

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Boléro

The bolero is a moderately slow dance – that has its origins in Spain. A dance in triple time, with the signature triplet rhythm on the second beat. It is characteristically danced either by a solo dancer, or a couple.. If one had to describe a waltz or even a tango, one wouldn't need the same incised description, as so many of us automatically have a point of reference that goes beyond a verbal description. Yet, the entire concert going audience and millions more who don't appreciate classical music– know Boléro – as the piece by Maurice Ravel.

So intoxicating and mesmeric is the report from this piece that it has been used in several film scores and has found its way to the ubiquitous open air “Fireworks” concerts genre. Rarely, does one piece by a specific composer register an entire dance form as completely as this.

There are a number of things interesting and remarkable about Ravel's Boléro . It was written on a commission from the famous dancer, Ida Rubenstein. She had been a protégé of Diaghilev at the Ballet Russe – and would have known first hand the success of the 1912 collaboration between Diaghilev and Ravel on the ballet *Daphnes and Chloe*. She was also affected – as all were – by the events of the Great War 1914-1918, where both she and Ravel saw first hand the ravages of trench warfare, she as a nurse and he as a supply driver. She would have understood the war torn imagery of “La Valse” even if Diaghilev did not – and it is not surprising that she would champion it along with Boléro in her 1928-29 season at the Paris Opera.

There is a dramatic insistence of the theme – which Ravel refers to – when mapping out the idea of an entire piece based on a single repeated melody. However, in my view, what makes it work is a matter of tempo. It reverberates in an entirely different and rather powerful way, if taken at the slower pace that Ravel insists upon. The score prints 72 – down from an original 76. However, in Ravel's own score he writes a tempo of 66 and his recording registers a tempo of 63. (60 is timed at a beat per second). This would not count for much, if it didn't explain the Toscanini affair which makes for good story telling.

According to the accounts, Toscanini performed the piece for its American premiere on November 14th, 1929 – in a much faster tempo. It was received with loud acclamation and Toscanini gestured for Ravel to stand during the applause – which Ravel stubbornly refused to do. Backstage there were angry exchanges where Toscanini is reported to have said that the fast tempo was the only way to save the piece . Other reports suggested that Toscanini said the piece was not effective when played at Ravel's tempo, to which Ravel retorted, “Don't play it.” There were conciliatory gestures that followed -on the part of Ravel who invited Toscanini to conduct his piano concerto, but the popularity of Boléro had been established.

The piece is also a marvel of orchestration – where there are combinations of instruments that either inventively create overtones, or create sounds that are new and evocative. In 1928 - Ravel had travelled on a tour of the United States, for which he was paid \$10,000 dollars, (approx..\$126,800 adjusted for inflation) and during which he visited New Orleans. I am convinced that the jazzy scoop in the Trombone solo – a notable moment in his own recording - is a product of fresh memories in an open mind.

Zane Dalal