posted to the Verdun front where he encountered much danger and had many exciting adventures. He named his truck Adelaide. He wrote many cheerful letters home, describing his adventures with Adelaide, and signing them “Driver Ravel”. Alas, one night, Adelaide lost a wheel and slid into a ditch. Soon after, Ravel himself became quite ill and required surgery.

He returned to Paris on sick leave to find his beloved mother dangerously ill. She died in January 1917. Her death was a severe blow to him, resulting in what he called “cet horrible désespoir” (this horrible despair).

Belvédère

In 1920, with the war behind him, Ravel purchased a house in the little French town of Montfort l'Amaury, west of Paris. He named the house Belvédère and this is where he lived for the rest of his life. He made extensive renovations to the house and hosted many Sunday lunches for his friends from the arts community in Paris. He refused to own a car, in spite of his experiences as a driver during the war, and would walk 10 kilometers every day, usually in the woods nearby. He avoided trips to Paris except when necessary. He had a fine collection of beautiful first editions of French authors of the 17th and 18th centuries, and owned some lovely Japanese prints as well. The garden contained many small exotic plants and miniature Japanese trees. He made Belvédère into an extension of his own personality. Described by some as an enlarged doll's house, it has been maintained almost as he left it.

Légion d'honneur

In 1920, Ravel was nominated for the coveted French Légion d'honneur award. He immediately rejected it. Nobody really knows why, since he had been offered and had accepted many other foreign honours during his life. But, he was always reluctant to accept any from France. The most likely explanation is that he feared that accepting such domestic honours would place him under an obligation. Indeed, during the war years when a group of prominent French musicians wanted to ban any Austrian or German music, Ravel would not agree to this censorship! He was a fiercely independent man in his thinking. Perhaps the last word on the Légion d'honneur should belong to his fellow composer Erik Satie: "Monsieur Ravel has refused the Légion d'honneur, but all his music accepts it."

Recording Artist

In 1917, for the first time one of Ravel's quartet's was recorded. It was performed by the London String Quartet and issued by Columbia. Another recording was made in 1928, and thereafter recordings of Ravel's music were made quite regularly. Ravel was one of the first composers to recognize the importance of making recordings. Later, Stravinsky too saw the benefits of recording music.

A North American Visit

Ravel visited Canada and the United States in 1928. His engagements ranged from the great concert halls to performances in private homes. He liked the warmth and the hospitality with which he was greeted, but complained that the Americans didn't understand his tastes in food – he did not eat meat. He traveled by train to 25 cities and towns. He liked the trains because he found he could sleep quite comfortably on them. He was beginning to suffer from insomnia, which was to become increasingly a problem for him. He loved the spectacular landscapes, all of which he described in letters home to his brother Édouard. He especially liked the Grand Canyon. Ravel spent time in Harlem and New Orleans, listening to jazz and ragtime, which he enjoyed. Critics and audiences greeted him with enthusiasm and

described him as the greatest living French composer. The French press, however, largely ignored him.

It was on this occasion that he met the American composer George Gershwin, who requested music lessons from him. Ravel turned down his request, saying, "You would only lose your own spontaneity and end up by writing bad Ravel."

Honours

In 1928, Oxford University in England conferred an honorary doctorate upon Ravel. Afterwards, he conducted an all-Ravel concert at the Town Hall. One year later, in 1929, a festival in his honour was held in the town of St. Jean-de-Luz, and the town of his birth, Ciboure, renamed the street where he was born Quai Maurice Ravel.

The Final Chapter

Ravel's health was now clearly failing. By 1934, he was barely able to write and unable to compose. He still had plenty of ideas, but complained to a friend that whenever he tried to write them down, they vanished. In 1937, he underwent brain surgery to remove a tumor but no tumor was found. He survived the operation and appeared to be recovering, but then lapsed into a coma. He died on December 28, 1937, at the age of 62, without regaining consciousness. His illness remains a mystery.

Ravel's Music

Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G major*

When Ravel had begun work on his *Piano Concerto in G Major*, one of the best and most successful of his late compositions, he was approached by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein in 1929. Wittgenstein had lost his right arm in the war but had no intention of giving up his career. He wanted Ravel to compose a piano concerto for the left hand! Ravel enjoyed the challenge. This concerto is described as a "dark, powerful work with clearly defined tragic overtones." At first, Wittgenstein didn't like it, but later he became fascinated by it, describing it as a work of genius. Ravel worked on both concertos at the same time. In contrast to the *Concerto for Left Hand*, the *Piano Concerto in G Major* is a light, sparkly piece of music written for two hands.

Ravel's *Mother Goose (Ma Mere L'Oye)*

Ma Mere L'Oye was composed for the Godebski children, Mimi and Jean. It was written distinctly for children. According to Ravel, "It was my intention to evoke the poetry of childhood..." Ravel not only yearned for the world of childhood, but also could accurately recreate it musically. Originally developed for the piano, *Mother Goose* was eventually orchestrated and turned into a ballet with new pieces added. When you hear it, listen carefully. Does the music remind you of the dreams and enchanted worlds you read about as a small child? That's what Ravel intended.

Ravel's *Boléro*

In 1928, Ravel was asked by an acquaintance to write a ballet with a Spanish flavour. The actual tune of *Bolero*, according to Ravel, is a simple one that is repeated a number of times on different orchestral levels, but without any development. He knew that what he had completed was a technical masterpiece, but felt that was all. "Unhappily it has no music in it," he commented. He was immensely surprised by its enormous and immediate popularity as a concert piece. He had intended it merely as a dance piece. *Boléro* found renewed popularity with the film "10".