

Piano Concerto in G major

Maurice Ravel

Between 1929 and 1931 Maurice Ravel composed both of his piano concertos more or less simultaneously: the Concerto in D major for Piano Left-Hand and Orchestra (1929–30) and the Concerto in G major for Piano (both hands) and Orchestra (1929–31). Years earlier he had sketched a piano concerto on Basque themes, which he provisionally titled *Zazpiak-Bat*. As early as 1906 he reported to the critic Léon Vallas that he was planning this work, and in 1913 he informed his friend Igor Stravinsky that he was refocusing his attention on it. However, in late 1914 Ravel, now installed in the south of France due to the disruptions of World War I, wrote to his student and colleague Roland-Manuel that he had had to give up work on the piece, since he left his sketches behind in Paris. That was the end of it — until some material from that project was reworked when he came to write his G-major Piano Concerto.

Ravel occasionally took colleagues by surprise by revealing that pieces they didn't know about were well along in their gestation. So it was that the pianist Marguerite Long (a notable interpreter of Fauré's and Debussy's music, as well as of Ravel's) recalled a gathering sometime in the 1920s:

One day at a dinner in the house of Mme. de Saint-Marceaux, whose salon, according to Colette, was “a citadel of artistic

intimacy,” Ravel said to me point-blank: “I am composing a concerto for you. Do you mind if it ends *pianissimo* and with trills?” “Of course not,” I replied, only too happy to realize the dream of all virtuosi.

One heard nothing more until 1927, the date of Ravel's journey to North America.

But after his return, a year elapsed before the Concerto was put in hand — doubtless after [Paul] Wittgenstein had commissioned the Concerto for the Left Hand. Negotiations took place for a first performance of the Concerto in G in Holland, and the Concertgebouw even announced it with the composer as soloist for March 9, 1931.

Ravel came to retract his gift to Marguerite Long as he, spurred by the success of his American tour, fixed on the idea of premiering the new concerto himself. However, it was not to be. His health was none too good, and, Long continued,

The long hours spent on the *Études* of Chopin and Liszt greatly fatigued him. ... Even when this was evident he still wished to be the first to play his work, and it was

In Short

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris

Work composed: 1929–November 14, 1931; for the first and last movements the composer reportedly drew on material he had composed in 1914

World premiere: January 14, 1932, at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, the composer conducting the Lamoureux Orchestra, Marguerite Long (the work's dedicatee), soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 7, 1933, Bruno Walter, conductor, Harold Bauer, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 18, 2009, Riccardo Muti, conductor, Mitsuko Uchida, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 22 minutes



out the precious pages. Hastily I turned to the last page to look for the *pianissimo* and the trills: they had become *fortissimo* and percussive ninths!

When he described this concerto to his friend the critic M.D. Calvoceossi, Ravel called it "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." He continued:

Ravel as Pianist

Maurice Ravel began studying piano at age seven, and five or six years later he produced his first compositions: variations, and even a sonata movement, for piano. He entered the Paris Conservatoire as a piano major, but he did not display the panache required of a top-flight concert artist and was dismissed from the Conservatoire in 1895.

Ravel next focused his attention on composition, where his greater talent resided, and his output of piano music remained steady through 1920. After collaborating with Ravel in a performance of the composer's Violin Sonata in New York, the violinist Joseph Szigeti noted:

Ravel was somewhat nonchalant about his piano-playing ... It was as if he said: "What of it, whether we play it a little better, or in a less polished and brilliant fashion? The work is set down, in its definitive form, and that is all that really matters."

only when pressed by his friends ... that he realized the difficulties confronting him in this formidable undertaking.

It can be understood how I was seized with agitation when on November 11, 1931, Ravel telephoned from Monfort l'Amaury announcing his immediate arrival with the manuscript. I had hardly composed myself when he entered holding

The music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be lighthearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or at dramatic effects. It has been said of certain classics that their concertos were written not "for" but "against" the piano. I heartily agree. I had intended to title this concerto "Divertissement." Then it occurred to me that there was no need to do so because the title "Concerto" should be sufficiently clear.

One quotes Ravel here from a sense of duty, for, in fact, his comment confuses more than it elucidates. We should probably disagree with what he seems to imply about the piano concertos of Mozart (perhaps even about those of Saint-Saëns) and, indeed, of his own capacity for profundity, certainly with regard to his Concerto for Piano Left-Hand but also in the *Adagio assai* of the G-major Concerto.

Instrumentation: flute and piccolo, oboe and English horn, clarinet and E-flat clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, wood block, slapstick, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.