Maurice Ravel - Piano Concerto for the Left Hand

Composition History

Ravel composed this concerto between 1929 and 1930. Paul Wittgenstein was the soloist for the first performance, on January 17, 1933, in Paris. The orchestra consists of three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, woodblock, tam-tam, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately nineteen minutes.

Performance History

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Ravel’s Piano Concerto for the Left Hand were given at Orchestra Hall on February 15 and 16, 1945, with Robert Casadesus as soloist and Désiré Defauw conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on October 1, 2, and 5, 2004, with Jean-Yves Thibaudet as soloist and Charles Dutoit conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on August 4, 1960, with John Browning as soloist and William Steinberg conducting, and most recently on July 10, 1998, with Leon Fleisher as soloist and Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

Maurice Ravel

Born March 7, 1875, Ciboure, France.  

Piano Concerto for the Left Hand

Had Paul Wittgenstein’s career as a concert pianist gone according to plan, this and several other works for piano and orchestra wouldn’t exist. He was born into one of Vienna’s most remarkable families; his father, Karl, a steel, banking, and arms magnate, and his mother, Leopoldine, brought nine children into the world. Paul was the seventh child; the eighth was Ludwig, who became one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century.
The Wittgensteins were an obsessively musical family. Their palatial Viennese home contained seven grand pianos (including two Bösendorfer Imperials), and a grand statue of a nude Beethoven towered over their Musiksaal. Brahms, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Mahler were only a few of the famous guests who climbed the marble staircase to join the family’s celebrated gatherings. All the Wittgensteins “pursued music with an enthusiasm that, at times, bordered on the pathological,” writes Alexander Waugh in his new book about the family, *The House of Wittgenstein.* Paul studied piano with Theodor Leschetizky and made a successful debut in 1913. Early the next year he enlisted in the Austrian army. A few months later, while serving on the Russian front, he was shot and seriously wounded; his right arm was amputated and he was taken prisoner by the Russians.

Being a member of a distinguished family of overachievers and survivors, and raised by a father of forceful determination, Wittgenstein didn’t intend give up his career as a pianist. (That same oppressive upbringing led his two eldest brothers to commit suicide.) While confined to the invalid ward of a Siberian P.O.W. camp, he began to “play” a Chopin piece on a wooden box with his single hand, inventing ways for five fingers to encompass both melody and harmony.

After the war was over, Wittgenstein took what many would consider his greatest asset, family money, and commissioned more than a dozen pieces for piano left-hand from some of the world’s leading composers, including Maurice Ravel, Paul Hindemith, Benjamin Britten, Richard Strauss, and Sergei Prokofiev. Wittgenstein wasn’t particularly fond of any of the pieces he commissioned—it’s questionable why, given his conservative tastes, he approached such modern-minded composers to begin with. Shortly before he died he admitted that, of all the composers he asked, he felt closest to the Austrian post-romantic Franz Schmidt.

Wittgenstein eventually came to regard Ravel’s concerto as a masterpiece, but only after living with it for some time and having words with the composer. “It always takes me a while to grow into a difficult work,” Wittgenstein said later. “I suppose Ravel was disappointed, and I was sorry, but I had never learned to pretend. Only much later, after I’d studied the concerto for months, did I become fascinated by it and realize what a great work it was.”

Ravel was already writing a piano concerto—the well-known one in G—when Wittgenstein’s commission arrived. He was intrigued by the challenge and set aside the other concerto for this one almost at once. He studied what little music he knew for left hand, including Saint-Saëns’s six studies and Leopold Goldovsky’s transcription of Chopin’s études (difficult music to begin with, now rendered virtually unplayable). He probably also knew Brahms’s transcription of J. S. Bach’s famous chaconne for violin and perhaps Scriabin’s Two Pieces for left hand, op. 9. Ravel’s concerto is a real tour de force filled with sounds that regularly suggest two hands at work. Although Wittgenstein criticized the way Ravel played it, it’s not clear that Wittgenstein’s interpretation was significantly better (his two recordings are not completely convincing). Ravel admitted to his publisher that planning the two piano concertos simultaneously was an interesting experience. The one in which I shall appear as the interpreter is a concerto in the truest sense of the word: I mean that it is written very much in the same spirit as those of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. . . . The concerto for the left hand alone is very different. It contains many jazz effects, and the writing is not so light. In a work of this kind, it is essential to give the impression of a
texture no thinner than that of a part written for both hands. For the same reason, I resorted to a style that is much nearer to that of the more solemn kind of traditional concerto.

Ravel picked up his jazz effects on his 1928 trip to the United States, where he met bandleader Paul Whiteman and spent several nights visiting jazz clubs in Harlem with George Gershwin. (He also conducted the Chicago Symphony in January and continually complained about American food.) In a lecture he gave in Houston, he said,

> May this national American music of yours embody a great deal of the rich and diverting rhythm of your jazz, a great deal of the emotional expression in your blues, and a great deal of the sentiment and spirit characteristic of your popular melodies and songs, worthily deriving from, and in turn contributing to, a noble heritage in music.

The concerto is one long movement, with an opening slow section followed by an allegro. As Ravel promised, it’s a serious work, particularly compared to his other concerto, but hardly solemn. After much orchestral fanfare, the piano enters with a virtuosic cadenza; Ravel described it as an improvisation, although as with all things in Ravel, it’s meticulously worked out. This is followed by music recalling the nights he spent in American jazz clubs. “Only gradually,” Ravel wrote, “is one aware that the jazz episode is actually built up from the themes of the first section.” It’s clear from Ravel’s melodies that he has learned all about blue notes, just as, in La valse and the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, the quintessential Frenchman wrote perfect Viennese waltzes. The final cadenza provides spectacular ripples of arpeggios and a singing melody, all with just five fingers.

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