Maurice Ravel – *Valses nobles et sentimentales*

**Composition History**

Ravel composed this music for solo piano in 1911 and orchestrated it the following year. It was first performed in the original piano version on May 9, 1911; the first concert performance of the orchestral version was given on February 15, 1914. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, side drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, glockenspiel, celesta, two harps, and strings. Performance time is approximately eighteen minutes.

**Performance History**

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* were given at Orchestra Hall on November 12 and 13, 1920, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 24, 25, 26, and 29, 2002, with Michael Gielen conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on July 24, 1938, with Eugene Goossens conducting, and most recently on July 18, 1959, with Carlos Chávez conducting.

**For the record**

The Chicago Symphony recorded Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* in 1957 under Fritz Reiner for RCA.

**Maurice Ravel**

*Born March 7, 1875, Ciboure, France.*

* Died December 28, 1937, Paris, France.*

**Valses nobles et sentimentales**

Franz Schubert was the first important composer to write the word “waltz” on a score. By then—the early 1820s—waltzing had lived down its reputation as a scandalous demonstration of excessive speed and intimate physical contact on the dance floor. Schubert knew the waltz (from the German *walzen*, to turn about) as a charming social dance, more upbeat than the traditional ländler—although he knew it only from the safety of his piano stool, where he was spared romantic encounter, the hazards of severe nearsightedness (he kept his spectacles on even in bed), and the embarrassment of
standing less than five feet tall in his dress shoes. From his seat at the piano, Schubert observed the life that eluded him. (He improvised waltzes throughout the wedding festivities of his dear friend Leopold Kupelweiser, letting no one else near the piano; by a fortuitous stroke of fate, one of the tunes remembered by the bride and passed down through her family was sung to Richard Strauss, who arranged it for piano in 1943.) In the last years of his pitifully brief life, Schubert published many of his waltzes, including the thirty-four *Valses sentimentales* and twelve *Valses nobles* that Maurice Ravel would play some seventy-five years later.

Ravel had little in common with Schubert, aside from the slight stature that disqualified both of them from military service. Ravel had the social graces and the wardrobe to shine at parties, as well as the money to enjoy the fine life, and to collect antiques, mechanical toys, and endless bric-a-brac. This same sensibility encouraged a passion for Viennese waltzes at an early age. In 1911, after Ravel discovered Schubert's piano waltzes, he decided to write his own set of noble and sentimental waltzes, taking his cue from the title and classic simplicity of his predecessor's pieces. He dedicated the score to the “delicious and ageless pleasure of a useless occupation.”

The eight *Valses nobles et sentimentales* for piano were first performed in May 1911, at a “Concert sans noms d’auteurs,” a kind of concert quiz show not unlike *Name That Tune*, where audience members were asked to guess the composer of each piece on the program. Ravel's *Valses* were variously attributed to Kodály, Satie, Chopin, and Gounod, among others, although apparently no one suggested Schubert. However, according to Ravel, “a minute majority” correctly identified his music.

The following year, Ravel agreed to orchestrate the waltzes as a ballet score for which he supplied the title—*Adelaide*—and the scenario—a series of fleeting romantic encounters during a party in Adelaide’s Paris salon. *Adelaide* is no longer staged, but Ravel's music, newly attired in shimmering orchestral colors, quickly found a home in concert halls.

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