

## Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in G major

Maurice Ravel

B. March 7, 1875, Ciboure, France

D. December 28, 1937, Paris

*Premiered January 14, 1932 by the Lamoureux Orchestra, conducted by Maurice Ravel, Marguerite Long, soloist.*

*Scored for solo piano with piccolo, flute, oboe, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, and percussion (triangle, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, wood-block, whip), harp and strings (approx. 23 minutes).*

From the end of 1927 to April of 1928, French composer Maurice Ravel made a concert tour of the United States. French expatriate E. Robert Schmitz, president of Pro-Musica, Inc., a group that promoted contemporary music and dialogue between American and European musicians, organized the tour. Ravel was astonished at the generosity of his American hosts and their enthusiasm toward his music. Flush with his successes and with the sound of American orchestras and jazz bands fresh in his ears, he quickly conceived the idea of writing a piano concerto that he could play, and even considered a worldwide tour.

Ravel's failing health and other responsibilities prevented him from immediately realizing this ambition. In 1929 he received a commission from the one-armed pianist Paul Wittgenstein, for whom he wrote his other major piano concerto - the *Concerto for the Left Hand* (1930) - and subsequent years were occupied with festivals and periods of rest ordered by his doctor to recover from exhaustion (the cause of which would eventually be traced to a possible brain tumor). Ravel finally completed his own *Piano Concerto* in 1931, and it would be one of his last compositions. Because he was too ill to perform the solo part at the premiere himself as planned, he conducted the orchestra while Marguerite Long, a pianist who specialized in contemporary music and had studied privately with Fauré, Debussy, and Ravel, played the piano.

In his comments about the work, Ravel placed his *Concerto* within the classical tradition: "It was written very much in the spirit as those of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. The music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be light hearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or dramatic effects." The work's emphasis on lightness and clarity is evidenced by its orchestration, which calls for paired winds, a single trumpet and trombone, and 32 strings - an ensemble similar in size to one of Mozart's concertos.

In the first movement Ravel uses the sections of sonata form to explore contrasts between many of the styles that interested him throughout his career. The piccolo introduces a buoyant first theme, while the piano creates a shimmering background by playing running triplets in two different keys in its highest register. The theme reflects the ancestry of the composer's mother. It has a Basque flavor, and may even quote segments from Basque tunes. The transitional material, which is slightly slower, takes on a Spanish flavor with its lowered second scale degree and incisive rhythms. Solo wind instruments respond with a theme characterized by "blue" notes - that is, lowered sevenths and thirds

- that recall jazz and the music of George Gershwin, both of which Ravel heard and admired while in the United States. The development section returns to the original quick tempo, and features continuous runs in the piano, while the recapitulation transforms the opening material into a piano cadenza played against a hazy, impressionistic orchestral accompaniment. The sense of free improvisation eventually spills over into the orchestra, leading to dreamy arpeggiations in the harp and upper winds, until the soloist returns to the original tempo and leads the orchestra to a resolute conclusion.

In his booklet *Le coq et l'arlequin* (Cock and Harlequin) from 1918, writer Jean Cocteau outlined what he believed to be quintessentially French aesthetics of music, qualities he saw in the music of Erik Satie. These include an emphasis on clarity and lightness, and a direct mode of expression that avoids bombast. These aesthetics are epitomized in the opening of the Ravel's second movement - an extended melody for solo piano. It finds poignant and expressive character through restraint: the dynamic rarely rises above the *soft / piano* level, and the solo melodic line is content to explore the middle range of the instrument. The composer stated that he modeled the movement after the slow movement of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet. The solo is given a mild polyrhythmic bite through the interrelation of melody and accompaniment. The former has three quarter-beats per measure, while the latter plays a pattern, continuous through the movement, that suggests three eighth-notes per measure. A solo flute and strings enter just as the melody appears to be approaching a conclusion, and brief woodwind solos provide a transition to a more disquieted middle section. Eventually the English horn reprises the opening against a flowing accompaniment in the solo piano.

The brilliant finale movement, in keeping with Ravel's stated aesthetic aims, provides a light-hearted conclusion to the work. It constantly shifts in key and texture and cycles through a wealth of short themes. Like a spring-powered toy winding back to its original position, the movement concludes with the exact gesture that appeared at the opening.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Ravel's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in G major on Feb. 25-26, 2005, with David Roberston conducting and Orli Shaham as soloist.

*Program note by David Heetderks, doctoral student in music theory at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.*