

RAVEL

LA VALSE

Choreographic Poem

For Orchestra

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*Ravel*

# LA VALSE

(Choreographic Poem for Orchestra)

Performed by the  
**SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
conducted by  
**PIERRE MONTEUX**



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# Maurice Ravel

(1875-1937)

Notes by A. VEINUS

**LA VALSE**, a Ravelian reincarnation of the spirit of Lanner, Strauss and the golden age of the Viennese waltz, is, with the exception of the *Bolero*, the most popular composition by this most popular of modern French masters. A prefatory note to the score localizes the setting of the work as follows:

"Through an occasional break in the swirling mist one may dimly distinguish couples waltzing. The vapours are dissipated little by little revealing an immense ball-room filled by a dancing crowd. The illumination from the chandeliers blazes forth fortissimo. An Imperial Court about 1885."

Sketched during the first World War and completed in 1920, *La Valse* is a typical creation of a post-war intellect. There is, on Ravel's part, an obvious sympathy with what seems on the surface to have been a more carefree and a more glamorous era in human history. There is, likewise, a genuine sensitivity for the values of the old Viennese waltz idiom which Ravel does not seek to obscure. However, as Gilman notes, Ravel's "poetic transmutation of material whose original charm he has neither forgotten nor obscured . . . is only half of his achievement. *La Valse*, despite its surface charm and scintillation, is essentially a work of tragic irony. It is as perturbing and ominous as a mobilization order." We may well believe with Ravel's most recent biographer (Madeleine Goss) that "the bitterness and depression of the war" first found its release in Ravel "through the violent measures of *La Valse* . . ."

The work opens with waltz fragments gradually assuming shape and sequence. Once the atmosphere is clarified and the music stabilized, there ensues, as H. T. Parker writes, "a succession, as it were, of waltzes: the waltz sensuous and languorous, the waltz playful and piquant, the waltz sentimental, the waltz showy, the waltz strenuous—the waltz in as many variants and as many garbs as Ravel's imagination and resource may compass. Like sleepchasing, waltz succeeds waltz; yet Ravel is wide-awake in the mental dress everyone receives. . . . Of a sudden, the chain of waltzes seems to break. Fragments of them seem to crackle and jar, each against each, in the tonal air. The harmonies roughen; there are few euphonies; through a surface-brilliance, harsh progressions jut; that which has been sensuous may, for the instant, sound ugly. As some say, here is the music that imaginative minds write in this world of the aftermath of war. . . ."

Concerning the description "choreographic poem" which Ravel attached to the title of this work, Alfredo Casella tells us that Ravel thought of it in connection with a ballet, but "had no idea of a choreographic production." Goss, Ravel's biographer, tells us, however, that Diaghileff "commissioned Ravel to write an 'apotheosis of the waltz'; but when the score of *La Valse* was brought to him he decided that it was unsuited to his purpose."

*La Valse* was performed for the first time in Paris at a Lamoureux concert, December 20, 1920. It is interesting to note that the first performance of this work in Boston (January 13, 1922) was by the Boston Symphony Orchestra with Pierre Monteux conducting.

*La Valse* is scored for three flutes (one interchangeable with piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, double-bassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, three kettledrums, side drum, bass drum, tambourine, cymbals, triangle, castanets, tam-tam, glockenspiel, crotales (small cymbals), two harps, and strings.

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