

VOLUME 1

OLEG MARSHEV

RAVEL

Complete Solo Piano Music

**Jana
CORD**

For Ravel, as for Beethoven and Stravinsky, the craft of composition was an essentially pianistic endeavour. While his image has become fixed in popular reception by masterpieces of orchestral colour such as *Boléro*, *La valse* and *Daphnis et Chlôé*, the composer regarded the processes of composition and orchestration as separate. He remarked to his student Vaughan Williams that 'without a piano one cannot invent new harmonies'. For an orchestral piece to emerge, a piano version would have to be made first, not merely as a sketch to be filled out by instrumentation, except in the case of *Boléro* (a one-off in several ways), but as a self-sufficient score. Orchestration, he said, concerns 'transferring the effect of both pedals of the piano – i.e. creating an atmosphere of sound around the music, around the written notes.'

A distinction is worth making between the exercise of the imagination and the process of transferring it to the page via the medium of the piano, particularly in the case of a composer who declared that if he had any genius at all, it was in knowing how to work. While even a notorious wrist-breaker such as 'Scarbo' is written with an intimate understanding of the piano's resources, and in that sense presents no awkwardness of idiom such as we find in the piano writing of Dvořák and Janáček, Ravel's own limitations as a pianist are confirmed by a few surviving piano-roll recordings, though they did not prevent him from practice with Chopin's Etudes. Such limitations work to the benefit of music deriving its effect not from the fluency or mastery of a performer – the composer himself, in the long 19th-century tradition extending from Beethoven to Rachmaninov via Liszt – but as the supremely polished outer working of a fiercely guarded individuality. In this regard, his piano writing owes much to the music of a fellow Mozart-lover, Camille Saint-Saëns, regarded at the time as a conservative but to whom Ravel never failed to pay the warmest tribute.

Ravel was a teenaged dandy and a rebellious student at the Paris Conservatoire in 1892-3 when he composed the *Sérénade grotesque*. He added the descriptor in 1928 but refrained from submitting the piece for publication, and it lay unknown until the centenary year of 1975. The sole recorded public performance seems to have been given in 1901 by its dedicatee, the Catalan-born pianist Ricardo Viñes, a fellow student of Ravel in the advanced piano class at the Conservatoire led by Charles de Bériot, and the first assiduous champion of his piano music.

As his earliest surviving work in any genre, the Serenade already speaks with Ravel's accent, inflected by his Spanish heritage. Born in the Basque village of Ciboure, just across the river from the resort of Saint-Jean-de-Luz which now hosts an annual festival in his honour, Ravel took pride in a local Basque

identity inherited from his mother, Marie Deluart, (his father Pierre-Joseph was a Swiss-born engineer, which partially accounts for Stravinsky's double-edged compliment to 'the Swiss watchmaker of music').

Ravel also acknowledged the influence of Emmanuel Chabrier on the Serenade, which is plain to hear in its opening theme, marked 'très rude' and 'pizzicatissimo'. The composer of *España* casts an even longer shadow over the *Menuet antique* (1895), and specifically the 'Menuet pompeux' from his *Dix Pièces pittoresques* of 1881. Ravel's homage fuses modal ('antique') harmonies with an 18th-century dance form (cast in F sharp minor with a heavy accent on the first beat of the bar and enclosing a gentler, major-key second minuet) and his own, fast-developing language of semitone clashes, major-seventh and -ninth intervals and abrupt dynamic contrasts.

By contrast, *La Parade* is indubitably by Ravel, yet it could have been written by anyone passingly acquainted with the person or music of Erik Satie and an assiduous frequenter of music-halls. The manuscript, discovered a few years ago in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, is in his hand, but the title is added by another. The mysteries multiply with further annotations to the score suggesting it was composed 'sous le pseudonyme de Jacques Dream', together with the qualification, 'élève de Dalier, organiste-compositeur'. The period of composition is no more certain, though a suggested date of 1896 makes sense of a further annotation that it was written as dance music to a scenario devised by Antonine Meunier (1877-1972), a leading young member of the Ballet at the Paris Opéra.

Bowling along in D major for much of the time, *La Parade* opens with a 'Mouv. de marche'. Flashy rising scales cue 'Scène I', which introduces a suite of dances including a waltz in F sharp major and a mazurka in G flat. The most remarkable quality of *La Parade* – which seems to have been written out in haste – is its lack of an artistic fingerprint. By contrast, the unmistakably Ravellian identity of the *Pavane pour une infante défunte* may partly explain why the composer sought to distance himself from it in later life, citing an unduly heavy debt to Chabrier and failings in its form. For all that, there is less trace of Chabrier in the melancholy tread and cloudy harmonies than there is of Ravel's teacher at the conservatoire, Gabriel Fauré.

The grave mood of the Pavane has encouraged many listeners to think of it as an elegy, like a slighter musical version of a Velásquez portrait. Ravel himself described it as 'an evocation of a pavane that a little princess [Infanta] might, in former times, have danced at the Spanish court'. On the other hand, when once asked about the origin of the title, he replied: 'Do not be surprised, that title has nothing to do with the composition. I simply liked the sound of those words and I put them there, c'est tout.'

Ravel also later paid tribute to Fauré as ‘the origin of whatever pianistic innovation my works may be thought to contain’. In dedicating *Jeux d’eau* (1901) to his teacher he paid thanks with his most original and individual work yet. Ravel outlined its form thus: ‘This piece, inspired by the noise of water and by the musical sounds which make one hear the sprays of water, the cascades, and the brooks, is based on two motives in the manner of the movement of a sonata – without, however, subjecting itself to the classical tonal plan.’ The score bears an evocative annotation, quoted from the work of the symbolist poet Henri de Régnier (1864-1936), loosely translated as ‘The river god laughing at the water which tickles him’ in reference to a fountain at Versailles.

Liszt’s work supplies the most obvious precedents for the music and title of *Jeux d’eau*, notably *Au bord d’une source* as a rippling evocation of the movement of water, as well as ‘Les Jeux d’eau à la Villa d’Este’ from the third book of the *Années de pèlerinage*. However, the shimmering, uneven texture of *Jeux d’eau* is all Ravel’s own, partly achieved by use of the piano’s sustain pedal in passages dominated by the upper register, in order to give ‘an impression of vibrations in the air’.

Having finally left the Conservatoire without formally graduating in 1903, Ravel began taking on composition pupils of his own. Among them was Maurice Delage, hitherto untutored in music, but who had learnt to play the interludes from Debussy’s *Pélleas* by ear. Delage’s playing and his dedication impressed Ravel, and he offered private instruction. On the back of some exercises by Delage, Ravel wrote out a tiny Minuet in C sharp minor. The courtly dance form is softened and modulated here by veiled, fourth-enriched harmonies; even within the matter of a few phrases, Ravel establishes a tension which is dissolved by a climax and a dying fall. In this context Ravel’s guidance to his pupil Vlado Perlemuter is worth recalling as advice which the composer followed throughout his life: ‘Copy, and if while copying you remain yourself, that’s because you have something to say.’

The impact of *Pélleas* on Ravel and his contemporaries – not only composers but artists in every medium – could hardly be overstated. After leaving one of the opera’s early performances, Viñes, Ravel and their friends were presumably in high spirits when a newspaper-seller mocked them as ‘Apaches’, a term used at the time to describe menacing street-gangs. The young musicians adopted the term, and in fact made a nuisance of themselves at their weekly gatherings hosted by the painter Paul Sordes.

Delage joined the Apaches in the spring of 1904, and as a man of private means he rented a meeting-place that would not disturb Sordes’ neighbours: a small, detached wooden pavilion in a garden

near Auteuil at 3, rue de Civry. Each Saturday evening, they would meet, drink coffee, smoke and talk late into the night. The poet Léon-Paul Fargue recalled their common interests, beyond Debussy: 'Chinese art, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, Cézanne and Van Gogh, Rameau and Chopin, Whistler and Valéry, Debussy and the Russians'. Viñes was the designated pianist, and on several occasions he played *Jeux d'eau* together with Balakirev's oriental fantasy *Islamey* as exemplars of a new language and literature for the piano.

On another occasion Viñes reported to the Apaches that he was working with Debussy on a piece which produced an almost improvisatory effect (*Un cahier d'esquisses*). Ravel announced that he was thinking along the same, independent lines – 'I would really like to do something to free myself from *Jeux d'eau*' – and soon showed the pianist a new piece, 'Oiseaux tristes'. Viñes' enthusiasm was not matched by the rest of the Apaches, but by 1905 Ravel had produced another four pieces which he dedicated to other members of the group. The set was published in 1906 as *Miroirs*, and announced a further, radical evolution in Ravel's piano writing from *Jeux d'eau*, even while the arpeggios, cascades and double trills throughout are obviously Lisztian in origin.

The distinguished Ravel pianist Marguerite Long (first performer of *Le tombeau de Couperin* in 1919) perceived the title of *Miroirs* as 'an aesthetic proposition. It underlines what the Impressionists have shown us – the pre-eminence of reflected light from the direct image in the appeal to our sensibility and in the creation of an illusion. These pieces are intensely descriptive and pictorial. They banish all sentiment in expression but offer to the listener a number of refined sensory elements which can be appreciated according to his imagination.'

'Noctuelles' ('Night Moths') was inspired by a line of Fargue to whom it was dedicated: 'The moths leave their sheds in clumsy flight to drape themselves around other beams.' Ravel described 'Oiseaux tristes', dedicated to Viñes, as an evocation of 'Birds lost in the torpor of a deep dark forest in the hottest hours of summer', inspired by an occasion when he heard unseen birds calling in the forest of Fontainebleau. Faure grasped the point: 'Ravel set store by the player bringing out two levels: the birdcalls with their rapid arabesques on a higher, slightly strident level and the suffocating, sombre atmosphere of the forest on a lower level which is rather heavy and veiled in pedal without much movement.' Dedicated to Sordes, 'Une barque sur l'océan' returns to the Impressionistic preoccupation with water: its movement, depths and colours. The opening theme represents the boat, but the indication of 'd'un rythme souple' guides both pianist and listener to focus on the unpredictable swell of the ocean.

In the words of its dedicatee, the critic M.D. Calvocoressi, 'Alborada del gracioso' is 'a scherzo, a big independent scherzo in the manner of Chopin and Balakirev.' And for that matter, Albeniz, as Ravel returns to the Spanish idiom of the *Sérénade grotesque* with a guitar-like opening motif and castanet patterns. Ravel tried to explain the title to his German publisher: 'I understand your bafflement over how to translate the title 'Alborada del gracioso'. That is precisely why I decided not to translate it. The fact is that the *gracioso* of Spanish comedy is a rather special character and one which, so far as I know, is not found in any other theatrical tradition. We do have an equivalent, though, in the French theatre: Beaumarchais's Figaro. But he is more philosophical, less well-meaning than his Spanish ancestor. The simplest thing, I think, is to follow the title with the rough translation "Morning Song of the Jester". That will be enough to explain the humoristic style of this piece.'

Finally, dedicated to Delage, there is 'La vallée des cloches', instructively composed some years before Debussy's take on a similar subject in 'La cathédrale engloutie'. Sounding in octaves, the bells chime firstly one beat apart, then one and a half, then half a beat, then two beats and then one and a half beats, evoking the space and naturalistically irregular chime of bells heard from a distance. A fragment of a chorale sounds against the lowest tolling bell, before developing into one of the composer's richest melodies.

As an appendix to the first volume of his Ravel survey, Oleg Marshev adds one of the fugues which Ravel composed for his serial and unsuccessful attempts to win the Prix de Rome between 1900 and 1905. This F major example was composed for the 1901 competition, each of the four voices being assigned to a separate staff in the established practice followed by Bach for *The Art of Fugue*. Marshev has arranged it for two hands at the keyboard and corrected misprints in the available source.

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Oleg Marshev plays Ravel

Concerto for piano and orchestra in G major · Concerto for the left hand for piano and orchestra

South Jutland Symphony Orchestra · Vladimir Ziva

Danacord DACOCD 672

Oleg Marshev

Gramophone considered Oleg Marshev's first album of Prokofiev on Danacord (DACOCD391) as featuring 'one of the most authoritative and impassioned performances [of the First Sonata] on disc so far'. His interpretation of the 'War' Sonata trilogy was awarded a 'Classic CD Choice' and compared with pillars of the gramophone such as Richter, Berman and Ashkenazy.

Born in Baku, Azerbaijan, Oleg Marshev trained with Valentina Aristova at the Gnessin State Musical College and with Mikhail Voskresensky at the Moscow Conservatoire. He is numbered among the fifth generation of Russian pianism since Liszt, through the lineage of Alexander Siloti, Konstantin Igumnov and Voskresensky's teacher, Lev Oborin. Resident in Italy since 1991, Marshev received awards in several international piano competitions in Canada, Italy, Portugal, Spain, USA, including four first prizes. He is now widely acknowledged as one of the most talented Russian pianists of his generation.

In 1991 Marshev made an acclaimed New York debut with a recital at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall. The following year he first appeared at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw which led to other invitations to perform at this prestigious hall. Since then he has given recitals and concerts across the world at venues such as Wigmore Hall of London, the Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli Festival of Brescia-Bergamo, Italy, the Klavier Festival Ruhr, Germany, and La Roque d'Anthéron. Alongside his concert engagements, Marshev regularly gives masterclasses in many different countries and is a Professor at the Anton Bruckner University in Linz.

Oleg Marshev began his distinguished recording career with the complete original works for solo piano by Prokofiev (5 CDs) for Danacord Records. He has since made over 35 albums for the same label, featuring works by Schubert, Brahms, Strauss, Rubinstein, Rachmaninov and others. His six-volume series of Emil von Sauer's complete piano music was a notable first on records, and he was among the first pianists to have recorded the complete works for piano and orchestra by the great 'Russian Four' of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Prokofiev and Shostakovich; Chopin and Mendelssohn have also been the subject of complete concertante editions. His interest in little-known and forgotten music has yielded a 4 CD album of Danish romantic piano concertos.

Marshev's recordings have been positively received by leading international publications. 'Marshev is a phenomenon,' wrote BBC Music Magazine of his Shostakovich concertos. 'Master of every mood from strip-cartoon crispness to thundering monster, but above all a controlling sensibility of intelligence and feeling.'





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The first volume of Oleg Marshev's new Ravel survey draws together threads of pianistic innovation and Spanish influence from the composer's earliest surviving work through to the groundbreaking cycle of *Miroirs* published in 1905. Rarities include the first-ever piano recording of one of the fugues written by Ravel in his attempts to win the Prix de Rome. 'Marshev is a phenomenon' *BBC Music Magazine*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

- [1] Sérénade grotesque 3:23
[2] Menuet antique 7:42
[3] La Parade 14:14
[4] Pavane pour une infante défunte 7:00
[5] Jeux d'eau 5:57
[6] Menuet in C sharp minor 1:11
Miroirs:
[7] I. Noctuelles 5:16
[8] II. Oiseaux tristes 4:35
[9] III. Une barque sur l'océan 7:58
[10] IV. Alborada del gracioso 6:28
[11] V. La vallée des cloches 6:06

[12] Fugue in F Major 4:59

Oleg Marshev, piano