Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

La Valse

Our semester theme is Music and Motion, and the kind of motion which most intrigued Maurice Ravel was the regular, precise movement of machines. Indeed, his meticulous attention to matters of time and rhythm, as well as his near-obsession with intricate inner details, prompted Stravinsky to disparage his compositions as the works of “a Swiss clock-maker”.

It was that fascination with machinery that prompted the 14-year-old Ravel to visit the Great World Exposition staged in Paris in 1889. This was intended to show to the world France’s commercial, technological, industrial and artistic achievements (it was for this that the Eiffel Tower was erected, originally intended only as a temporary structure), and in its vast arena, every conceivable machine and technological innovation seemed to be on display. Beyond that, however, it attracted artists from over 50 nations, and with his own artistic inclinations – he had been admitted to the Paris Conservatoire that very year - Ravel found himself as intrigued by the music he heard as he was by the machines he saw. It was here that he had his first taste of Russian dance, and this was to bear fruit 30 years when, as one of France’s most respected composers, he was commissioned to compose a ballet for the famous Paris-based Russian dance troupe – the Ballets Russes - by their inexhaustible director, Serge Diaghilev.

As early as 1906 Ravel had sketched some ideas for a musical homage to Johann Strauss – “a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz” is how he described it – and when Diaghilev suggested that he might like to compose a new ballet, Ravel returned to those sketches, calling the work-in-progress Wien. But when it came to physical motion of actually writing music down on paper, Ravel moved exceedingly slowly and, unfortunately, the First World War intervened. It was not until the end of the War that he was able to complete work on Wien, which he had decided to rename La Valse and, following his usual practice, he first produced it as a piano piece, following this up with a version for two pianos which he performed (together with Marcelle Meyer) in April 1920 at the home of the painter Misia Sert, with Poulenc, Stravinsky, the choreographer Léonide Massine and Diaghilev in the audience. Diaghilev declared the work "a masterpiece", which pleased Ravel, but added, "It's not a ballet. It's a portrait of a ballet", which most certainly did not. And when Diaghilev went on to suggest that Ravel's ideas would be too costly to produce, Ravel (as Poulenc later recalled) picked up his music and walked out of the house. He apparently never forgave Diaghilev.

It was in that two-piano version that La Valse was first publicly performed (by Ravel and the Italian composer Alfredo Casella) appropriately enough in Vienna on 23rd October 1920. Ravel then orchestrated the work and in that guise it
became an immediate success following its première in Paris on 12th December 1920 given by the Lamoureux Orchestra under Camille Chevillard. Subtitled “a choreographic poem for orchestra”, La Valse sets out to relive the heady days of 19th century Vienna when “the Waltz was King”. In the score Ravel gives this vivid description of the music: “Fantastic and fatal whirling clouds give glimpses, through rifts, of couples dancing. The clouds scatter, little by little. One sees an immense hall peopled with a twirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of the chandeliers bursts forth fortissimo.”
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)  

Piano Concerto No.2 in A, S125  

Pursuing the idea of Music and Motion in its widest sense, we find yet another type of motion very much at the core of Franz Liszt’s persona. Few, if any, composers before him had travelled quite so extensively, and there are times in Liszt’s life when he seems to have been continually on the move. A woman he met on one of his travels was the catalyst was, eventually, to bring this itinerant lifestyle to an end.

During a concert tour to Russia in 1847, Liszt encountered the Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein. She was, in the words of Anthony Wilkinson’s biography of the composer, “28, and plain, and married; but Liszt was flattered by the aristocratic title, dazzled by her fortune, overwhelmed by her culture and intellect, overpowered by the forcefulness of her character and strength of will, and, perhaps most important of all, found benediction in her intensely religious nature”. That “religious nature” persuaded him to discard his previous mistresses, and when Liszt returned to his home in the German city of Weimar, the Princess followed and the two set up home together (much to the dismay of the Weimar people who were dubious of the odd clothes she wore and of her habit of chain-smoking cigars). To maintain the outward appearance of respectability, they convinced the outside world that their relationship was entirely platonic. But it most certainly was not; the Princess hid her pregnancies by travelling to Brussels to give birth to their three children all three of whom were brought up entirely in that city. The basis of their relationship, platonic or otherwise, however, was the Princess’s insistence that Liszt abandon his life as a travelling virtuoso pianist (with its obvious distraction in the shape of adoring females) and devote his energies to composition.

Virtually all Liszt’s major works were composed during the 12 years he and the princess shared a house in Weimar, and while without her imperious presence many of these works would doubtless never have seen the light of day, clearly Liszt did not find this arrangement conducive to the speedy creation of great works. The Second Piano Concerto, for example, took no less than 24 years to complete; the earliest sketches date back to 1839 and it finally appeared in print in 1863. During that long gestation his pupil, Hans von Bronsart (to whom the Concerto is dedicated) gave a performance of a version of the work (in Weimar on 7th January 1857), but Liszt continued to work on it right through until 1861 (the year in which, finally, Liszt and the Princess were to marry, but on the very eve of their wedding, Liszt got cold feet and spent the rest of his life in what Anthony Wilkinson refers to as “semi-religious retirement”).

Liszt’s piano concertos are cast in a single movement, but while the First maintains at least a hint of the original three-movement concerto format and the Third, only re-discovered in 1990, appears incomplete, the Second comprises a
great many sections many of which merge imperceptibly into one another, prompting more than one commentator to describe this as a “Symphonic Poem with piano”. Indeed, in its early stages Liszt described the work as a “Concerto Symphonique”; although a rather more vivid title was suggested by the American critic W F Apthorp; “The life and adventures of a melody”.

It opens with a poetic passage from woodwind, the clarinet taking the lion’s share of the melodic interest, the piano entering almost imperceptibly with gently unfolding arpeggios. The piano’s delicately rippling passagework is somewhat reminiscent of Chopin, but it is also the piano which moves from the lyrical, almost plaintive mood of the opening to something altogether more bombastic. This comes with a stirring and stormy cadenza-like passage emphasising the instrument’s powerful bass register and eventually sending the orchestra on to a dramatic climax, after which a reflective piano interlude introduces the second section. This is announced by the strings and contains a richly expressive statement of the opening theme played by a solo cello against more Chopinesque piano figurations. The piano seems to ponder this for a while, before abruptly breaking into a pulsating march, with the orchestra striding along in attendance. This eventually calms down and a delicate, dance-like section follows in which both the piano and orchestra sparkle in their higher registers (there is a delightful passage for solo flute). Light, crisp, dancing passagework from the piano (music and motion of the more obvious kind) introduces the final section in which, to the accompaniment of the piano rolling up and down scales with almost impertinent athleticism, the orchestra quickly reaches its triumphant, if somewhat unexpectedly foreshortened conclusion.

A somewhat more picturesque description of the Concerto’s closing bars comes, again, from W F Apthorp: “It is as if some magician in some huge cave, the walls of which were covered with glistening stalactites and flashing jewels, were revelling in his fill of all the wonders of colour, brilliancy and dazzling light that his wand could command. Never has even Liszt rioted more unreservedly in fitful orgies of flashing colour".
Richard Strauss (1864-1949)  

Der Rosenkavalier Suite, Op.59  

Timing – 25:00

The ultimate example of Music and Motion is, of course, dance. And in the world of Classical Music, no dance is more honoured than the Waltz. Throughout the second half of the 19th century Vienna was regarded as the Waltz Capital of the World (which is why Ravel originally entitled his work after the city), and the Strauss family were the acknowledged Kings of the Waltz. What more natural, then, than to end our celebration of Music and Motion with some Strauss Waltzes.

But hold on! Richard Strauss was not even by the most remotes test link related to the Viennese Strauss family (and believe me, scholars by the busload have tried to find a familial connection between the Strausses of Vienna and the Strausses of Bavaria) and everything about his musical persona seems to point to a composer with no time for the lush opulence of the Viennese ballroom, even if, in his early days, Strauss moved rather loosely over various musical styles before adopting one of his own.

Brahms met Richard Strauss when, in 1885, he attended rehearsals for his Fourth Symphony given by the Meiningen Court Orchestra of which Strauss was assistant conductor. Strauss took the opportunity to show the older man his own Symphony, which Brahms described somewhat patronisingly as “quite charming”, but then went on to advise Strauss against following new trends in his compositions. Those new trends were, specifically, those being championed by Wagner, and for a few years Strauss followed this advice and wrote music which he himself described as his “Brahms adoration”. However, this was not to last long, and the eager enthusiasm of his friend Alexander Ritter to the music of Wagner (the two were related by marriage) soon won Strauss over. Indeed, so all-consuming was Strauss’s admiration for Wagner that he largely abandoned the purely instrumental genres favoured by Brahms and concentrated his composing energies on opera; a genre in which Wagner was pre-eminent and Brahms did not figure at all. His 15 operas were seen then, as now, as the natural successors to Wagner’s.

Quite what either Brahms or Wagner would have made of Der Rosenkavalier (“The Knight of the Rose”) is open to conjecture. It largely inhabits a musical world which neither seemed inclined towards, immersing itself unashamedly in the opulence of the ballrooms of late 19th century Vienna. Wagner might have seen it as celebrating an appallingly shallow society and Brahms might have seen it as dreadfully light-weight, but the audience at its première in Dresden on 26th January 1911 had no reservations, and the work remains as popular today as it did almost 104 years ago.
The story of Der Rosenkavalier is actually set in mid-18th century Vienna and centres around the shifting romantic attachments of four principal characters, the Marschallin (a noblewoman whose visual charms are quickly succumbing to the aging process), Octavian (a handsome young man with an eye for a beautiful woman), Baron Ochs von Lerchenau (the Marschallin’s bumbling and foolish cousin) and Sophie (to whom Baron Ochs is engaged). The opera opens with the Marschallin and Octavian having spent the night together being disturbed by the arrival of Baron Ochs who has come to seek the Marschallin’s assistance in courting Sophie. However, when her back is turned, Ochs makes a pass for what he believes to be her chambermaid but is actually Octavian in disguise. Octavian escapes and in his absence he is appointed a “Rosenkavalier”, whose duty it is to carry the Baron's love-token - a silver rose - to Sophie. But as soon as he sets eyes on Sophie, Octavian falls in love with her, and she begs him to help her avoid marrying Ochs. After the kind of convoluted plot twists which would have delighted Mozart, Sophie and Octavian are united, Ochs is abandoned and the Marschallin, who knew Octavian would eventually leave her for a younger woman, is left alone.

So popular was Der Rosenkavalier that Strauss made several concert versions of numbers from the work and, in 1944, produced, with the assistance of the American conductor Arthur Rodzinski, the Rosenkavalier Suite which begins with the opera’s orchestral prelude, depicting the night of passion (vividly portrayed by whooping horns) between the Marschallin and Octavian. Next comes the appearance of Octavian as the Rosenkavalier, which is depicted in tender music; the sight of him looking so young makes the Marschallin realise that he will soon leave her for a younger woman. The duet between Octavian and Sophie (oboe and horn) reveals their growing love, but this is abruptly interrupted by the discordant music associated with the clumsy arrival of Ochs. Next the violins tentatively introduce the first of several waltzes, which is followed by another given out by the solo violin, before the whole orchestra settles into waltz mode. A general pause and a violin solo leads into the nostalgic music where the Marschallin sadly realises she has lost Octavian. A passionate love-duet between Octavian and Sophie reaches its ecstatic climax before the work closes with a singularly robust Waltz, depicting Ochs at his most pompous, and a boisterous coda newly composed for the 1944 Suite.