

# Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”



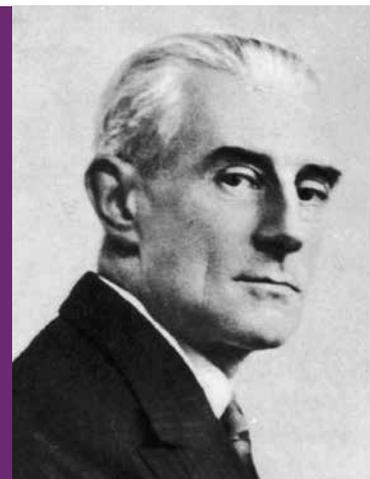
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JANUARY 2017

## Masterworks #4: Beethoven & Ravel January 20-22, 2017

*Unraveling Ravel: His most well-known composition was written while he was afflicted with a progressive brain disease.*



In 1927, 10 years before his death, Ravel began exhibiting signs of the neurological deterioration that ultimately claimed his life. Yet, despite troubling hand tremors, memory lapses and slowing mental processes, Ravel's most enduring works, including *Bolero* and his Piano Concerto in G Major, were composed during this difficult time in his life.



Early biographers speculated about the disorder that plagued Ravel. Some called it dementia, some claimed Pick's Disease, while others believed it was

the end result of an injury sustained in an automobile accident,<sup>i</sup> but all agreed that at varying times in the last ten years of his life, Ravel experienced devastating symptoms, especially for a composer whose livelihood was dependent on his ability to express himself clearly. Ravel suffered from aphasia (the inability to comprehend or formulate language), apraxia (difficulty performing motor tasks or movements), agraphia (loss of the ability to write) and alexia (the loss of the ability to read.)<sup>ii</sup> And yet somehow, in spite of his symptoms, Ravel composed. How?

Our story begins with Ravel's birth in 1875. Demonstrating early musical gifts, he was given piano lessons from age seven, despite his family's financial worries.<sup>iii</sup> His father, a Swiss-born civil engineer, moved the family to various locations in Paris, as he sought to make his fortune with various industrial schemes.<sup>iv</sup> At

14, Ravel was accepted at the Paris Conservatory, where he studied composition with Jules Massenet and Gabriel Fauré.<sup>v</sup> One of his earliest pieces was composed in 1893, after being introduced to Erik Satie<sup>vi</sup>, then a café pianist. Although Ravel repeatedly entered the Conservatory's competitions for harmony and piano, he did not win, and ultimately, his inability to win the coveted "Prix de Rome" during his 14 years at the Conservatory, prompted him to leave.<sup>vii</sup> In 1900, Maurice joined a new group of innovative artists and musicians, The Apache Club, a male-dominated group of musicians (including Erik Satie, Igor Stravinsky and Jean Cocteau, among others), who met regularly until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.<sup>viii</sup>

With the eruption of World War I, Ravel enlisted in the army, with dreams of becoming a pilot. Small in stature and light in weight, Ravel was



not deemed a suitable candidate.<sup>ix</sup> Instead, he was selected as a truck driver, and posted to the Verdun front. During his time in the service, Ravel was injured when his truck, (which he had nicknamed 'Adelaide') slid into a ditch.<sup>x</sup> Returning to Paris on sick leave, he found his mother gravely ill and he was devastated by her death in 1917.<sup>xi</sup>

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Ten years later, in 1927, Ravel was a successful composer who had completed his famous orchestral arrangement of Mussorgsky's *Pictures At An Exhibition*, but signs of neurological impairment were becoming evident: he was making "blunders" in writing, and his trembling hand compromised his ability to write.<sup>xii</sup> Ignoring his doctor's recommendation of rest, Ravel pushed forward with his highly successful four-month North American tour in 1928, which resulted in a meeting with George Gershwin.<sup>xiii</sup> Ravel spent time in New Orleans and Harlem, listening to jazz and ragtime, and received a standing ovation in New York City.<sup>xvi</sup> Upon his return to France in 1929, he wrote



three of his most famous works: *Bolero*, Piano Concerto in G Major and his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, a piece commissioned by pianist Paul Wittgenstein (who, as a 27-year old, had lost his right arm as the result of an injury sustained during his service in World War I.)<sup>xv</sup> The neurological symptoms appeared to be somewhat reduced, but a precipitous decline in his health accelerated upon a 1932 taxi-cab accident in Paris.

Ravel's injuries from the accident went beyond his broken teeth and bruised head and chest; following the accident, Ravel's mental state deteriorated.<sup>xvi</sup> While on a vacation in 1933, Ravel (always a strong swimmer), lost the ability to swim and nearly drowned. Writing became so much of a challenge that he could not even sign his name.<sup>xvii</sup> Ravel's last public appearance was in November of 1933, conducting *Bolero* and his piano concerto; remarkably, while suffering from diminished neurological faculties, he still retained the ability to hear music.<sup>xviii</sup>

In a desperate effort to obtain relief from debilitating symptoms, Ravel agreed to undergo neurosurgery. He was subjected to exploratory brain surgery (apparently without adequate anesthetic) in December of 1937 to determine if a tumor was the cause of his problems.<sup>xix</sup> No tumor was found. Although he briefly regained consciousness post-surgery, Ravel slipped into a coma and died nine days later.

Fast forward 57 years to 1994: Anne Adams, a scientist and amateur painter, became fascinated with the music of Ravel, translating the score into visual art entitled *"Unraveling Bolero."*<sup>xx</sup>



At the time, Adams had no idea she was suffering (and would die) from the same rare disease that had stricken Ravel, now with a name: frontotemporal dementia (FTD), a disorder that alters currents in the brain.<sup>xxi</sup> According to physician Dr. Bruce Miller,<sup>xxii</sup> when one part of the brain is compromised, another part can "remodel" or even become stronger, resulting in a torrent of creative activity. The story of Adams was the subject of an episode of "Radio Lab" on NPR. The podcast detailing the remarkable coincidences between Adams and Ravel may be heard at: <http://www.radiolab.org/story/217340-unraveling-bolero>



The tragedy of Ravel's illness has been examined by countless experts, and one neurologist, Francois Boller, sadly concluded, "He didn't lose the ability to compose music; rather, he lost the ability to express it."<sup>xxiii</sup> The irony is that some of his greatest works were created during periods of his greatest anguish, proof that we can overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

**Please join the HSO's presentation of Beethoven & Ravel, including Ravel's dazzling and jazz-inspired Piano Concerto in G Major, January 20 - 22, 2017.**

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### Wondering How the Music Will Sound?

Please try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE below, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!

To hear Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, enjoy this recording of a string chamber orchestra, conducted by Otto Klemperer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6i0mkGZCees>

To hear the same piece as originally written for string quartet, performed by the Alban Berg Quartet:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEZxjW\\_s0Qs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEZxjW_s0Qs)

A great recording of Martha Argerich performing Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq1ueeJucA8>

Schubert's 9th Symphony, conducted by Sir Ricardo Muti and the Wiener Philharmonika:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAEz0TXqdOE>

### The return of Casey's Classics

*Recommended recordings for your listening pleasure!*

#### Curious about what you will be hearing on the concert program, or want to hear more?

**Coleman Casey**, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

**Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*** receives a classic performance from Otto Klemperer and the Philharmonia Orchestra (EMI/WARNER).

**Ravel's Piano Concerto in G** is superlatively well performed and recorded in a brilliant version of both of Ravel's piano concertos with Krystian Zimerman with Pierre Boulez conducting, and the engineers have provided a crystalline and detailed recording (DG).

**Schubert's Symphony No. 9** ("Great") is compellingly conducted in echt Viennese style by George Solti and the Vienna Philharmonic in beautiful sound (DECCA). Although Solti is more often associated with works that call for lots of animal energy, here he relaxes in the most ingratiating way and is rewarded with sublime playing from the orchestra.

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/ravel.php>

<sup>ii</sup> Henson, R.A. Maurice Ravel's illness: a tragedy of lost creativity, *British Medical Journal*, Volume 296, June 1988; [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC254963](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC254963)

<sup>iii</sup> Ivry, Benjamin. *Maurice Ravel, A Life*. Rain Publishers.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/Maurice-ravel-312-php>

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

<sup>x</sup> Ibid

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xii</sup> Henson, R.A. Maurice Ravel's illness: a tragedy of lost creativity, *British Medical Journal*, Volume 296, June 1988; [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC254963](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC254963)

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/maurice-ravel-mn0000932757/biography>

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/Maurice-ravel-312-php>

<sup>xv</sup> <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/maurice-ravel-mn0000932757/biography>

<sup>xvi</sup> Henson, R.A. Maurice Ravel's illness: a tragedy of lost creativity, *British Medical Journal*, Volume 296, June 1988; [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC254963](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC254963)

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xix</sup> <http://www.maurice-ravel.net/health.htm>, 20 Sept 2016

<sup>xx</sup> Blakeslee, Sandra. A Disease That Allowed Torrents of Creativity, *NY Times*, 8 April, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/08/health/08brai.html>

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xxii</sup> Neurologist and director of the Memory and Aging Center at the University of California, San Francisco.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Whitfield, John. Brain Disease shaped Bolero. <http://www.nature.com/news/2002/020122/full/news020121-1.html>