

Concerto in D major for Piano (Left Hand Alone) and Orchestra

MAURICE RAVEL

B. 1874, Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées

D. 1937, Paris

Premiered January 17, 1933 by pianist Paul Wittgenstein with the Paris Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer.

Scored for three flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and four percussionists (bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tam tam, wood block, triangle), harp, and strings (Approx. 19 minutes)

Much of the significant left-hand piano music written in the twentieth century owes its existence to the Austrian-born American pianist Paul Wittgenstein (1887–1961), who lost his right arm at the Russian front during World War I. Determined not to let this injury destroy his musical life, Wittgenstein developed an extraordinary technique with only his left hand and used his family's wealth to commission one-handed piano works from notable composers, including Richard Strauss, Serge Prokofiev, Benjamin Britten, and Maurice Ravel. Ravel found the challenge of writing for one hand particularly stimulating. His remarks preceding the premiere reveal an ambition to write a substantial piece, despite the digital limitations of the soloist: "...[the soloist's limitation] poses a rather arduous problem for the composer...which is to maintain interest in a work of extended scope while utilizing such limited means. The fear of difficulty, however, is never as keen as the pleasure...of overcoming it."

The concerto's grand and serious tone is evidenced by Ravel's choice to use a full-sized orchestra: triple woodwinds, including a contrabassoon and English horn, and a full complement of brass and percussion. The work is in a single movement, and follows a slow-fast-slow pattern whose design might be best described as one sonata encased inside another. The opening evokes a mysterious atmosphere by using the lowest possible instruments of the orchestra: the contrabasses playing their open strings, and a solo contrabassoon. The latter instrument's melody presents two important motives: a dotted rhythm that will eventually grow into the first theme, and a descending third that will become important in the center of the work. The introduction gradually grows in intensity and brightness, acting as a giant upbeat to the soloist's entrance, which after a cadenza introduces the first theme. The solo piano soon offers a brief and lyrical second theme, and the orchestra and soloist join together in a transition that quotes the opening dotted rhythm.

The transition leads to the arrival of a fast section in a fast 6/8 time. Ravel claimed that the section was inspired by jazz, and the use of altered thirds and a lowered 7th might suggest jazz influence, though present-day listeners might hear a stronger influence in Ravel's love of Spanish music. A brief and playful melody in duple time follows, played by the high woodwinds and accompanied by the soloist. The middle

section is an extended meditation on the descending third introduced at the opening. This is spun out into a theme that gradually builds in texture and activity; eventually the initial theme from the fast section becomes the accompaniment. A return to the slow section features an extended piano solo that touches on the lyrical theme from the opening, and leads to a triumphant conclusion.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Ravel's Concerto in D major for Piano (Left Hand Alone) on March 19, 2004 with Music Director Emeritus Neeme Järvi conducting.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Ravel, Concerto in D major for Piano (Left Hand), Jean-Philippe Collard, piano, Lorin Maazel conducting the Orchestre National de France, EMI 74749.

Program note by David Heetderks, doctoral student in Music Theory at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance.