

MAURICE RAVEL

Born March 7, 1875 in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France; died December 28, 1937 in Paris

Concerto in D major for Piano (Left Hand Alone) and Orchestra (1929-1930)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, November 27, 1931

Grosser Musikvereinssaal
Vienna Symphony Orchestra
Robert Heger, conductor
Paul Wittgenstein, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 19 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

Maurice Ravel made a triumphant tour of America as pianist and conductor in 1928. Plans were begun almost immediately for a second foray into the New World, and he started work on a piano concerto in 1929 that was to be the centerpiece of the venture. While he was at work on what became the Concerto in G, however, he was asked to compose another concerto by the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, brother of the eminent Austrian philosopher, Ludwig, who was determined to continue his concert career despite the loss of his right arm during the First World War. Wittgenstein had transcribed several piano works for his own performance for left hand alone and commissioned new pieces from some of the era's most distinguished composers — Strauss, Prokofiev, Franz Schmidt, Britten, Hindemith, Korngold. Ravel was intrigued by Wittgenstein's sincerity and by the challenge of the project, and he accepted the proposal. He laid aside the concerto in progress, and took up the new score with enthusiasm.

Of the Left Hand Concerto, Ravel wrote, "It contains many jazz effects, and the writing is not as light [as the Concerto in G]. In a work of this kind, it is essential to give the impression of a texture no thinner than that of a part written for both hands. For the same reason, I have resorted to a style that is much nearer to that of the more solemn kind of traditional concerto. A special feature is that, after a first section in this traditional style, a sudden change occurs and the jazz music begins. Only later does it become manifest that the jazz music is built on the same theme as the opening part."

The Left Hand Concerto is in three sections. The opening rises from a barely audible rumbling of the lowest instruments during which two thematic cells are presented: the first, with its snapping rhythmic figures, is intoned by the contrabassoon; the other, appearing in the eighth measure, is a smooth melody presented by the horns in octaves. (It is this second motive on which the "jazz music" of the central section is based.) The two themes are interwoven to achieve a crashing climax from the full orchestra after which the soloist emerges with a cadenza based on the snapping-rhythm theme. Most of the remainder of the opening section is given over to further orchestral elaborations of this melody, with florid figurations from the soloist. The central, "jazzy" section is driving in rhythm and brilliantly brittle in sonority. A scherzo-like strain and a cheeky tune piped by the high woodwinds are followed by the recall of the smooth melody of the beginning, here entrusted to the solo bassoon and then the solo trombone. The jaunty scherzo resumes, but is brought to a sudden halt by a silence and the return of the snapping opening theme in a bold setting for full orchestra. A sweeping cadenza and closing flourishes from the orchestra bring this masterwork of Ravel's maturity to a powerful conclusion.