

La Valse

Maurice Ravel

Maurice Ravel was occasionally given to commenting on earlier cultural achievements through his own music, even to an extent that may be said to prefigure the postmodern obsessions of the late 20th century. One such historical strand of music that intrigued Ravel was the Viennese waltz, which reached its apex in the hundreds of examples by Johann Strauss II and came to symbolize the somewhat formalized joyfulness of 19th-century Austria. To some, it also suggested the assumed cultural superiority of a city (and a populace) that could boast of having supported some of the most notable composers of all time, from the age of Haydn and Mozart through the period of Beethoven and Schubert to the era of Brahms and Bruckner and the modernist *fin-de-siècle* moment of Mahler and Schoenberg. In 1911 Ravel paid homage to the Viennese waltz in his *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, inspired most particularly by the waltzes of Schubert, and he clarified his interest in the extra-musical connotations of the genre by inscribing this epigram at the top of the first page: “... le plaisir délicieux et toujours nouveau d’une occupation inutile” (“... the delicious and ever-fresh pleasure of a useless occupation”).

As early as 1906 Ravel started thinking about creating a musical tribute to Johann Strauss II, but he didn’t get much farther with the composition than deciding on its title: *Wien (Vienna)*. Years passed and Ravel was continually distracted by other projects; and then Europe crumbled under the calamity of World War I, during which Ravel served as a driver in the motor transport corps, having been turned down in several applications to enlist as an air-force pilot.

When the war ended, Ravel retained his admiration for the waltz as a musical genre, but its sociological implications had changed

considerably. What had formerly signified buoyant *joie de vivre* assumed an ominous tone in retrospect. The self-satisfied pleasure of 19th-century Vienna had led to national hubris and international catastrophe. By the time Ravel composed *La Valse*, in 1919–20, the gaiety of the Viennese ballroom could no longer be presented without knowing comment. Instead, Ravel’s 20-minute tone poem reveals itself, ever so gradually, to be a sort of *danse macabre*. The interval of the tritone (the augmented fourth or diminished fifth), historically understood to convey some diabolical connotation, is shot through the melodies of *La Valse*, yielding a bitonal sense of something being out of kilter. One can’t help feeling that the ballroom the piece depicts is oddly out of focus. Nonetheless, a listener encountering *La Valse* for the first time will

In Short

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris

Work composed: 1919–20, drawing on sketches made as early as 1906

World premiere: October 23, 1920, at the Kleiner Konzerthausaal in Vienna, played in its two-piano version by Ravel and Alfredo Casella at a concert of Arnold Schoenberg’s Society for Private Musical Performances; the orchestral version was premiered December 12, 1920, in Paris, by the Lamoureux Orchestra in Paris, Camille Chevillard, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 9, 1922, Willem Mengelberg, conductor; this marked the work’s New York Premiere

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 24, 2016 at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Juraj Valčuha, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 14 minutes

find it easy to make excuses for the disturbing undertones and the general wooziness: the surface is undeniably festive, after all. Not until the final minutes of the piece is one forced to accept that the waltz has run irretrievably amok. Even understanding that, listeners are likely to be shocked by the brutality of the piece's conclusion, which is nothing short of violent, terrifying, and bitterly final.

"I conceived of this work as a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz," Ravel wrote, "mingled with, in my mind, the impression of a fantastic, fatal whirling." He intended the piece for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and he accordingly prefaced his score with a vague scenario, signaling two spots specifically:

Through breaks in the swirling clouds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed. Little by little they disperse: one makes out (A) an immense hall filled with a whirling crowd.

The stage is illuminated gradually. The light of the chandeliers peaks at the fortissimo (B). An Imperial Court, about 1855.

In the event, it would not be staged by Diaghilev. When Ravel and his pianist-colleague Marcelle Meyer played through the piece in a two-piano arrangement for the great ballet impresario, Diaghilev reportedly said, "Ravel, it's a masterpiece, but it's not a ballet. ... It's the portrait of a ballet, a painting of a ballet."

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, antique cymbal, cymbals, bass drum, castanets, tam-tam, orchestra bells, two harps, and strings.

Listen for . . . Mi-Si-La



Misia Sert, Ravel's close friend, was also a muse for artists including (from top) Toulouse-Lautrec and Renoir.

Ravel's *La Valse* made musicological headlines in 2009 thanks to a startling announcement by David Lamaze, a professor at the Conservatoire de Rennes. Attentive listeners have long been aware that the three-note figure E-B-A is so common in Ravel's music as to serve almost as a musical fingerprint. As Lamaze is French, he knew these notes by their French names, mi-si-la, and he came to imagine them as encoding the name "Misia." Misia Sert was one of Ravel's closest friends. She maintained a salon frequented by a who's who of artists and musicians, and her portrait was painted by the likes of Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec. She was the dedicatee of both *La Valse* and "Le Cygne" ("The Swan") from Ravel's song cycle *Histoires naturelles*.

"It has never been done before," stated Lamaze, "to take one person and to place them at the center of a life-long work." His analysis revealed that the mi-si-la motif appears at crucial junctures of *La Valse*. What's more, he found that at the work's beginning, before the waltz grows desperate, Ravel has interlinked those notes with an extra A and E; as the only two vowels in the composer's surname, they may represent the name "Ravel." By linking the names Misia and Ravel through these musical means, Lamaze believes, the composer may have revealed a romantic attraction that is far from clearly documented through more conventional means.