WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 14 May 2025
7.00pm

RAVEL - the complete piano works

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet piano

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Sérénade grotesque (c. 1893)

Menuet antique (1895)

Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899)

Jeux d'eau (1901)

Sonatine (1903-5)
I. Modéré • II. Mouvement de menuet • III. Animé

Miroirs (1904–5)
Noctuelles • Oiseaux tristes • Une barque sur l'océan • Alborada del gracioso • La vallée des cloches

Interval

Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn (1909)

Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911)
Modéré, très franc • Assez lent, avec une expression intense • Modéré • Assez animé • Presque lent, dans un sentiment intime • Vif • Moins vif • Epilogue. Lent

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)
I. Ondine • II. Le gibet • III. Scarbo

Interval

A la manière de ... Chabrier (1913)

A la manière de ... Borodine (1913)

Prélude (1913)

Le tombeau de Couperin (1914-7)
I. Prélude • II. Fugue • III. Forlane • IV. Rigaudon • V. Menuet • VI. Toccata

Ravel studied piano at the Paris Conservatoire and always composed at the instrument: he told his pupil Vaughan Williams 'Without the piano, one cannot invent new harmonies.' While he was no virtuoso, instrumental virtuosity inspired him, and he composed many pieces with the superlative technique of his friend, Ricardo Viñes, in mind.

Composed when Ravel was only 18, *Sérénade grotesque* was not published until 1975. It was originally titled 'Sérénade', but the addition of 'grotesque' adds a typical Ravelian paradoxical twist, and its Hispanic flavour anticipates 'Alborada del gracioso.' Both *Sérénade grotesque* and *Menuet antique* (1895) show the influence of Chabrier. Ravel composed several minuets, but 'antique' is a surprising anachronism. While the piece is ostensibly in F sharp minor, it starts with a dissonant chord that eventually resolves, and Ravel's modal touches echo and recontextualise earlier musical languages. *Pavane pour une infante défunte* is dedicated to the Princesse de Polignac, whose Paris salon Ravel attended. Ravel's mention of a Renaissance dance and an infanta locates the dance in the Spanish court, though the composer claimed he chose the title because he liked its sound.

'Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille' (The river god laughs at the water that tickles him) is the epigraph of *Jeux d'eau*, citing the poet Henri de Régnier. Ravel's model was Liszt's 'Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este': both pieces evoke fountains through elaborate arpeggiated patterns. Ravel's immediate repetition of phrases suggests a mechanical fountain, and towards the end, a cadenza-like passage juxtaposes black- and white-note arpeggios, hinting at bitonality several years before Stravinsky.

The *Sonatine* is in three movements: the first is in sonata form (its first section is repeated), the second is a characteristic Ravel minuet and the finale is brilliant and restless. Composed in the same period as the *Sonatine*, *Miroirs* immediately suggests that the composer's aim was to reflect something in musical terms. Each of the five pieces is dedicated to a friend and fellow member of the Apaches group of young male contemporary music enthusiasts, and the suite was premièred by Viñes in 1906. 'Noctuelles' captures the unpredictable flight of moths, while Ravel situates the birds of 'Oiseaux tristes' 'in a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer.' In 'Une barque sur l'océan', Ravel does not so much paint a picture of a boat on the ocean as capture the sensation of its movement. The outer sections of 'Alborada del gracioso' conjure up the strumming, castanet-driven excitement of Spanish rhythms, while the more reflective melodic central part is an *alba* (medieval dawn song) reimagined in the early 20th Century. Finally, 'La vallée des cloches' mirrors the sound of bells heard near and far.

1909 marked the centenary of Joseph Haydn's birth and to commemorate the anniversary, Ravel, was asked by *La Revue musicale* to write a piece based on Haydn's surname, translated musically as B natural (H in German notation), A, D, D and G; the final three notes were obtained by assigning the letters of the alphabet beyond H to pitches in ascending groups of seven. Ravel indicates precisely how he used the 'Haydn' theme: the theme appears as a melodic line, as a bassline, reversed, and in retrograde inversion.

Valses nobles et sentimentales is a sequence of eight waltzes composed in 1911 as a homage to Schubert's *Valses nobles* and *Valses sentimentales*, though there is no suggestion that Ravel intended any individual piece to be specifically noble or sentimental in character. His waltzes vary in tempo and character: for instance, the second seems to echo Satie's *Gymnopédies,* and in the lively sixth piece Ravel uses off-beat accents to trip up would-be dancers. The seventh is the longest and climactic waltz, and the unusual eighth is a ghostly reminiscence: a slow chord progression is interspersed with fragments of what has been heard.

Aloysius Bertrand's nocturnal fantasies *Gaspard de la nuit* inspired Ravel to explore the furthest reaches of piano technique. Ravel must have been familiar with a new edition of Bertrand's work published in 1895 that includes two prose poems titled 'Scarbo', a shape-shifting grotesque goblin. He composed the three-movement suite in 1908: 'Ondine' is a shimmering evocation of a water sprite who seduces a human lover, and 'Le Gibet' paints a horrifying picture of hanging corpses with tolling bells as a constant backdrop. 'Scarbo' is particularly challenging: Liszt and Balakirev haunt the movement, and Ravel claimed he wanted it to be 'more difficult than Balakirev's *Islamey.*'

Ravel composed two short pastiches of Chabrier and Borodin for a collection edited by Alfredo Casella, who premièred the pieces in 1913 alongside his own pastiche of Ravel, *Almanzor ou le mariage d'Adélaïde. A la manière de Borodine* is a waltz which is reminiscent of the scherzo of the Russian composer's Second String Quartet, while the Chabrier pastiche is a complex double homage, as the aria 'Faites-moi les aveux' from Gounod's *Faust* is paraphrased, in Ravel's words, in the style of Chabrier. *Prélude* in A minor was composed in 1913 for a Paris Conservatoire sight-reading competition, which was won by the 15-year-old Jeanne Leleu; in 1910, she was one of two children who premièred Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye* for piano duet.

Ravel's model for *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17) was the French keyboard suite of the Baroque era associated with composers including François Couperin. The title 'tombeau' – literally meaning 'grave' – was used in Couperin's period to pay tribute to someone who had died. Ravel used the traditional forms of the Prelude, Fugue, Forlane, Rigaudon, Minuet and Toccata, and dedicated each movement to friends killed on active service. Curiously, Ravel wrote no more solo piano music: in his final active years as a composer, he instead used the piano as a concerto solo instrument and in chamber music.