

Maurice Ravel

Piano Concerto in G

JOSEPH MAURICE RAVEL WAS BORN IN CIBOURE NEAR SAINT-JEAN-DE-LUZ, BASSES-PYRÉNÉES, IN THE BASQUE REGION OF FRANCE JUST A SHORT DISTANCE FROM THE SPANISH BORDER, ON MARCH 7, 1875, AND DIED IN PARIS ON DECEMBER 28, 1937. HE COMPOSED HIS PIANO CONCERTO IN G, ALONG WITH HIS OTHER PIANO CONCERTO (THE ONE FOR LEFT HAND), IN 1930 AND 1931; HE CONDUCTED THE FIRST PERFORMANCE OF THE G MAJOR CONCERTO, WITH PIANIST MARGUERITE LONG, AT A RAVEL FESTIVAL CONCERT IN THE SALLE PLEYEL, PARIS, ON JANUARY 14, 1932, WITH THE LAMOUREUX ORCHESTRA. IN ADDITION TO THE PIANO SOLOIST, THE SCORE CALLS FOR AN ORCHESTRA OF PICCOLO, FLUTE, OBOE, ENGLISH HORN, CLARINETS IN E-FLAT AND B-FLAT, TWO BASSOONS, TWO HORNS, TRUMPET, TROMBONE, TIMPANI, TRIANGLE, SNARE DRUM, CYMBALS, BASS DRUM, TAM-TAM, WOOD BLOCK, WHIP, HARP, AND STRINGS.

At about the same time that Paul Wittgenstein, a concert pianist who had lost his right arm during World War I, asked Ravel if he would write a concerto for him, Ravel's longtime interpreter Marguerite Long asked for a concerto for herself. Thus, although he had written no piano music for a dozen years, he found himself in 1930 writing two concertos more or less simultaneously. The concerto for the left hand turned out to be one of his most serious compositions, but the G major concerto, dedicated to and first performed by Madame Long, falls into the delightful category of high-quality diversion. Ravel's favorite term of praise was *divertissement de luxe*, and he succeeded in producing just such a piece with this concerto.

The motoric high jinks of the first movement are set off by the cracking of a whip, though they occasionally yield to lyric contemplation. The second movement is a total contrast, hushed and calm, with a tune widely regarded as one of the best melodies Ravel ever wrote. The effort cost him dearly, and it may have been here that he first realized that his powers of composition were failing; they broke down completely in 1932, when the shock of an automobile collision brought on a nervous breakdown, and he found himself thereafter incapable of sustained work. For this concerto, he found it necessary to write the Adagio assai one or two measures at a time. The final Presto brings back the rushing motor rhythms of the opening, and both movements now and then bear witness that Ravel had traveled in America and had become acquainted with jazz and recent popular music. He also met George Gershwin and told him that he thought highly of his *Rhapsody in Blue*; perhaps it is a reminiscence of that score that can be heard in some of the "blue" passages here and there.

Steven Ledbetter