

Maurice Ravel (1835-1937) *La Valse*

Maurice Ravel, who was born in the far south-west of France (formerly a Basque region), is most appreciated for his descriptive and colourful musical works. Written in 1919 and premiered the following year, *La Valse* was completed in response to Diaghilev's commission for a ballet, originally called *Wien*. The ballet was dropped however when the entrepreneur announced the work as unsuitable: "it is not a ballet. It's a portrait of a ballet". Ravel was deeply hurt by the episode and refused to shake Diaghilev's hand when they met again five years later. A ridiculous episode was narrowly avoided when Diaghilev challenged Ravel to a duel over the insult, later recanting due to the persuasion of friends!

Perhaps as a result of his parents, (Joseph Ravel was a successful and ingenious engineer and inventor, while Maurice's mother Marie was of Basque origin) Ravel's music is extremely colourful and inventive, adopting strains and characteristics of many foreign sources, while combining these seemingly incompatible qualities into his effortless acerbic style. Interestingly he was regarded with deep suspicion within his own society for a long time: three times he was denied the *Prix de Rome* while studying at the Conservatoire in Paris. Clearly he was a rebel (along with Debussy and others), belonging to the musical *avant-garde*, and his works and development were eagerly discussed in the societies and journals. '*Impressionism*' was a term often used to describe the evocative musical poetry of composers such as Ravel, and yet this facile term is more suited to the painting movement from which it originates. Though Ravel was not interested in the traditional forms of sonatas and chose not to develop as a symphonist, his overwhelming skill as an orchestrator, a feel for colour, passion and ability to evoke scenes as diverse as a Spanish bordello (*Bolero*) or the poems of Stephan Mallarme (in the piano pieces *Gaspard de le Nuit*) give his music a massive popular appeal.

The lushly orchestrated tone-poem *La Valse* captures a depth of feeling probably experienced by Ravel following the death of his mother in 1917. In a society devastated by four long years of war the essence of the waltz eagerly captures the spirit of vanished opulence and security, epitomised in the *fin de siècle* culture of Vienna and the Austro-Hungarian empire.