

MAURICE RAVEL

Piano Concerto in G major

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, southwest France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris

Work composed: 1929–31

World premiere: January 14, 1932, in Paris. Marguerite Long was the soloist, and the composer conducted the Lamoureux Orchestra.

Ravel composed his G Major Piano Concerto late in his career, following a concert tour of the United States he undertook in 1928. That visit proved so successful that the composer immediately began planning for a second one, during which he hoped to perform a concerto of his own with American orchestras. After returning to his home, near Paris, Ravel began writing such a work toward the end of 1929.

Ravel was a painstakingly slow worker, something his meticulous attention to every compositional detail assured. As a result of his habitual diligence and the necessity to complete other projects, he did not finish the concerto until November 1931. By this time Ravel had abandoned his plans for a second American tour. He therefore presented the concerto to his friend Marguerite Long, a well-known French pianist, who gave the first performance in January 1932.

Ravel took pains to distance this work from the Romantic paradigm of the heroic concerto, stating: "I believe that a concerto can be gay and brilliant without necessarily being profound or aiming at dramatic effect." He added that his concerto "uses certain effects borrowed from jazz, but only in moderation." No doubt Ravel's original plan of performing this work in the United States influenced his decision to jazz up the music a bit.

The jazz references are especially evident in the first movement. Still, with its Gallic wit and iridescent orchestration, the movement as a whole is vintage Ravel. There follows a leisurely Adagio that begins with a long meditation for the piano. The finale, by contrast, conveys a sense of raucous satire and offers further hints of jazz.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Ravel presents contrasting ideas in the opening minute of the first movement: a bustling commotion that leads to a tune, played by trumpet, sounding almost like circus music; and relaxed passages featuring the piano alternating with material reminiscent of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, which Ravel had heard in New York. The composer varies and develops these ideas in remarkably ingenious ways. Midway through the movement, for example, both an ethereal harp solo and a horn solo that follows it present slow-motion renditions of a phrase from the piano's part of the second theme. There also is a substantial cadenza, a solo for the featured instrument, late in the movement.

The second movement begins with a long passage for the piano alone. The simplicity and modal flavor of its melody, the slow triple-pulse meter, the lack of dynamic contrast and the unchanging rhythm of the chordal accompaniment all bear an obvious resemblance to the famous *Gymnopédies* of Erik Satie, a composer Ravel had known and admired. Later, after the orchestra has taken up the melody, the accompanying figurations in the piano take on a more classical gravity. The spirit of the circus returns in the finale, where the piano part runs in *moto perpetuo* figuration nearly from start to finish. © 2016 Paul Schiavo