

**Maurice Ravel**  
**1875-1937**

Our composer, Maurice Ravel, was a master at building and balancing his compositions. He was so meticulous and careful in the way he wrote music that another composer, Stravinsky, compared him to a Swiss watchmaker. Why do you think he called him that? (*Making a watch requires great precision and care. The watch won't work if you slip up even once. Ravel wrote his compositions so thoughtfully and carefully that it was as if he were building a watch, instead of writing music*). He continued to be very meticulous when his pieces were published and personally reviewed and corrected his compositions with his publisher. In a letter, Ravel wrote that when proofing one of his compositions after many other editors had proofread the opera, he could still find ten errors per page.

**Bolero**

*Bolero* is Ravel's most famous musical composition, although Ravel considered this piece "fluff". Ravel wrote it after the famous dancer, Ida Rubinstein, asked him to create a ballet score with a Spanish character.

*Use Music Visual and play CD, track #1 (just in the beginning when you can hear just the flute and drum).*

Which two instruments are playing? (*Flute and drum*).

Which of those instruments is playing the **melody** (part you can hum)? (*flute*)

Which is keeping the **rhythm** or beat? (*drum*)

*Continue playing the music. Note: the entire piece is about 15 minutes long.*

Now, notice how Ravel builds the composition. He adds instruments, a few at a time so that their tones balance and create interesting **harmony**. There is one element of music left. (**dynamics**) Most composers will weave dynamics in and out of their compositions. Ravel does something very different with it – what? (*Listen to the music for several more minutes to hear different instruments and to hear how Ravel starts softly and builds to a loud climax or crescendo*).

The composition is very simple – one melody and one countermelody repeated over and over, each orchestrated differently. The rhythm continues to be played on the snare drum throughout the piece. The melody starts with the flute, moves to the clarinet, followed by the bassoon, e-flat clarinet, oboe, trumpet, saxophone, horn, trombone, etc.

Ravel insisted that this piece be played at a steady and unvarying tempo. At the first performance of her ballet production, Ida Rubinstein danced the role of a flamenco dancer, who dances on a table in a bar, surrounded by men who are very interested in her, and their interest increases as she continues to dance. Ravel had a different interpretation of this music. He saw the ballet as an outdoor scene in front of a factory; whose machinery provides the inflexible rhythm (drums); the factory workers would emerge to dance together while a story of a bullfighter killed by a jealous rival was played out. *Bolero* is the most recognizable piece by Ravel. It was played in the movie "10" with Dudley Moore and Bo Derek. For the younger students, the animated series "Digimon" played the song throughout its first season. The ice dancers Torvil and Dean used *Bolero* for their long program in the 1984 Olympics.

**Activity:**

Spanish dancing is very difficult; dancers must be able to dance rhythm with their feet while using their upper bodies to move to the rhythm and melody. Have students stand up and try to keep the *Bolero* beat

with their feet. (The beat is uneven and difficult to dance) Then try adding the upper body. Have students keep their feet going while trying to move arms, shoulders, and bending at the waist in time to the melody.

## **Biography**

Maurice Ravel was born in the Basque region of France to a Swiss father and a Basque mother in 1875. His father, Joseph, was a mechanical engineer and inventor. Maurice, throughout his life, collected many miniature working models and toys, sharing his father's love for mechanical objects. Ravel moved with his family to Paris where they lived in Montmartre, (where his brother Edouard was born) a colorful district known for its support of artists and musicians.

Ravel began studying piano at 7. At the age of 12 he started studying harmony, (the organization or plan of a piece of music). He became fascinated with it; taking pieces apart and reassembling them; just like the mechanical toys that he loved. He was admitted to the Conservatory of Music and remained at the Conservatory on and off for over 14 years, leaving in 1905 at the age of 30.

Some say that Ravel and Claude Debussy, another French "impressionist" composer were rivals. This was probably not true as Ravel arranged much of Debussy's works for orchestra and made it possible for his music to be heard by a much wiser audience. Both were impressionist composers, writing music with colorful and unusual titles and both were masters of the use of orchestral sound using rich harmonies and new scales. Unlike Debussy, Ravel was much more the craftsman and traditionalist. Ravel wrote a wide variety of compositions, carefully polishing each piece (he averaged only one composition per year). He composed a left-handed concerto for a friend who had lost his right hand. Ravel was influenced by the music from around the world, especially jazz and traditional folk songs from across Europe, especially Spain. While on a tour of the United States, he met George Gershwin. Supposedly, Gershwin asked Ravel for music lessons. Ravel indicated it was not a good idea. It is reported that Ravel told Gershwin "You will only lose your own spontaneity and write bad Ravel".

A number of his pieces began as piano works, which he later orchestrated. (*Orchestration: arranging a piece of music for an orchestra and assigning parts to the different musical instruments*). Ravel orchestrated many pieces, including those by other composers. One piece he is famous for is his orchestration of our March/April composer, Mussorgsky, and his composition, *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Though Maurice considered his small size and light weight an advantage to becoming a pilot, he was not allowed to enlist as a pilot in WWI because of his age and weak health. Instead, upon his enlistment, Maurice Ravel became a truck driver. He named his truck "Adelaide". He would write letters to home describing his adventures with Adelaide. After WWI he toured Europe and traveled to the United States extensively as a conductor. Ravel never married. He was very concerned about his appearance and never left home unless he was perfectly groomed. He had to match his suspenders and shirt very carefully. Rumor has it that he was frequently late for appearances because of the time he took in choosing his clothing.

In 1932 Ravel was involved in an automobile accident that injured his brain. His output dropped dramatically. It impacted his attention span, and his insomnia, which plagued him for many years, became worse. He also had problems with his oral and written communication. In 1937 doctors operated on his brain, thinking he had a tumor. Unfortunately, it was a failure, there was no tumor and Ravel went into a coma, dying nine days later.