

MAURICE RAVEL

Various contributors

The French composer Joseph Maurice Ravel was born on 7 March 1875 and died on 28 December 1937. He was born in the Basque region in a village called Cibourne.

He was always difficult and a rebel. At the Paris Conservatoire, he deliberately upset both his teachers and adjudicators by composing cantatas which were parodies of baroque composers. This resulted in many unnecessary scandals. Around 1900, he joined a group of artistic outcasts called Les Apaches (The Hooligans). He is known to have worn women's clothing on occasions.

In 1916, he tried to enlist in the war effort but was rejected for several reasons including a minor heart ailment, but he was successful in joining the Artillery as a lorry driver.

He was both homosexual and an atheist and these two conditions often go together. He had affairs with the Spanish pianist Riccardo Vines who taught Poulenc, who was also gay, and Ravel had a sordid homosexual affair with Manuel de Falla. Ravel constantly collected a great deal of porn material and books on sexual perversions.

He was a seriously uneven composer writing some real gems and some simply awful pieces. Of the awful pieces, there is Bolero which the composer admitted was rubbish, and it is. The Violin Sonata is always announced as having a Blues movement. So what? The Piano Concerto in G has a sublime slow movement but the finale destroys what has gone before in a raucous ending. There are two orchestral Spanish works the uneventful and tedious Rhapsodie Espagnole and the badly constructed Alborada de Gracioso which has been deservedly condemned by many musicians. Another condemned work is the Valses nobles et sentimentales which many pianists have said does not suit the piano at all.

It has been often remarked that as he was a seriously flawed person, as we have indicated, some of his music also suffers particularly y the Spanish works when considering his Spanish lovers.

Yet some works are excellent... none more so that Daphins et Chloe. There is the Pavane for a dead child, another terrific ballet, Mother Goose, and a delicious String Quartet. His songs, which are not really promoted are probably the best French songs ever written. There are two fine song cycles namely Sheherazade of 1903 and the Mallarme songs of 1913. His opera L'heure espagnole is very poor but L'Enfant et les sortileges is magical. His piano works such as Gaspard de la Nuit and Miroirs are extremely difficult to perform and mainly admirable as tour de forces.

His music is often referred to as lacking emotion and depth.

He suffered a blow to the head in a taxi accident in October 1932 and had the services of a Paris neurosurgeon. He was also suffering from ventricular dilation and eventually lapsed into a coma dying five years after the taxi accident.

Before this article is criticised, it must be said that many composers wrote uneven music and Ravel is no exception.

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