

# Piano Concerto in G major

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

## 1 *Allegramente*

## 2 *Adagio assai*

## 3 *Presto*

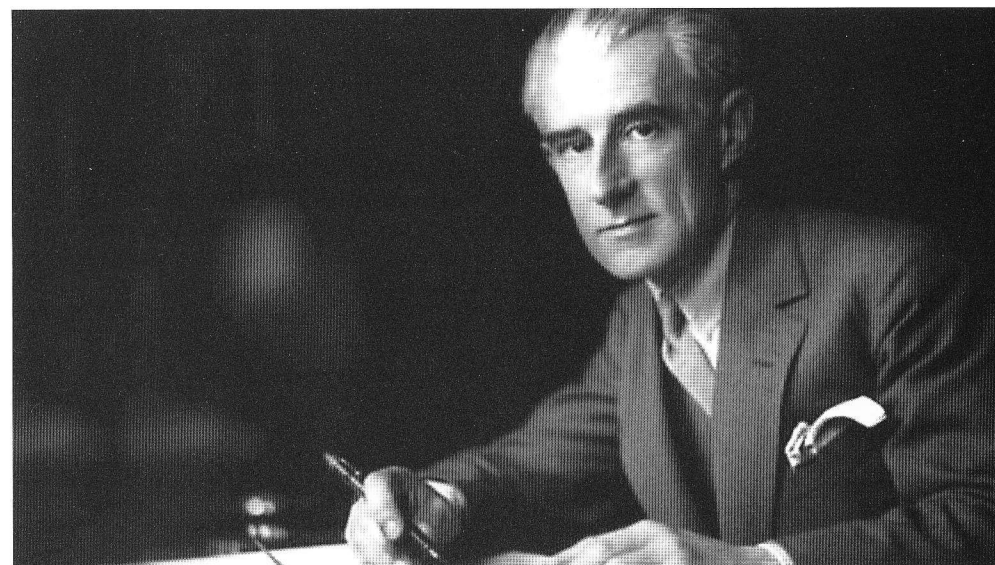
Maurice Ravel was one of the few composers whose musical ambitions were encouraged and supported by his parents right from the start. He had private musical tuition from the age of seven, entered the Paris Conservatoire at 14, and soon established himself as a fine pianist and a fastidious composer.

It was following an enormously successful concert tour of America in 1928 that Ravel came up with the idea of writing a Piano Concerto – for himself to play, naturally, and as the centrepiece of an even grander return tour. But those performances were not to be. For a start, the Concerto took him two years to write – he was already a notoriously slow composer, but he was also distracted by the simultaneous composition of his far darker Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, commissioned by pianist Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right arm in World War I. Nearing the deadline, he wrote: 'I can't manage to finish my Concerto, so I'm resolved not to sleep for more than a second. When my work is finished I shall rest in this world... or the next!' Those were prophetic words: the Piano Concerto in G major was Ravel's

last important work, his gradual decline in health also contributing to the slowness of its composition.

When it came to performing the piece, the increasingly ailing Ravel found his strength and skills were not up to the task. Instead, he dedicated the Concerto to the eminent French pianist Marguerite Long, and offered her the first performance. She gladly accepted, later calling the piece 'a work of art in which fantasy, humour and the picturesque frame one of the most touching melodies that has come from the human heart' (more on that melody later). The hugely successful premiere was in January 1932, with Ravel conducting the Orchestra Lamoureux, and led to more than 20 repeat performances throughout Europe, where it was received equally enthusiastically.

Quintessentially French in its craftsmanship, lyricism, gracefulness and wit, the Piano Concerto in G major is also heavily influenced by the then new-fangled jazz, which Ravel had encountered on his 1928 US tour – and arguably also by the Spanish folksongs sung to him by his Basque mother.



## The music

The **first movement** opens with a whip-crack and a perky tune on piccolo (perhaps Basque, although Ravel said it came to him on a train from Oxford to London), later taken over by trumpet, but despite some propulsive accompaniment figures, the piano only properly makes its presence felt with the sultry, bluesy second main theme – which sounds uncannily like Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* at times. The soloist segues into a more lyrical, romantic melody, then jumps unexpectedly into a brisk, rhythmic section. When the Basque/London-Oxford tune returns, it's assertively on the piano, and the bluesy theme is then expanded to grotesque, fantastical proportions, sliding trombones and hammered piano contrasting with a mystical episode for gently chiming harp. After an inexorable build-up, the movement ends with some spiky brass chords.

The slow **second movement** is where we hear the melody that Marquerite Long so admired – and following her praise, Ravel replied: 'That flowing phrase! How I worked over it bar by bar! It nearly killed me!' The movement can be summed up very simply:

a long, slow melody that seems to stretch to infinity for solo piano, then a darker, more dissonant central section, and lastly a return of the long opening melody on cor anglais, with discreet decoration from the piano soloist. But to be so blunt is to ignore the exceptional craftsmanship that went into the movement, and the aching poignancy of the tune that caused Ravel so much effort.

The brief, virtuosic **third movement** is often repeated as an encore after the Concerto – and that may be precisely what Ravel intended. It opens with a call to attention on brass and snare drum, launching into a bubbling piano part that's interrupted by shrieks and howls from the woodwind, rushing through several characterful interludes before its distinctive opening chords round the Concerto off with a thud.

© David Kettle, 2014