

Ravel: Piano Concerto in G - Gaspard de la Nuit (1996)

Written by bluesever

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1. Ravel: Piano Concerto In G - 1. Allegramente 8:18 2. Ravel: Piano Concerto In G - 2. Adagio assai 9:03 3. Ravel: Piano Concerto in G - 3. Presto 3:52 4. Ravel: Gaspard de la nuit, M.55 - Ondine 6:30 5. Ravel: Gaspard de la nuit - Le gibet 6:40 6. Ravel: Gaspard de la nuit - Scarbo 9:21 Martha Argerich – piano Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra Claudio Abbado – conductor

The piano was Ravel's favorite instrument, and of his two extraordinary concertos, the Piano Concerto in G major was, in his opinion, "more Ravelian." Indeed, the two works are profoundly different, but without being, as Vladimir Jankélévitch observed in his book about the composer, more (or less) Ravelian than the other. Nevertheless, Ravel's opinion should not be dismissed, for it reflects his personal predilection, and, as any listener can tell, the work literally overflows with exuberance, delight, and verve. The Concerto may have been conceived in 1928, the year Ravel received his honorary doctorate from the University of Oxford. While some commentators have found the source of this Concerto in Ravel's Rhapsody on Basque themes *Zazpiak bat*, a project which remained unfinished, Robert de Fragny remembered that the composer had remarked that the dazzling opening theme came to him during a train ride from Oxford to London in 1928. In 1929, despite failing health, Ravel talked about a world tour on which he would perform his Concerto. While the world tour never materialized, the composer's life was sufficiently hectic, as he received a commission to compose another piano concerto, the Piano Concerto in D major (for the left hand).

Completed in November 1931, the concerto was premiered in January 1932, in a legendary performance by Marguerite Long. The sensations that this work conjures up, right from the beginning, are brightness and boundless energy. Opening with a whiplash sound, the first movement, *Allegramente*, proceeds rapidly, from an initial burst of light, composed of a lively piccolo tune threading through crystalline, harp-like piano figuration, to the incisive ending, traversing the many truly magical, even mysterious, moments of repose, when the piano indulges in dreamy, languid soliloquies. Delighting in the piano's expressive potential, Ravel

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fully employs the instrument's sonority, weaving, for example, a trill into a melody. The piano's rich and subtle discourse is magnificently matched by the orchestra, which, appearing in many guises, mimics and complements the piano, reinforcing the sensation of relentless energy by sharp, metallic, insistent statements by the trumpet. Ravel's splendid orchestration, which tempts the listener to experience this work as a brilliant, and almost self-sufficient, demonstration of sheer musical color, reflects the composer's interest in jazz, evidenced by trombone glissandi and similar effects. However, the jazz elements are profoundly Ravelian, which means that they hardly strike the listener as out of context. The remarkable second movement introduces an introspective, soulful atmosphere, seemingly quite remote from the bustle of the previous movement. A simply stated solo piano theme, of a disarming yet profoundly soulful simplicity, suggesting, perhaps, the image of a solitary promenade in the moonlight, yields to a timeless flute theme which expresses feelings of longing, sorrow, and subdued, yet clearly stated, passion. The final movement, as the piano wends its way through a series of shrieks and wails, executed by woodwind and brass instruments, affects the listener as a mounting wave of sound. A sudden, abrupt exclamation concludes the seductive cacophony of this climactic movement, and the listener experiences a desire to revisit the enchanted landscape of a musical work whose limpid formal structure contains a seemingly boundless world -- without a trace of creative fatigue or ambivalence -- of elegantly turned musical ideas. --- Zoran Minderovic, Rovi

Though competent at the piano, Ravel was no virtuoso; so, when he set out to compose a work for the instrument that would be, in his own words, "more difficult than [Balakirev's] Islamey," he drew heavily on the brilliant pianistic style of Franz Liszt to fulfill his ambition. The resulting three-part suite, *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), forever changed the technical landscape of keyboard music. Perhaps pianist Alfred Cortot put it best when he called the work "one of the most extraordinary examples of instrumental ingenuity which the industry of composers has ever produced."

Gaspard de la nuit, subtitled "Three Poems after Aloysius Bertrand," takes as its inspiration Bertrand's same-titled 1842 collection of medieval tales, which the author claimed were whispered to him in the night by the devil, Gaspard. Each of the pieces in Ravel's suite is prefaced by one of the poems; no doubt the same macabre streak that led Ravel to spend many nights absorbed in the stories of Edgar Allen Poe is also responsible for the composer's powerful attraction to Bertrand's rather dark work. *Gaspard* was premiered in January 1909 by pianist Ricardo Viñes, who had introduced Ravel to Bertrand's work.

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Each of the three pieces of the suite, "Ondine," "Le Gibet," and "Scarbo," presents not only an individual assortment of pianistic demands but also a unique musical language and narrative vision. In the first piece Ravel undertakes the portrayal of the water nymph Ondine's seduction of a mortal man. Shimmering C sharp major figuration soon becomes the background for a transparent melodic strand marked *très doux et très expressif* (very soft and expressive). The fluid background pauses only once during "Ondine" -- for a brief *pianissimo Très lent* that precedes the final, quicksilver cadenza.

"Le Gibet" (The Gibbet) is a musical horror story of such textural density that Ravel notated nearly all of the piece on three staves. An extract from the preface of the corresponding poem provides some idea of the musical atmosphere: "It is the bell sounding from the walls of a city far away below the horizon, and the carcass of a dead man hanging from a gibbet, reddened by the setting sun." Ravel's "bells" are the slightly irregularly grouped B flats that sound continuously throughout the piece, around which the composer weaves music of total psychological suspense. The dynamic never exceeds piano, and Ravel demands that the performer play "without expression" for the last portion of the piece.

"Scarbo" is 19 pages of some of the most frightful digital difficulties ever devised. Scarbo himself is a somewhat malicious night-dwarf who comes, laughing, to horrify, and then disappears without a trace. Here Ravel places the greatest emphasis on his singular sense of rhythm; witness the perfectly placed pauses throughout. Rapid repeated notes, wild arpeggiations, and sudden shifts of texture and dynamics are among the hurdles pianists must overcome; a famous passage in parallel seconds seems to owe its existence to the composer's own peculiarly double-jointed thumb, and is therefore quite challenging for those without such a physical anomaly. After a tremendous triple-*fortissimo* climax, the music dissolves into impish *pianissimo* thirty-second notes. --- Blair Johnston, Rovi

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