

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899)

Ravel's famous *Pavane*, well known by its later arrangement for orchestra, is a student work written during the composer's time at the Paris Conservatoire, while he was a pupil of Fauré. It became enduringly popular in the years shortly after its appearance and has remained so ever since. Much has been made about its enigmatic title, "Pavane for a Dead Princess." Ravel, a composer deeply reverent of the musical traditions and forms of the past, often drew the structural coherence of his music from Baroque and Classical models. The pavane is in the style of a Spanish courtly dance popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the atmosphere of the piece is one of muted stately protocol. But who is the infanta, the princess, of the title? While the work's pervasive melancholy might suggest that the piece is meant to solemnly commemorate some historical Spanish princess, the title's provenance is more pedestrian in nature. When a colleague once asked how Ravel had arrived at "Pavane pour une infante défunte," he responded simply that the title had nothing to do with the composition, and that he simply liked the sound of the words strung together. The deeply affecting atmosphere of this piece might lead listeners to scoff at this anecdote, and Ravel eventually throws us a bone, elsewhere remarking that the work depicts a pavane as it would have been danced by an infanta one might find in a Velázquez painting. As early as 1899, Ravel reveals his exquisite ability to marry the dignity and elegance of the Spanish baroque with the gently rubbing textures of burgeoning French Impressionism.

Prélude (1913)

Originally conceived as a sight-reading piece for piano competitions at the Paris Conservatoire, the singular *Prélude* is an enchanting morsel, a glimpse at an impressionistic landscape of wandering harmonies and dolorous lyricism. We could wish only that Ravel had composed twenty-three others to complete the set.

Le Tombeau de Couperin (1914–17)

- I. *Prélude* (in memory of First Lieutenant Jacques Charlot)
- II. *Fugue* (in memory of Second Lieutenant Jean Cruppi)
- III. *Forlane* (in memory of First Lieutenant Gabriel Deluc)
- IV. *Rigaudon* (in memory of Pierre and Pascal Gaudin)
- V. *Menuet* (in memory of Jean Dreyfus)
- VI. *Toccata* (in memory of Captain Joseph de Marliave)

The Ravel of the years leading up to the First World War contrasts starkly with the veteran serviceman of the years during and following Europe's greatest catastrophe. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (Couperin's Tomb) is a masterpiece of the repertoire that looks fondly backward, to the eighteenth-century musical world of François Couperin's keyboard suites, while thoughtfully confronting the profound upheaval and contortion of the Great War. Ravel served as a truck driver in the supply corps after repeated failed attempts to join the French Air Force (at one point carrying cargo and petrol to the front at Verdun), but

his wartime service was plagued with ill health that would eventually lead to his discharge from the military in 1917.

Ravel's wartime experience haunts the music he composed in the following decades. *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, his only wartime work, marks the beginning of a textural and atmospheric shift in style that betrays the profound trauma felt by its composer. While the piece is ostensibly a musical tribute honouring musical traditions of the past, the word "*tombeau*" is French for "tomb," and Ravel's decision to dedicate each of the suite's movements to the memory of a friend lost in war reveals the intimately personal sense in which *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a work of commemoration.

The breezy *Prélude* that opens the work is an irresistible balance of sombre grace and wit. Ravel's music often carries listeners away, and the supple, winding lines of this short piece seem to soar like a fast-moving flock of birds. The following fugue is an academic nod to the formal restraint and sober technique of Baroque contrapuntal music. In it, Ravel works skilfully within music's most rigid, literal form, steeping traditional fugal architecture with the gentle tonal ambiguity of his early twentieth-century harmonic language. After the delicate dissonant pinches of the gracefully lilting *Forlane* (the first of the suite's three baroque dances), comes a bouncy *rigaudon* – the most ebullient movement of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Ravel was a master of proportion and balance, and the rhythmic exuberance of this dance is exquisitely coloured with impressionistic harmonies that are allowed to wander, but never too far. The famous *Menuet* that straddles the work's virtuosic fourth and sixth movements is the emotional centre of the set. The swaying triple-meter pulse oscillates under a charmingly decorated melody. After winding itself up to the grim climax of a short but powerful chordal passage at the piece's centre, the gentle main theme returns, overlapping with echoes of the darker preceding material. While the *Menuet* is a reflection on the comparative simplicity and elegance of the seventeenth century (and likely the relative calm of the composer's own life before the war), the despair of its middle section hints at profound mourning under the surface. The suite's crackling *toccata* finale – a baroque instrumental form characterized by light touch and agile passagework – thrills right up to the dazzling figuration of its abrupt conclusion.

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

24 Préludes, Op. 28 (1839)

If the two books of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* are an authoritative manual on the style and language of Baroque keyboard music, then Chopin's set of preludes vies for similar stature as the encyclopedia for its own time. Written between 1835 and 1839, the 24 *Préludes* capture Chopin at the height of his creative powers. Arranged to follow the circle of fifths (an inspiration drawn from Bach's own organization of the 48 preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* according to the chromatic scale), Chopin's Op. 28 forms a cyclical harmonic pattern. Also looking to the models of his beloved Bach, Chopin's preludes harken back to the concept of the Baroque *praeludium* – a short improvisatory piece functioning as the introduction to a larger work. Here, however, each miniature (the shortest runs barely 35 seconds) assumes the stature of a stand-alone piece devoted to conveying a specific idea or emotion. These are not preambles. While their brevity and seeming lack of formal structure raised eyebrows at the time of their first publication (Robert Schumann dismissed them as mere "sketches"),

general understanding of and appreciation for the Op. 28 *Préludes* grew quickly and the cycle soon entered the standard repertoire, remaining there ever since.

As small, self-contained tone poems, Chopin's *Préludes* are masterworks of succinctness, relative to their richness and depth, and several have earned individual reputations. While each piece offers a glimpse of its own unique world of emotion and sound, the textural and harmonic contrast between the preludes themselves creates a compelling tension to support the notion that the Op. 28 cycle is the sum of its two-dozen little masterpieces. Consider the warm ease of the first prelude, with its yearning sixteenth-note figurations, next to the despairing slow grind and ghoulish melody of the second. The famous fifteenth prelude, with its gently plodding repeated notes giving way to passionately romantic anguish, lives next to its polar opposite – a thrilling tour de force of demonic turmoil in B-flat Minor. Some may find the order of these pieces emotionally jarring, but this is the sort of emotional whiplash we expect from the piano's great Romantic-era poet. Chopin, like Ravel in the following century, was a master of restraint and balance. While many of the Op. 28 preludes place extreme technical demands on the player, others are relatively simple; for this composer, virtuosic display is only justified in service to the idea of the music itself. Unlike some of the less-memorable keyboard works of his great contemporary and colleague Franz Liszt, Chopin's output rarely, if ever, falls into the garishness of pianistic pyrotechnics for their own sake. Not only do Chopin's *Préludes* offer a comprehensive survey of the style and techniques of the mid-Romantic era, they also explore every corner of his genius as the instrument's first true champion. By the time we arrive at pounding low notes of the final prelude's breathless conclusion, that much will have been made clear.

Program notes by Morgan Lueth