

A BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH MAURICE RAVEL
by Matthew DeChirico

Joseph Maurice Ravel, who lived from March 1875 to December 1937 was a French composer born in the Basque region of France. His mother of Basque-Spanish heritage from Madrid Spain had a strong influence on his life and his music. His father was a Swiss inventor and industrialist from France. Both parents provided a happy and stimulating life for Joseph and his younger brother.

His parents encouraged his musical pursuits and sent him at age 14 to the Conservatoire de Paris first as a preparatory student and eventually as a piano major. Although intellectually bright and well read, he was not successful academically even as his musicianship matured. Considered "very gifted" he nevertheless was called "somewhat heedless" in his studies. He failed to meet the requirements of earning a competitive medal and was expelled. He returned three years later studying with Gabriel Faure focusing on composition rather than piano. He was again dismissed for having won neither the fugue nor the composition prize. He remained an auditor with Faure until he left the Conservatoire in 1903. During his years at the Conservatoire, Ravel tried numerous times to win the prestigious Prix de Rome but to no avail: he was probably considered too radical by the conservatives. Ravel's "String Quartet in F" is now a standard work of chamber music, though at the time it was criticized and found lacking academically.

His first significant work, "Habanera" for two pianos was later transcribed into the third movement of his "Rapsodie Espagnole". His first published work was "Minuet Antigue" dedicated to and premiered by Ricardo Vines. (He had met Vines, a pianist, who performed and interpreted Ravel's work for many years. They were close friends and maybe romantically involved). In 1899, Ravel conducted his first orchestral piece, "Sheherazade" which was greeted by a mixture of boos and applause. Critics termed the piece a "Jolting debut: a clumsy plagiarism of the Russian School and called Ravel a "mediocrely gifted debutant.." As the most gifted composer of his class and as a leader, with Debussy, of avant-garde French music, Ravel would continue to have a difficult time with the critics.

Known for his melodies, orchestral and instrumental textures and effects he is considered one of the two great French Impressionist composers. The other being Debussy. Like Debussy, however, he refused the description of "Impressionist" which he believed was reserved for painting. Though the two musicians appreciated much the same musical heritage and operated in the same artistic milieu, they differed in terms of personality and their approach to music. Debussy was considered more spontaneous and casual in his composing while Ravel was more attentive to form and craftsmanship.

Active during a period of great artistic innovation and diversification, Ravel benefited from many sources and influences, though his music defies any easy classification. His musical language was ultimately very original neither absolutely modernist nor impressionist. Much of his piano, chamber music, vocal and orchestral music has entered the standard concert repertoire.

Ravel was a remarkable synthesist of disparate styles. His music matured early into his innovative and distinct style. As a student, he studied scores of composers of the past methodically: "in order to know one's own craft, one must study the craft of others". Though

he liked the new French music, during his youth Ravel still felt fond of the older French styles of Franck and the Romanticism of Beethoven and Wagner. Certain aspects of his music can be considered belonging to the tradition of 18th century French classicism, the uniquely 19th century French sensibilities of Faure and Chabrier, other of his works owe something to the innovations of Satie and Debussy. His admiration for American jazz is echoed in "l'enfant et les sortilèges", the "Violin Sonata" and the "Piano Concerto in G". The Russian school of music inspired him and he variously cited Mozart, Schubert and Schoenberg as inspiration for various pieces. He also composed short pieces in the manner of Haydn and his teacher Faure. Even in writing in the style of others, Ravel's own voice as a composer remained distinct.

He considered himself in many ways a classicist. Ravel often relied on traditional forms as well as traditional structures as ways of presenting his new melodic and rhythmic content and his innovative harmonies. He stated, "if I were called upon to do so, I would ask to be allowed to identify myself with the simple pronouncements made by Mozart.....He confined himself to saying that there is nothing that music cannot undertake to do, or dare, or portray, provided it continues to charm and always remain music."

Ravel was cognizant of the effect of new music on the ears of the public and he insightfully wrote: "On the initial performance of a new musical composition, the first impression of the public is generally one of reaction to the more superficial elements of the music, that is to say, to its external manifestations rather than to its inner content.....often it is not until years after, when the means of expression have finally surrendered all their secrets, that the inner emotion of the music becomes apparent to the listener."

His own composing method was craftsmanlike and perfectionistic. Stravinsky once referred to Ravel as "the most perfect Swiss watchmakers" a reference to the intricacy and precision of Ravel's work. Ravel sometimes spent years refining a piece. He crafted his manuscripts meticulously, and relentlessly polished and corrected them. He destroyed hundreds of sketches and even re-copied entire autographs to correct one mistake. Because of his perfectionism and methods, Ravel's musical output over four decades is quite small. Most of his works were thought out over considerable lengths of time, then notated quickly, and refined painstakingly. When a piece would not progress, he would abandon it until inspired anew. There are only sixty compositions in all, of which slightly more than half are instrumental. Ravel's body of work includes pieces for piano, chamber works, two piano concerti, ballet music, opera, and song cycles. Though wide ranging in his music, Ravel avoided the symphonic form as well as religious themes and forms.

Many of his most innovative compositions were developed first as piano music. Ravel used this miniaturist approach to build up his architecture with many finely wrought strokes. To fill the requirements of larger works, he multiplied the number of small building blocks. This demonstrates the great regard he had for the piano traditions of Mozart, Chopin and Liszt. Ravel's most difficult pieces are marked by elegance and refinement.. It is said that Ravel's piano works are among the most difficult pieces for the instrument but always based on "musically perfectly logical concepts"; not just technically demanding but also requiring the right expression.

Ravel's great regard as an orchestrator is also based on his thorough methods. He was and is a leading figure in the art of transcription and orchestration. During his life Ravel studied the ability of each instrument carefully in order to demonstrate its possible effects while being

sensitive to individual color and timbre. He regarded orchestration as a task separate from composition, involving distinct technical skills. He was always careful to ensure that the writing for each family of instruments worked in isolation as well as in the complete ensemble. Orchestration gave him the opportunity to view works in a different context. However, he disapproved vehemently to anyone else tampering with his own works once completed. (Falling out with Toscanini who conducted the premiere of Bolero in N.Y., Wittgenstein who made changes to the score of "Piano Concert for The Left Hand" and even with Vines)

Ravel was always a supporter of young musicians. He modeled his teaching methods after his own teacher, Faure, avoiding formulas and emphasizing individualism. His preferred way of teaching would be to have a conversation with his students and demonstrate his points at the piano. Often he would challenge a student with "What would Mozart do?" and then ask the student to invent his own solution.

Though never a paid critic, Ravel had strong opinions on historical and contemporary music and musicians which influenced his younger contemporaries. In creating his own music he tended to avoid the more monumental composers as models, finding relatively little kinship with or inspiration from Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky. As an outspoken commentator on the Romantic giants, he found much of Beethoven "exasperating", Wagner's influence "pernicious" and Berlioz's harmony "clumsy". He had considerable admiration for other 19th century masters such as Chopin, Liszt, Mendelssohn and Schubert. Despite what he considered its technical deficiencies, Ravel was a strong advocate of Russian music and praised its sponaneity, orchestral color and exoticism.

In post-war Paris, American musical influence, particularly jazz was strong. French composers including Ravel were applying jazz elements to their work. Also in vogue was a return to simplicity in orchestration, a transition from the great scale of works of Mahler and Richard Strauses. These trends posed challenges for Ravel, always a slow and deliberate composer who desired to keep his music relevant but still revered the past.

In 1928 Ravel made a four month concert tour in North America visiting twenty five cities and conducting most of the leading orchestra. While in the U.S. he met with and befriended George Gershwin whom he admired, met Duke Ellington and inbided the jazz scene in New Orleans. His admiration of jazz increased by his American visit caused him to include some jazz elements in his later compositions, especially the two piano concertos.

PIANO CONCERTO FOR THE LEFT HAND in D major was composed by Ravel between 1929 and 1930, concurrently with his Piano Concerto in G which he was writing for himself for a projected second tour to America. The Piano Concerto for the Left Hand was commissioned by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm during World War I. He was considered a feisty musician who was determined to continue his concert career. He had devised novel techniques including pedal and hand movement combinations that allowed him to play chords previously regarded as impossible for a five fingered pianist.

A tough customer to please, he approached many famous composers, including Richard Stauss, Prokofiev, commissioning them to write material for him. Many produced pieces which he rejected. However, Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand became more famous than any other compositions that Wittgenstein inspired. At first Wittgenstein

did not take to the piece, not liking the jazz-influenced rhythms and harmonies. He also took issue with the long solo cadenza that opens the work. "If I wanted to play without an orchestra, I wouldn't have commissioned a concerto!" After studying the work for several months he became fascinated by it and realized what a great work it was. He proposed some modifications to the score. When Ravel refused, Wittgenstein made changes when he played the work for the first time in November 1931. There was instant acclaim however Ravel became incensed and the two never reconciled. Working simultaneously on the Concerto in G for his own concerts and the one for the left hand, the composer conceived his own concerto as a scintillating divertissement, the Concerto for The Left Hand emerged as a dark, powerful work with tragic overtone, which displays a great deal of resourcefulness and originality on Ravel's part. It was imperative to Ravel that the Concerto not have any hint of being a stunt. He felt that it was essential to give the impression of a texture no thinner than that of a part written for two hands. He resorted to a style that was much nearer to that of the more solemn kind of traditional concerto. This rather soulful work from the usually elegant and aloof Ravel ranks among his finest creations.

The Concerto unfolds in a single movement that falls into three sections. An impressive feat of musical sleight of the hand and illusion, the full sound and texture of the solo part rarely gives the slightest hint that a mere single hand is involved. As if to underline the domain of the pianist's left hand, the orchestral scoring leans toward the rich, lower pitches of the ensembles, including English horn, bass clarinet and contrabassoon as well as low strings.