

Piano Concerto in G major

Maurice Ravel

Maurice Ravel composed both of his piano concertos more or less simultaneously from 1929 to 1931: 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). As early as 1906, he reported that he had begun sketching a piano concerto on Basque themes, provisionally titled *Zazpiak-Bat*, and in 1913 he informed his friend Igor Stravinsky that he was re-focusing his attention on it. But in late 1914 Ravel, by then 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 to give up work on the piece since he had left his sketches behind in Paris. And that was the end of it, except that some material from the project was reworked when Ravel came to write his G-major Piano Concerto.

The pianist Marguerite Long (a notable interpreter of music by Fauré and Debussy, as well as Ravel) 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.

In fact, Ravel had rather retracted his gift to Marguerite Long and, spurred by the success of his American tour, fixed on the idea of premiering the new concerto himself. But 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 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,

IN SHORT

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

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris

Work composed: from 1929 to November 14, 1931, although the first and last movements reportedly drew on material composed in 1914

World premiere: January 14, 1932, at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, with 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: March 21, 2015, at the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts, Greenvale, New York, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Inon Barnatan, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

Ravel telephoned from Monfort l'Amaury announcing his immediate arrival with the manuscript. I had hardly composed myself when he entered holding 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. Calvocoressi, 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:

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 may choose to disagree with what Ravel seems to imply about the presumed frothiness of piano concertos of Mozart — perhaps even about those of Saint-Saëns — and, indeed, of his own capacity for profundity, certainly in 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 clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, wood block, whip, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Ravel as Pianist

Maurice Ravel was seven years old when he was sent off to his first piano lessons, and five or six years later he began producing his earliest compositions, which took the form of variations and even a sonata movement, not surprisingly, for piano. He was admitted to the preparatory piano classes for the Paris Conservatoire and then entered the Conservatoire itself as a piano major. Although he was obviously a capable pianist, he did not display the panache required of a top-flight concert artist at the turn of the century.

Ravel focused on composition, accordingly. Still, the piano remained an essential medium for him. His output of piano music remained steady through 1920, and in addition to music destined originally for that instrument, he translated several of his orchestral pieces into versions for piano solo or piano duet. Even during his successful and demanding tour through the United States and Canada in 1928 he was applauded most enthusiastically as a composer, a bit less warmly as a conductor, and softer still as a pianist. After collaborating with Ravel on the composer’s Violin Sonata in New York, the violinist Joseph Szigeti offered a typical assessment:

Ravel was somewhat nonchalant about his piano-playing; “unconcerned” might better describe his attitude. . . . 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.”

Ravel in 1927

