

Class 2 : Form & Color

B. Maurice Ravel: Sound & Stage

The master of musical color in the earlier 20th century was **Maurice Ravel** (1875–1937), who enriched the repertoire with highly colorful orchestrations not only of his own works, but those by many other composers as well. But even as a composer for the piano, he was using unusual harmonies and piano techniques to think and write in color, even more than **Claude Debussy**, who was no slouch.

1. Ravel and Picasso's *Pierrot and Columbine*

I put his piano piece *Alborada del Gracioso*, or “Morning Song of the Clown,” on the web. It comes from a set of five pieces, *Miroirs* (Mirrors), that he published in 1905, five years before Debussy's *Préludes* that we heard last week. It is another sandwich form. The music of outer sections is a vigorous Spanish dance; the filling is the soulful song of the clown itself. It is music that sounds much more natural than it looks on the page; I tried to play it last night, but it is way beyond me. Those tunes are broken up between the two hands, so you seldom see them as a line. The harmonies are spiced with discords to represent the hand slashing across the guitar strings; there are passages consisting only of a single note, rapidly repeated; rapid runs and glissandos shoot up like rockets, especially in the final part; and that song is enveloped in a shimmer of discordant chords like a sonic mist. Listen for these as you watch a live performance by Vitaly Pisarenko; I will add a few signposts as subtitles.

2. Ravel: *Alborada del Gracioso* (Vitaly Pisarenko), 6½ minutes

3. Ravel and Picasso's *Pierrot and Columbine* (repeat)

You'd think he could hardly make it more colorful, but when he orchestrated the piece 15 years later he certainly could. Listen to this performance and note everything you hear about his use of the orchestra. Or see it; although this is an open air performance, with many aerial shots of Frankfurt, it also has the best close-ups of the players. One question you might consider: when does Ravel give his music to a single instrument or group for several bars at a time, and when does he jump around between instruments of different colors?

4. Ravel: *Alborada del Gracioso* (Pablo Heras-Casado), 7½ minutes

5. Ravel and Picasso's *Pierrot and Columbine* (repeat)

What did you hear?

6. Léon Bakst: designs for *Daphnis and Chloe* (1911)

It is hardly surprising that so colorful a composer should have attracted the notice of **Serge Diaghilev** (1872–1929), who commissioned *Daphnis and Chloe* for performance by his *Ballets Russes* in 1911. These are two of the designs by **Léon Bakst** (1866–1924). The story is set in an idealized pre-Classical

Greece, and it is full of Mediterranean color. I'm going to show two versions of the *danse générale* which concludes the ballet. It is a wild Bacchanal of celebration, into which Ravel throws his entire orchestra and even a wordless offstage chorus. I'll show you first the Royal Ballet version, with choreography by **Sir Frederick Ashton** (1904–88); it is not the best video, I'm afraid, but it keeps very close to the original scenario. Then directly after that, a crystal-clear clip of a new version by the French choreographer **Benjamin Millepied**, who treats the music as abstract rather than narrative.

7. Ravel: *Daphnis and Chloe* (Ashton), ending (4 minutes)
8. Ravel: *Daphnis and Chloe* (Millepied), ending (3 minutes)
9. Léon Bakst: designs for *Daphnis and Chloe* (repeat)

If we can leave the quality of the two videos aside, what did you think? Where was the color in each: in the music, in the décor, in the dancing, or in all three?

10. *Bolero*, title slide

Of course, Ravel's most famous feat of orchestration is his *Boléro*, also written in 1928. He described it as nothing more than orchestration: the same tune played 18 times over an unchanging side-drum rhythm, varied only by the instruments chosen to play it. According to Wikipedia, he wanted it set in the open air with a factory in the background, reflecting the mechanical nature of the music. But Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972), the original choreographer, aimed for something different:

11. *Bolero*, title with text

The version you see most often today is by the Franco-Swiss choreographer **Maurice Béjart** (1927–2007). He starts with that woman on the table, and only gradually reveals the men cheering her on. The dancer here, in a performance from Tokyo, is Sylvie Guillem. Alas, at 15 minutes, it is too long to play complete, but I'll put it on the website. Meanwhile, I have made a shorter version, giving only the beginning and end. Enjoy!

12. Ravel: *Bolero* (Béjart/Guillem), complete (15 minutes)
13. Ravel: *Bolero* (Béjart/Guillem), with internal cut (5 minutes)
14. Main title 3