

Pavane for a Dead Infanta
Tzigane
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

In many ways, Ravel's music is as equally distinctive and unique as Beethoven's, - as powerful in it's suggestion and language. As a result he is one of the outstanding composers of his generation and definitely the era's preeminent composer in France. Though often compared with Debussy, and banded together for convenience in the "french impressionist" box, there is much more to Ravel.

It is true that there are colossal, "impressionist" tendencies exhibiting the hint of 'this and that' and a point of light 'here and there'. However, at other times Ravel values a sharp edged clarity, inextricably linked to cultivation of eighteenth century French forms. He was a masterful colorist for orchestral writing, a facility evident in the orchestral versions of so many of his pieces that started as piano works. The **Pavane for a Dead Infanta** is one such work. Written in 1899 when he was 24, it represents the earliest sound on Ravel's palette, but still it's suggestive melancholy has made it one of the most beloved pieces in the repertoire.

Tzigane, 'a piece in gypsy style' comes from an altogether different time in Ravel's life and it is worth mentioning some of the circumstances that condition the emergence of this work, in 1924. The great war had just taken place and we know that Ravel was profoundly moved by it, and moreover what it had done to his country and his countrymen. He had been declared medically unfit for service, even though he signed up and was later sent to the front as a driver in 1916. The war changed his life and health making him a depressive insomniac. The effect on his music is obvious too. Asked to write a waltz, by Diaghilev, with whom the collaboration on *Daphnis and Chloe* had been so successful in 1912, he produced the war torn, macabre *La Valse*. Citing that it was not possible for him to return to the salon entertainment genre, in the wake of the last 6 years, he grudgingly accepted the refusal of the score, which was championed by the dance troupe of Ida Rubinstein. To thank her for that gesture he wrote her a gift - *Bolero*. Between 1920 and his honorary degree from Oxford in 1928 he did some extensive travelling to London, Italy, Scandinavia and the United States. Perhaps his view of the war torn regions of Europe, and his own itinerant life at the time, contributed to this gypsy work. From 1933 his recurring insomnia made him very ill and it was thought that he had a brain tumor. On operating in December 1937, the surgeons found nothing, leaving him lingering unconscious for a few days before he died.