



# Maurice RAVEL

## *La Valse*

**Joseph Maurice Ravel** (7 March 1875 – 28 December 1937) was a French composer, pianist and conductor. He is often associated with impressionism along with his elder contemporary Claude Debussy, although both composers rejected the term. In the 1920s and 1930s, Ravel was regarded as France's greatest living composer, both nationally and internationally. Born to a music-loving family, Ravel attended France's premier music college, the Paris Conservatoire; he was not well regarded by its conservative establishment, whose biased treatment of him caused a scandal. After leaving the Conservatoire Ravel found his own way as a composer, developing a style of great clarity, incorporating elements of baroque, neoclassicism and, in his later works, jazz. He liked to experiment with musical form, as in his best-known work, *Boléro* (1928), in which repetition takes the place of development. He made some orchestral arrangements of other composers' music, of which his 1922 version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is the best known. As a slow and painstaking worker, Ravel composed fewer pieces than many of his contemporaries. Among his works to enter the repertoire are pieces for piano, chamber music, two piano concertos, ballet music, two operas, orchestral music, and eight song cycles; he wrote no symphonies and only one religious work "Kaddish", which is merely an arrangement of pre-existent Hebrew liturgical melodies. Many of his piano pieces also exist in the form of orchestrations made years after their original conception. Some of his piano music, such as *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), is exceptionally difficult to play, and some of his complex orchestral scores, such as the music for the ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912), require great conducting skill to realize successfully. Ravel was among the first composers to recognise the potential of recording to bring their music to a wider public. From the 1920s, despite limited technique as a pianist or conductor, he took part in recordings of several of his works; others were made under his supervision.

*La valse*, *poème chorégraphique pour orchestre* (a choreographic poem for orchestra), is a work written by Maurice Ravel between February 1919 and 1920; it was first performed on 12 December 1920 in Paris. It was conceived as a ballet but is now more often heard as a concert work. The work has been described as a tribute to the waltz, and the composer George Benjamin, in his analysis of *La valse*, summarized the ethos of the work: "Whether or not it was intended as a metaphor for the predicament of European civilization in the aftermath of the Great War, its one-movement design plots the birth, decay and destruction of a musical genre: the waltz."

Ravel himself, however, denied that it is a reflection of post-World War I Europe, saying: "*While some discover an attempt at parody, indeed caricature, others categorically see a tragic allusion in it – the end of the Second Empire, the situation in Vienna after the war, etc... This dance may seem tragic, like any other emotion... pushed to the extreme. But one should only see in it what the music expresses: an ascending progression of sonority, to which the stage comes along to add light and movement.*" He also commented, in 1922, that "*It doesn't have anything to do with the present situation in Vienna, and it also doesn't have any symbolic meaning in that regard. In the course of La Valse, I did not envision a dance of death or a struggle between life and death. (The year of the choreographic setting, 1855, repudiates such an assumption.)*"

In his tribute to Ravel after the composer's death in 1937, Paul Landormy described the work as follows: *...the most unexpected of the compositions of Ravel, revealing to us heretofore unexpected depths of Romanticism, power, vigor, and rapture in this musician whose expression is usually limited to the manifestations of an essentially classical genius.*