

Maurice Ravel, 1875–1937

by Dorothea Bostock

THIS is the centenary year of Maurice Ravel who was born one hundred years ago at Ciboure, a small fishing village in the Basses-Pyrénées between St. Jean de Luz and the Spanish frontier. His father was born in Switzerland but the Ravel family originally came from Haute-Savoie and his mother was of Basque origin. They met in Aranuez, a beautiful Spanish resort, where Pierre Joseph Ravel, who was an engineer, was concerned in building a railway. They married a year later in 1874 and went to live at Ciboure. Maurice was born the following year and although they moved to Paris when he was only three months old he always felt the influence of his birthplace and loved this part of the country. This influence became apparent in some of his best compositions, notably 'Rhapsodie Espagnole' and 'L'Heure Espagnole'. They lived in Montmartre where another son was born in 1878 and the two boys remained close companions all their lives. Their family background was an artistic and cultured one and Maurice was encouraged by his father when it became evident that music would be his vocation. He had piano lessons when he was six and began to study harmony when he was twelve. In 1889 he entered the Paris Conservatoire and won a premier prize and medal for piano two years later. Here he met another piano student, Ricardo Vines, who was to become his lifelong friend and one of the great interpreters of French piano music and particularly of Ravel's.

1889 was the year of the Great Exhibition and the music which was played by the visiting orchestras from Russia and the East was something quite new to the Parisians and it greatly attracted Ravel and Debussy. It was a time when France was leading Europe in the arts and literature. The Impressionists and Symbolists were at the height of their powers. Seurat, van Gogh, Lautrec, Emil Zola, Anatole France, Edgar Allen Poe, Mallarmé, Proust, Satie, Chabrier, Fauré and Debussy were to the fore and part of the Paris picture. The new Eiffel tower, built at a cost of 15 million gold francs, was a striking symbol of the renaissance; one of the greatest feats of engineering, it gave Paris a distinctive look and appeared unceasingly on the canvases of the artists. New ideas were rampant, barriers were broken down in all the arts so it was not surprising that Ravel was attracted to these new schools of thought. He was a model student. He learnt all he could of the technique of composition; he studied harmony and counterpoint and the classical scores assiduously to make himself knowledgeable in all kinds of music. He accepted the discipline of the rules of composition in order to perfect his own technique knowing that what he would compose would be very different from anything he studied. His teachers recognised his unusual ability and originality and were not too severe in their criticism, but although he entered for the Prix de Rome four times, the last time in 1905, his works were rejected by the judges and their unjust treatment of him led to increased independence and a disregard of criticism.

The first of Ravel's compositions to be published was the 'Menuet Antique', written in 1895 and dedicated to Ricardo Vines. His next work was a collection of two pieces for two pianos, played at a concert and not well received,
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but one, 'Habanera', was later included in 'Rhapsodie Espagnole'. In 1898 two songs, 'Sainte' and 'Deux Epigrammes de Clement Marot' showed his unmistakable individuality, and the following year his operatic overture, 'Scheherazade', being hissed and booed at a public concert, was never published, although he used some of the material from it for a set

of three songs with the same title in 1903; these were for piano or orchestra and were much more successful. His next work, also composed in 1899, made his name almost overnight; this was the 'Pavane pour une Infante Défunte' for piano and later orchestrated, which became popular everywhere and remains so. Ravel himself said it was of little value and that the title had no significance; he chose it because it sounded well. After a year of quiet study he produced in 1901 'Jeux d'eau', a remarkable virtuoso work for the piano and generally considered the beginning of a new treatment in piano writing. At the time he was still a student and working at his 'String Quartet', which he began in 1902 and completed the following year. The latter is one of his finest compositions which together with 'Jeux d'eau' placed him as a leading French composer. At the same time he was regarded by the older conventional musicians as a dangerous revolutionary.

He was a dandy of the time, wearing exquisite waistcoats, immaculate shirts and a carefully trimmed beard and, though showing to the world a disdainful and aloof manner, he had a sensitive and affectionate nature and a collection of loyal friends. He was one of an intellectual group calling themselves 'Les Apaches'. They gathered together and talked of music, art and literature through the night and went home on the first train at dawn. He was the least revolutionary among them. They had fun, played practical jokes as well as discussing seriously every aspect of life and used the first eight notes of Borodin's Second Symphony as a secret call signal. For them Ravel composed, in 1905, the suite of five pieces entitled 'Miroirs', each piece dedicated to a different member.

Among his closest friends were the Godebskis and their two children. Madame Godebski's sister married Alfred Edwards, a prominent figure in Parisian society and the millionaire proprietor of the daily paper *Le Matin* who put his yacht at Ravel's disposal from time to time so that he could work without interruption and in solitude. Edward's wife was an admirer of Ravel's music and a great patroness of the arts. In June 1905 Ravel went with the Edwards on this yacht on a cruise through the canals of France, Belgium and Holland and up the Rhine to Frankfurt. The smoking factories of Belgium and Germany intrigued him and he wrote, 'the great castles of iron, incandescent cathedrals, a symphony of conveyor belts, hammer blows, whistles emit a reddish smoke and slender flames; the sky is red, dark and threatening; how full of music all this is': and again, he comments on the automatic movement of the windmills going round and round. He stored in his mind these impressions for the poetry and drama of machinery appealed to him more than the beauties of nature. He had always been interested in mechanical toys, puppets and everything artificial, and he is reputed to have said that he preferred a beautiful locomotive to a beautiful woman.

The ten years after leaving the Conservatoire found him leading a bohemian life amidst his friends in a circle of the most eminent writers, artists and
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musicians. They met regularly at the Godebski house and he was now a celebrated composer. His character and tastes were formed early and underwent little change just as his music had, by the age of twenty, acquired maturity and personality and the hallmarks of his individual style. These ten years proved to be his most creative and many of his best works were written during them. From the brilliant piano pieces he now turned to the more dramatic: 'Ma Mère l'Oye', 'Valses Nobles et Sentimentales', 'Histoires [sic] Naturelles', 'Rhapsodie Espagnole', 'L'Heure Espagnole', 'Daphne and Chloë' and the 'Piano Trio' were all composed between 1908–14. These works alone would have established him as one of Europe's most important composers. With 'Histoires Naturelles' Ravel broke new ground; they were settings to Jules Renard's witty sketches of the Peacock, Cricket, Swan, Kingfisher

and Guineafowl; he dispensed with melody as such and used a purely declamatory style closely following the natural inflections of the voice but even with bold and unusual harmony it proved disconcerting and unacceptable to the critics and public alike. They missed the evocative magic which makes it a work of great artistic merit. He wrote 'Ma mère l'Oye' as a piano duet for the Godebski children and later, in 1912, arranged it as a ballet and orchestral suite. For the parents he wrote his 'Sonatine' for piano, a delightful work in classical sonata form. 1907 was a particularly fruitful year with the 'Cinq Melodies populaires grécques' and two major works, 'Rhapsodie Espagnole' for orchestra and 'L'Heure Espagnole', his first opera. The Rhapsodie, together with 'La Valse' and 'Boléro', were unusual in being scored directly for orchestra. Ravel composed most of his works for piano and orchestrated them later. The Rhapsodie showed his mastery in writing for the modern orchestra and it was an immediate success. This work, the opera 'L'Heure Espagnole' and 'Bolero' have the authenticity of Spanish music. He uses the Phrygian mode when wanting to impart an Andalusian flavour adding rhythms and melodies which were sung to him as a child by his mother. The Spanish composer Falla was surprised that both Debussy and Ravel could write music which he describes as 'characteristically Spanish down to the smallest details'. 'L'Heure Espagnole' is a landmark in the history of the French lyric stage. The humour of the text, which is a kind of musical conversation, by Franc-Nohain, a contemporary poet and writer, appealed to Ravel and he delighted in the scene in the clockmaker's shop with all the whirring and ticking clocks of all sizes; he emphasised the mechanical aspect rather than the human element. Meanwhile he wrote 'Gaspard de la Nuit' a piano suite in three parts, consisting of Ondine, a remarkable musical picture of water, 'Le Gibet', a stark and dismal landscape, and 'Scarbo', a scherzo of great technical difficulty and one of the most interesting virtuoso pieces in piano repertoire. Also for the piano 'Minuet sur le nom d'Haydn' and 'Seven Folk Songs of different nations' for voice and piano. In 1911 his 'Valse nobles et sentimentales' were performed anonymously and were not well received but the following year he adapted them for a ballet, *Adelaïde ou le langage de fleurs*, which was a great success. These Valses are the quintessence of Ravel and can be studied for the harmonic structure, their epigrammatic nature and the rather sensuous rhythm in a work which shows his considerable powers, both technical and emotional. They were, as usual, written for the piano and later orchestrated. In 1913 he went to St Jean de Luz to work on the 'Piano Trio' which he did not finish until [p 110]

1914 due to interruptions to attend concerts of his own works in Geneva and Lyons. While in Geneva he set 'Trois poèmes de Mallarmé' for voice, piano, two flutes and two clarinets. He went to the Godebski's summer home near Fontainebleau [sic] to prepare his ballet 'Daphne and Chloë', taking long walks in the forest for inspiration. He took immense care in writing this work and a year to write the concluding Bacchanale section. It is considered to be the finest French ballet and Ravel's masterpiece. The parts of 'Daphne and Chloë' were taken by Nijinsky and Karsavina; it was produced by Diaghilev with Fokine as choreographer.

Then came the Great War which had a profound effect on Ravel. He tried to enlist but was rejected on the grounds of small stature, poor physique and a slight heart condition. He finally got himself accepted as a lorry driver at the Front near Verdun but in spite of trying to adjust to army life and food his health deteriorated and he was sent to a hospital and then to Paris to convalesce. He was appalled at the destruction that he had seen and when his mother died early in 1917 this further blow brought on the depression and insomnia from which he was to suffer for the rest of his life. He composed the piano

suite 'Le Tombeau de Couperin' as a tribute to eighteenth century French music and each of the six movements is dedicated to a friend who lost his life in the war; although a memorial work it is not a sad one.

His next compositions, the 'Sonata for violin and 'cello' and 'La Valse' for orchestra became very popular. In 1920 he began 'L'Enfant et les Sortilèges [sic] but it was not completed until 1925. It is an operetta-ballet, the story of a naughty boy who loses his temper, breaks things and is haunted by the furniture and crockery and animals he has hurt who come to life. Soon after he started work on it he moved to a new home in the country, not far out of Paris, to a small house on the side of a steep hill overlooking L'Ile de France. He soon filled it with ornaments and mechanical toys and had two Siamese cats which he cherished for many years. By 1921 it was furnished and redecorated and then began a new creative period. The first work completed here was the violin and 'cello sonata; it is not melodious but stark and harsh. This was followed by 'Tzigane' for violin and piano, a very difficult virtuoso piece in the style of a Hungarian rhapsody. 'These mark a turning point in the evolution of my career', he wrote. In none of the later works can be found the rich harmony and colours of 'Daphne and Chloë' or 'L'Heure Espagnole'. At this time he brilliantly transcribed for orchestra Mussorgsky's great piano work 'Pictures at an Exhibition', composed several minor works and began his 'Violin and Piano Sonata' which took him four years to finish and was first performed in London. During these years he was working on and off at 'L'Enfant et les Sortilèges'.

Ravel, as one of the leading composers of the day, was frequently [sic] invited to appear, perform or conduct at concerts of his works in the various European capitals and so a lot of time was now spent in travelling. His four months tour across America and Canada astonished and delighted him. He appeared at thirty-one concerts, often as guest conductor and composed the 'Chansons Madécasses' for voice, piano, flute and 'cello while there. On his return in April 1928 he wrote the famous 'Bolero' an orchestral tour de force; it consists of a theme in three sections repeated over a relentless pedal point played on the side drum; it is an excellent study of instrumentation, each instrument

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playing the theme in turn and the whole work a crescendo to a climax where a dramatic change of key takes place. It was composed for a ballet and bears little resemblance to the Spanish dance of that name. Ravel was surprised at its immediate popularity. This same year, 1928, the honorary degree of Doctor of Music was conferred upon him by Oxford University, while at his birthplace in Ciboure, a street was named after him. In 1931 he was at work on his two piano concertos; the first in G major, is based on the classical style but with some element of jazz; it is brilliant though superficial. The second, for the left hand only, he composed for an Austrian pianist who had lost his right arm in the war. It is in one movement with a Spanish flavour throughout and with some jazz effects and it requires a performer of exceptional ability. It is one of Ravel's best and most original works and both concertos stand alone in being unlike any other for any instrument.

Shortly after the première of the 'Concerto in G major' in 1932 he embarked on an extensive tour of central Europe but in the same year was involved in an accident when his taxi collided with another car and this is thought to have accelerated his last illness. He suffered from depression and amnesia and while his brain and mind were perfectly clear he was unable to communicate and a form of paralysis occurred. His condition worsened over the next five years but he was able to travel. He agreed to an operation which was at first thought to have been successful but he relapsed into a coma and, his sufferings over, he

died on December 28th, 1937.

Ravel is first and foremost a piano composer and it is impossible to exaggerate his importance in this field. He made a distinctive contribution to piano repertoire with 'Jeux d'eau', 'Gaspard de la nuit', 'Le Tombeau de Couperin', 'Sonatine', 'Miroirs', 'Pavane pour une Infante défunte' and not least the 'Piano Concerto in G major' and the 'Piano Concerto in D for the left hand'; and remember that almost all his orchestral works were first written for the piano and are performed in both idioms, notably 'Valses nobles et sentimentales'. Special technique is not required for his piano music in spite of the complexities, but neat and impeccable playing is necessary. In vocal music the song cycle 'Schéhérazade', 'Histoires Naturelles' and 'Chansons Madécasses' are of interest and in Chamber music the best works are the 'String Quartet', the 'Piano Trio', and the 'Violin and 'cello sonata'. 'Bolero', 'L'Heure Espagnole' and 'La Valse' are perhaps the best works for introducing students to the music of Ravel and although most of his piano music is too difficult for the average pianist the 'Pavane' and the 'Sonatine' are too delightful not to be worth the effort of study and performance.

Ravel worked in classical forms with harmony rooted in tonality but he extended and enriched it in a bold and original way. Where Debussy's music is enveloped in atmosphere, Ravel's is clear cut and hard; where Debussy shimmers Ravel glitters. His sense of hearing was extremely acute and he said that he thought and felt everything in music. He was a supreme master of the orchestra and of instrumentation. All his effects are minutely calculated and everything he wrote had to be perfect, polished and finished. All his scores have detailed directions for performance and he would not tolerate any personal interpretations. Music was for him a craft and his qualities were wit, grace, elegance, clarity, flexibility, fantasy and humour, but nevertheless he is a composer for the minority.