

Concert of Saturday, March 28, 2020

Robert Spano, Conductor

André Watts, piano

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

***Le tombeau de Couperin* (1914-1917, orch. 1919)**

I. *Prélude. Vif*

II. *Forlane. Allegretto*

III. *Menuet. Allegro moderato*

IV. *Rigaudon. Assez vif*

Concerto for the Left Hand for Piano and Orchestra in D Major (1930)

André Watts, piano

Intermission

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Opus 92 (1812)

I. *Poco sostenuto; Vivace*

II. *Allegretto*

III. *Presto; Assai meno presto*

IV. *Allegro con brio*

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

Maurice Ravel was born in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France, on March 7, 1875, and died in Paris, France, on December 28, 1937.

Le tombeau de Couperin (1914-1917, orch. 1919)

The first performance of the orchestral version of *Le tombeau de Couperin* took place in Paris on February 28, 1920, with Rhené-Baton conducting the Padeloup Orchestra. *Le tombeau de Couperin* is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, harp, and strings. Approximate performance time is seventeen minutes.

As with many of Maurice Ravel's finest orchestral pieces, *Le tombeau de Couperin* originated as a work for solo piano. In October of 1914, Ravel informed Roland-Manuel: "I have begun 2 series of piano pieces: (1) a French suite—no, it isn't what you think: *La Marseillaise* will not be in it, but it will have a forlane and a gigue..."

The outbreak of World War I halted Ravel's progress on this and other works. As the composer recalled in his 1928 autobiographical sketch: "At the beginning of 1915 I enlisted in the army, and because of this my musical activities were interrupted..." Ravel's initial war service involved tending to the wounded.

Ravel later joined the Thirteenth Artillery Regiment as a truck driver. His duties involved the nocturnal transportation of war materials, a responsibility that often placed the composer's life at risk. As Ravel wrote in April of 1916 to his friend, the singer Jane Bathori:

I very much regret having to miss your little reunion, my dear friend, and I hope that you will excuse me: I'm far away from Paris and far away from music; I'm a poilu (annotator's note: a term used for French infantrymen during World War I), dressed in goatskin, with helmet and gas mask, who drives on forbidding roads, even in the midst of the "gigantic struggle." The service is beginning to get interesting, to the point that I'll end up forgetting about my lovely dreams of aviation.

The composer took great pride and even delight in his wartime status, often signing his correspondence "Conducteur ('Driver') Ravel."

In the autumn of 1917, Ravel was discharged from military service and "then finished *Le tombeau de Couperin*." Ravel used the piece as an opportunity to pay tribute to those who had given their lives during the War. Each movement of *Le tombeau de Couperin* is dedicated to a friend of the composer who died in the conflict.

In 1919, Ravel orchestrated four of the work's original six movements. The orchestral version of *Le tombeau de Couperin* received its premiere on February 28, 1920, with Rhené-Baton conducting the Padeloup Orchestra. Later that year, the Swedish Ballet staged three movements of *Le tombeau de Couperin*.

The title (*The Tomb of Couperin*) refers to the Parisian composer François Couperin (1668-1733). Nevertheless, Ravel insisted: "The homage is directed less in fact to

Couperin himself than to French music of the eighteenth century.” The piece is in the style of a Baroque Suite, with an introduction followed by a series of dances.

Musical Analysis

I. *Prélude. Vif*—The lively *Prélude* features vibrant (and fiendishly challenging) oboe writing.

II. *Forlane. Allegretto*—A *Forlane* (*Forlana*) is a sprightly 18th-century court dance of northern Italian origin. The violins introduce the skipping principal theme of a movement that maintains the utmost delicacy throughout.

III. *Menuet. Allegro moderato*—The *Menuet* (*Minuet*) is another court dance, cast in triple meter. The winds are prominently featured in this elegant movement.

IV. *Rigaudon. Assez vif*—The *Rigaudon* (*Rigadoon*) is a lively dance popular in France and England during 17th and 18th centuries. The finale’s vigorous outer sections frame a more reflective episode (*Moins vif*), notable for its lovely wind solos.

Concerto for the Left Hand for Piano and Orchestra in D Major (1930)

The first performance of the D-Major Concerto took place in Vienna, Austria, on November 27, 1931, with Paul Wittgenstein as soloist. In addition to the solo piano, the Concerto is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets in A and B-flat, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, suspended cymbal, bass drum, wood block, tam-tam, harp, and strings. Approximate performance time is nineteen minutes.

Paul Wittgenstein

The history of music provides many examples of the triumph of the human spirit over seemingly insurmountable hurdles. Ludwig van Beethoven overcame deafness to compose his greatest masterworks. Giuseppe Verdi’s first great success, *Nabucco* (1842), followed in the wake of early professional failures, and the deaths of his wife and two young children.

The story of the Austrian pianist, Paul Wittgenstein (1887-1961), is yet another source of spiritual and musical inspiration. The member of an affluent Viennese family, Paul Wittgenstein (brother of philosopher Ludwig) made his professional debut as a pianist in December of 1913. His promising career was interrupted by World War I, and seemed to come to an early and tragic end when Wittgenstein lost his right arm as a soldier on the Russian front.

After this horrific turn of events, Wittgenstein arranged several solo pieces for left hand that he played in concerts throughout Europe, the United States, and the Near East. Wittgenstein also commissioned piano concertos from such prominent composers as Richard Strauss, Paul Hindemith, Sergei Prokofiev, Benjamin Britten, and Maurice Ravel.

Ravel’s Piano Concerto for the Left Hand

Ravel accepted a commission from Wittgenstein in 1930, at a time when the French composer was already at work on his G-Major Concerto. In a letter to a friend, Ravel observed:

Planning the two Piano Concertos simultaneously was an interesting experience. The one in which I shall appear as the interpreter (the G-Major)... is written very much in the same spirit as those of Mozart and Saint-Saëns...

The Concerto for the Left Hand alone is very different. It contains many jazz effects; the writing is not so light. In a work of this kind, it is essential to give the impression of a texture no thinner than that of a part written for both hands.

From the time of the work's premiere, critics have marveled at how the Concerto sounds as if it is indeed written for performance by two hands. At the Paris premiere, critic Henry Prunières exclaimed that at times, it seemed to be a work scored for piano duet! Of course, the illusion is due in great part to Ravel's genius with instrumental colors. But it must also be acknowledged that a piano virtuoso of the highest order is required for the Concerto to weave its magical spell. In this Concerto, Ravel often requires the left hand to perform the work of two (if not four). In this concert, André Watts performs the Concerto in his reworking for right hand.

Like many iron-willed individuals who succeed in spite of tremendous adversity, Wittgenstein was not always the most conciliatory of people. Upon receipt of Prokofiev's Fourth Concerto, Wittgenstein responded: "My thanks for the Concerto, but I don't understand a single note of it, and will never play it." As for the two glorious solo cadenzas in Ravel's Concerto, Wittgenstein commented in rather ungrateful fashion: "Had I wanted to play alone, I wouldn't have commissioned a Concerto with orchestra!" We're fortunate that the two cadenzas—and indeed, the entire work—have remained intact. The Ravel D-Major Concerto remains a supreme challenge for all pianists, not just those who, by physical necessity, must avail themselves of Paul Wittgenstein's musical legacy.

Musical Analysis

Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand is in a single movement, featuring various contrasting sections. The dark, mysterious opening (*Lento*) features the cellos and basses playing quietly in the depths of their ranges. The contrabassoon softly and ominously intones the beginnings of what will become the Concerto's main theme. The opening gradually builds to a full orchestral climax. The soloist enters with the first of two lengthy cadenzas, during which the main theme is introduced.

The cadenza, featuring many of the effects that create the impression of a two-handed performance, leads into a full orchestral statement of the main theme. The piano reemerges with a gentle, lyrical solo, finally joined by the English horn (*Andante*). This section gathers momentum and leads headlong into the central jazz-oriented portion (*Allegro*). A descending motif, played by the trumpets, is echoed by the soloist. A dance-like tune in 6/8 time, introduced by the pianist, becomes the main theme of the "jazz" section. Ravel himself noted that, "(o)nly later does it become manifest that the

jazz music is built on the same theme as the opening part.” An orchestral repetition of the theme (*Tempo l’o*) emphasizes this relationship, and introduces the second extended cadenza, preceding a final outburst by soloist and orchestra.

Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Opus 92 (1812)

Ludwig van Beethoven was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna, Austria, on March 26, 1827. The first performance of the Seventh Symphony took place in the Hall of the University of Vienna on December 8, 1813, with the composer conducting. The Symphony No. 7 is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Approximate performance time is thirty-eight minutes.

Vienna’s “Court Mechanician”

The fall of 1812 marked the beginning of the end of Napoleon Bonaparte’s domination of Europe. In October of that year, Napoleon and his troops were forced to retreat from Moscow when the Russians deserted and then burned their Holy City. On June 21, 1813, the forces of Sir Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, soundly thrashed Napoleon’s army at Vitoria. On August 12, Austria declared war on France. Napoleon then suffered a major defeat on October 16 in the “Battle of the Nations” in Leipzig. Emotions ran high throughout Europe—including Ludwig van Beethoven’s Vienna, a city that had suffered great hardship under Napoleon’s relentless pursuit of French omnipotence.

By the time of these events, Beethoven had befriended Johann Nepomuk Maelzel (1772-1838). Maelzel, an inventor and tireless self-promoter, was known as the “Court Mechanician” of Vienna. Maelzel had created several ear trumpets to help Beethoven cope with his ever-increasing deafness. Maelzel also fashioned numerous musical devices, such as “The Musical Chronometer,” a predecessor to his own metronome. Other Maelzel inventions included the “Mechanical Trumpeter” and the “Panharmonicon”—devices that could reproduce the sounds of various orchestral instruments.

In celebration of Napoleon’s Russian defeat, Maelzel produced an elaborate animated musical spectacle, *The Conflagration of Moscow*. After Wellington’s triumph in Vitoria, Maelzel approached Beethoven with the idea of composing a celebratory piece featuring the Panharmonicon. Beethoven responded with *Wellington’s Victory*.

Maelzel then suggested that Beethoven create an orchestral adaptation of *Wellington’s Victory* for presentation in a series of gala concerts that would also include a new symphony by the esteemed composer. Beethoven, who had been working on his Seventh Symphony during the previous two years, enthusiastically agreed. The first of these concerts, held on December 8, 1813, at the grand Hall of the University of Vienna, was presented for the benefit of wounded Austrian and Bavarian soldiers. Beethoven himself served as conductor.

Beethoven on the Podium

Because of Beethoven's participation in the concert and its philanthropic mission, Maelzel was able to convince several of Vienna's eminent musicians to play in the Orchestra. Ignaz Schuppanzigh, leader of Count Razumovsky's quartet, served as first violinist. Antonio Salieri cued the "drums and salvos." Among the percussionists were Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Ignaz Moscheles, and Giacomo Meyerbeer (although Beethoven complained that Meyerbeer always entered after the beat!).

Another violinist at the December 8, 1813 concert was composer Louis Spohr, who offered this colorful description of Beethoven as conductor:

Often as I had heard of it, it surprised me extremely. He was accustomed to convey the marks of expression to the band by the most peculiar motions of his body. Thus at a *sforzando* he tore his arms, which were crossed before on his breast, violently apart. At a *piano* he crouched down, bending lower the softer the tone. At the *crescendo* he raised himself by degrees until at the *forte* he sprang up to his full height; and without knowing it, would often at the same time shout aloud.

Despite this unorthodox podium manner and the difficulties that must have been posed by Beethoven's impaired hearing, the concert proved to be one of the great public triumphs of the composer's career. The audience cheered *Wellington's Victory* and insisted upon an encore of the Seventh Symphony's *Allegretto*. By popular demand, the entire concert was repeated four days later, raising another 4,000 florins for the wounded soldiers.

"Quite ripe for the madhouse"

Still, Beethoven's reliance upon the briefest of rhythmic motifs—often presented with relentless, and even frightening energy—inspired some negative reactions. Musician Friedrich Wieck, father of Clara Wieck Schumann, attended the first rehearsal of the Beethoven Seventh. Wieck recalled that the general consensus among musicians and laymen alike was that Beethoven must have composed the Symphony, particularly its outer movements, in a drunken state ("trunkenen Zustände"). After hearing the Symphony for the first time, Carl Maria von Weber reportedly stated that Beethoven was now "quite ripe for the madhouse."

On the other hand, Richard Wagner, in one of the most famous appraisals of a Beethoven Symphony, hailed the finale as the "apotheosis of the dance." More than two centuries after its premiere, Beethoven's Seventh continues to captivate and amaze audiences with its irrepressible momentum and dramatic fire. It remains one of the most powerful symphonic creations.

Musical Analysis

I. *Poco sostenuto; Vivace*—The Seventh opens with the most ambitious slow-tempo introduction (*Poco sostenuto*) of any Beethoven Symphony. At the conclusion of the introduction, the flute offers premonitions of the central theme, and then launches the *Vivace* with a full statement of that initial subject—a sprightly dance melody in 6/8 time. After a brief pause, the entire orchestra joins in a festive proclamation of the main theme.

The subsidiary themes and ensuing development—indeed the entire *Vivace*—are based upon the dotted eighth/sixteenth/eighth-note motif that is the nucleus of the principal theme. Another dramatic pause leads to a coda that builds to a stunning close.

II. *Allegretto*—The winds intone a foreboding chord that leads to an equally ominous march figure, played by the violas, cellos, and bases. The tension increases during a series of variations that ultimately erupt in a *fortissimo* orchestral outburst. Following a *diminuendo*, a contrasting lyrical section appears, prominently featuring the winds. After a varied reprise of the principal sections, a brief coda offers fragments of the march, capped by a reprise of the opening chord.

III. *Presto; Assai meno presto*—The scherzo (*Presto*) begins with a *forte* orchestral outburst, immediately followed by a quicksilver figure in the winds and strings. Various sections of the orchestra engage in lively dialogue, as the scherzo grows in power. The trio section (*Assai meno presto*) begins in far more tranquil fashion, but soon moves to a grand statement as well. The scherzo and trio sections repeat, but what initially appears to be a third statement of the trio is truncated by five brusque *fortissimo* chords.

IV. *Allegro con brio*—The finale is a miraculous combination of academic structure (sonata form) and Dionysian abandon. After a brief, *fortissimo* introduction, the first violins launch into the scurrying principal theme of the finale. The subsidiary themes (a descending phrase and a skipping motif, both introduced by the first violins), while offering some contrast, do little to slow the breathless pace. It is not until the terse final measures that the whirlwind of activity comes to a stunning halt.