

# MIRROR WORLDS

11:30AM

SUNDAY 13 OCTOBER 2024

REARDON THEATRE



**Maurice RAVEL (1875 – 1937)**

***Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899)***

***Miroirs (Reflections) (1905)***

1. *Noctuelles. Très léger*
2. *Oiseaux tristes. Très lent*
3. *Une barque sur l'océan. D'un rythme souple*
4. *La vallée des cloches. Très lent*
5. *Alborada del gracioso. Assez vif*

***La Valse (1919)***

Stephen McIntyre *Piano*

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**Maurice RAVEL (1875 – 1937)**

***Pavane pour une infante défunte***

From his student days until the years between the World Wars, Ravel habitually attended the salon of the Princess de Polignac (née Winnaretta Singer, heiress to the Singer sewing machine fortune). It was for her that he composed his *Pavane pour une infante défunte (Pavane for a Dead Princess)* in 1899, while he was still at the Conservatoire de Paris under Fauré. Almost overnight it became the rage of Parisian drawing rooms and salons.

The seemingly morbid title of the work belies its real meaning – according to Ravel himself, “It is not a funeral lament for a dead child, but rather an evocation of the pavaues which might have been danced by such a little princess as painted by Velázquez at the Spanish court.” Or, in the words of author Marc Raymond Strauss, “Ravel’s princess is dead in the sense that she is lost – a remote, archaic creature.” This is clearly reflected in the music, which evokes the elegance of a slow courtly dance, its delicate melody and sensuous harmony creating a serene, nostalgic atmosphere. © Douglas Rutherford, 2024

***Miroirs***

Composed between 1904 and 1905, *Miroirs (Mirrors)* marks a turning point in Ravel’s artistic development, in large part due to his association with *Les Apaches*, a group of avant-garde artists, writers and musicians. The suite’s title of course suggests the idea of reflection, literally and figuratively, with each of the movements reflecting various images, moods and characters in a highly evocative way. Altogether the suite reveals Ravel’s fascination with harmonic innovation and his exploration of texture and colour, while embodying his departure from traditional forms and embrace of a more impressionistic style.

*Noctuelles (Night Moths)* opens with intricate semiquaver and triplet flourishes calling to mind a myriad of nocturnal flutterings. The second movement, *Oiseaux tristes (Sad Birds)*, is a melancholy portrayal of birds calling in a shadowy forest, using spare, dissonant harmonies to suggest solitude. *Une barque sur l'océan (A Boat on the Ocean)* unfolds in sweeping, arpeggiated waves, vividly depicting the motion of the sea. The fourth movement, *Alborada del gracioso (Morning Song of the Jester)*, is a vivacious Spanish dance whose brilliance and rhythmic flair contrast strongly with the other movements. Ravel ends the suite with the ethereal, sonorous and profoundly serene *La vallée des cloches (The Valley of Bells)*. © Douglas Rutherford, 2024

## ***La valse***

As an impressionist, Ravel was more self-contained than the style's originator, Debussy, but in a handful of works, he moved boldly in the direction of expressionism, where distortion became symbolic of reality. In the orchestral realm, the first and most famous of these is *La valse* (the second being the Concerto for the Left Hand). Written between 1919 and 1920, *La valse* occupies a special place in Ravel's oeuvre, in that it contains a chilling social commentary, specifically the portrayal in its final pages of the frenzied death throes of 19th-century imperial society, as symbolised through its dance obsession: the waltz.

Initially Ravel had planned the work in 1906 as a kind of homage to Johann Strauss II, but 13 years – and the First World War – came between its conception and completion. Undoubtedly the catastrophic conflict had a huge impact on the character of the music, and perhaps this was the real reason why Serge Diaghilev famously rejected the score after commissioning it for his Ballets Russes.

Ravel included a descriptive note in the score, which reads: “Through swirling clouds, waltzing couples may be faintly distinguished. The clouds gradually scatter. We can see ... an immense hall peopled with a whirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of the chandeliers bursts forth at the fortissimo. An imperial court, circa 1855.”

The composer himself arranged a solo piano version of *La valse* that distils the dense orchestration of the original, resulting in an extraordinarily virtuosic piano part. It opens with fuzzy rumblings in the bass and fragments of melody gradually emerging through the haze. Soon the waltz blossoms into full, sweeping phrases, but becomes increasingly frantic and dissonant. The music accelerates, teetering on the edge of chaos, until it spirals into a wild, quasi-apocalyptic *danse macabre*. © Orrin Howard (adapted)