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## RAVEL:

bolero

la valse

valse nobles et sentimentales

alborada del gracioso

pavane pour une infante defunte

Orchestre du Théâtre des Champs-Élysées  
Conducted by Pedro de Freitas Branco



*Lucy*

## MAURICE RAVEL

## Bolero

## La Valse

## Valses Nobles et Sentimentales

## Alborado del Gracioso

## Pavane Pour Une Infante Défunte

ORCHESTRE DU THÉÂTRE DES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES

Conducted by PEDRO de FREITAS BRANCO

The composition of this work was prompted by a commission from Sergei Diaghilev for his *Ballets Russes*. The famous impresario wished to stage a work using Ravel's music, on a subject which had occurred to him in 1906, and which he had entitled (*Wien*). When in 1919 the score was presented to him he declared himself deceived, criticised the excessive simplicity of the plot, saw in it only a simple waltz, found in it no possibility of brilliant choreographic expansion, and, despite a formal agreement, refused to accept it. Ravel was profoundly wounded, and broke definitively with Diaghilev. An attempt by the latter at reconciliation, some years later, almost ended in a duel.

Diaghilev had not understood how Ravel, while following in the path of Strauss and other Viennese of the nineteenth century, had nonetheless brought sonorities of exceptional depth and grandeur into this "Waltz." The composer himself, some time later wrote of the work: "I conceived this work as a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese Waltz, in which the impression of a fantastic and fatal whirling went round in my head." Indications at the beginning of the score (intended for the choreographer) amplify his personal vision of the piece: "Flashes of lightning in turbulent clouds reveal a couple waltzing. This gradually fades; one sees an immense hall peopled by a whirling crowd. The scene brightens progressively. The light of chandeliers bursts forth. An imperial court around 1855."

It would be vain to attempt an analysis of this masterpiece, in which the simplicity of the overall line is not less disconcerting than high refinement of harmonic and orchestral detail. When one has noted the skill with which rhythms and themes are treated, the perfect assimilation of form and the distinction of the inspiration, it remains only to hear it again.

The regrettable precedent of Diaghilev's commission for *La Valse* seemed to separate Ravel from everything in any way concerned with the dance, for all time. Yet in 1928 he agreed, at the request of Ida Rubenstein, to orchestrate some pieces by Albéniz with the purpose of making a ballet of them. He was about to undertake this job, when difficulties arose, on the part of the heirs of Albéniz. Their contrariness totally discouraged Ravel, and in spite of an arrangement which was proposed to him with a great deal of tact and understanding he withdrew from the project. "After all," he confided to a friend, "I would much rather orchestrate my own music than another's."

That sentence throws some light on his intentions. The composition of the *Bolero* effectively reduced itself almost to an exercise in orchestration itself. He had no difficulty in conceiving typically Iberic themes (had not his mother reared him in an atmosphere almost more Spanish than French?). He took no pains to harmonize the piece in a particularly original, or to vary it, or even to modulate (except at the final coda). He relied entirely on his astonishing mastery of the orchestra to develop this subject. He described his *Bolero* in this way himself: "A dance in a very moderate movement, constantly uniform, as mud, in the melody and harmony as in the rhythm, this last marked ceaselessly by the *tambour*. The only element of diversity is given by the orchestral *crescendo*."

The composition of this orchestra is interesting: 2 flutes, 2 piccolos, 2 oboes, an oboe d'amore, an English horn, an E-flat clarinet, 2 B-flat clarinets, a bass-clarinet, 2 bassoons, a contrabassoon, 4 horns, a small trumpet in D, 3 standard trumpets, 3 trombones, a tuba, 3 saxophones (soprano, alto, tenor), 3 tympani, 2 *tambours*, cymbales, tam-tam, celeste, harp and strings. Several unusual details should be noted: the use of the antique oboe d'amore, whose range lies between those of the oboe and English horn, the little trumpet in D, and among the saxophones, the absence of the alto, the usual representative of that group.

Ravel was very much concerned that this work not be played too quickly. He himself conducted it almost slowly, inexorably excluding all variation of tempo, however slight, and above all, any acceleration. Toscanini, on the subject, found this very much against his own taste. P. de Freitas-Branco has related how, after a concert, he was witness to the author's reproaches to the celebrated Italian. "But," Toscanini had finally retorted, "if I played it less quickly, it would no longer be endurable!" Going out of the theatre with Freitas-Branco, Ravel made the following reflection: "He will never understand that I specifically wished that it should be *unendurable*."

The author was extremely surprised at the success of his *Bolero*, and he always thought that it was due to a misunderstanding between his piece and his public. Before the first performance, at the Opéra, November 20, 1928, he had declared to his friends: "Here is a piece which the big Sunday concerts will never have the gall to inscribe on their programs."

And as his brother later recalled to him, an old lady at the performance had registered an indignant reaction in spite of the general enthusiasm, and had been so exercised as to cry out, "A madman!" And he responded with a mysterious smile, "That one . . . she understood!"

These three works below were originally written for the piano. The orchestrations of them that Ravel made later on are much less in the character of transcriptions than of actual recompositions, in which he applies a finish of stupefying perfection, as well as elaborating detail.

*La pavane pour une infante défunte* was composed—for piano—in 1899, even before Ravel had competed for the Rome Prize (he was never to receive this highest honor). When asked the meaning of this title of the *Pavane* he always answered: "In putting together the words that form this title I thought only of the pleasure of making an alliteration." We will never know whether, in giving this response, his intention was simply to mystify the person to whom he was talking. It would have been in harmony with his character, which was sometimes strangely reminiscent of Satie's.

Many listeners will be surprised to learn that, after 1912, he had at least in part disavowed his *Pavane*. "From this distance I can no longer see its good qualities," he wrote. "But, unhappily, I can see its faults all too well: the influence of Chabrier, far too obvious, and the impoverished form. . . ." The public success achieved by the piece somewhat embarrassed him. Yet after the first performance, given before a small group of friends, the specifically personal qualities of the work appeared evident. Léon-Paul Fargue, who was among those present wrote of his own strong impressions: ". . . (its) color and novelty were a revelation for all of us. . . . Ravel, from the first instant, from the first phrase, revealed himself as an independent of the first water, the great master of a personal, isolated and secret conception. . . ." Ravel however, succeeded perfectly in separating those qualities in the *Pavane* which were purely those of his youth from those in which his genuine personality is affirmed. The orchestration he made later, and which we hear on this record, permitted him to weed out certain of these youthful qualities, and above all to deepen, color, and perfect the traits by which he is always known.

The original version of the *Alborado del Gracioso* appeared as the fourth of a suite of five pieces for piano entitled *Miroirs* (Mirrors), composed in 1906. The Spanish title of this piece, usually translated as The Clown's Morning-song (*L' Aubade du Bouffon*), hints at malicious intentions, sarcastic, properly Iberic. It is dedicated to the critic and M. D. Calvo-coressi, who very early recognised the position Ravel would occupy in the history of French music.

The inspiration here is as authentically Spanish as in the *Bolero*. (Ravel was brought up by his mother in an atmosphere more Iberic than Basque, his actual origin, and he considered Spain as his "second musical homeland"; but his genuine musical affiliation is French.) Without even having sought it, he rejoined the great tradition of "musical portraiture" of Couperin and Rameau. Like them, and opposite to Beethoven, he pictures the feelings, rather than expressing them.

This *aubade* opens with a rather complicated dance-rhythm, the strumming of the clown's guitar. This is evoked by strings *pizzicati*, at first opposed to and then blended with a motive that is singing and yet strongly rhythmic. Violent orchestral and dynamic contrasts create an almost unendurable tension. *C'est*, one of the best of Ravel's commentators, wrote of the "violent and yet contained frenzy of these (Spanish) dancers" depicted in the piece. The work is interrupted by a dramatic recitative, delivered by the bassoon, but gradually the rhythm reasserts its rights, and the piece ends in a whirlwind of a *danse générale*.

The *Valses nobles et sentimentales* were first heard in their original piano version at a concert of "nameless authors" organized by *S.I.M.* in 1911. The author was identified by only a very small majority of the hearers. Later on he implicitly excused those who were mistaken, when he gave this short commentary of the work: "The title indicates my intention of composing a group of waltzes after the example of Schubert. The virtuosity which is the basis of *Gaspard de la nuit* is succeeded by a more clarified sort of writing, in which the harmony is softened, and the contours of the music are emphasized."

The work was orchestrated in the spring of the following year, at the request of the dancer Trouhanova, who wished to use it as ballet music. The first performance of this orchestral version was given April 22, 1912 at the Châtelet under the direction of Ravel, doubly the author on this occasion, since he had also devised the scenario of the production. He called it *Adelaide*, or *The Language of the Flowers*. The action takes place in the salon of the beautiful and heartless Adelaide, around 1820. To the accents of the first (*noble*) waltz, Lorédan, by means of the symbol of a flower, makes known his love to Adelaide, who responds favorably in the second, a *valse sentimentale*. Ingenious peripeties follow in the third waltz with its calculated naïveté, the dizzying fourth and the slow fifth waltzes. In the sixth, an important piece in which the dance-rhythm is a springboard for great musical liberties the perfidy is revealed for a vicious duke and his treasures she consents to abandon Lorédan. But the seventh waltz (the favorite of Ravel) brings repentance to Adelaide, and the triumph of the red rose (symbol of passion) over the poppy (flower of forgetfulness). The epilogue (the eighth waltz) is a *divertissement* in which motives borrowed from the other seven are intermixed.

—IRVING KOLODIN

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RAVEL  
BOLERO

Orchestre du Théâtre des Champs-Élysées  
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LA VALSE

Orchestre du Théâtre des Champs-Élysées  
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VALSES NOBLES ET SENTIMENTALES

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RAVEL  
ALBORADA DEL GRACIOSO  
Orchestre du Théâtre des Champs-Élysées  
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RAVEL  
PAVANE POUR UNE INFANTE DÉFUNTE  
Orchestre du Théâtre des Champs-Élysées  
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