



Sunday | February 2, 2025 | 3pm
Symphony Hall

Seong-Jin Cho piano

The Complete Solo Piano Works of Maurice Ravel

Sérénade grotesque

Menuet antique

Pavane pour une infante défunte

Jeux d'eau

Sonatine for piano in F-sharp minor

Modéré

Mouvement de menuet

Animé

INTERMISSION

Miroirs

Noctuelles. Très léger

Oiseaux tristes. Très lent

Une barque sur l'océan. D'un rythme souple

Alborada del gracioso. Assez vif

La vallée des cloches. Très lent

Gaspard de la nuit

Ondine. Lent

Le Gibet. Très lent

Scarbo. Modéré

INTERMISSION

(Continued...)

Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn

Valses nobles et sentimentales

Modéré – très franc
Assez lent – avec un expression intense
Modéré
Assez animé
Presque lent – dans un sentiment intime
Vif
Moins vif
Épilogue: lent

Prélude

Á la manière de Borodine

Á la manière de Chabrier

Le tombeau de Couperin

Prélude. Vif
Fugue. Allegro moderato
Forlane. Allegretto
Rigaudon. Assez vif
Menuet. Allegro moderato
Toccata. Vif

Today's extended program will run approximately two hours
and 45 minutes with two intermissions.

Seong-Jin Cho appears by arrangement with Primo Artists, New York, NY
Seong-Jin Cho records exclusively for Deutsche Grammophon
seongjin-cho.com

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The complete solo piano works of Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Over his sixty-two years, Ravel bore witness to triumph and tragedy. Miraculous innovations like the telephone and the discovery of penicillin revolutionized the world even as humanity seemed poised to destroy itself. Ravel came of age during the Dreyfus Affair, endured the devastation of the First World War, and helplessly observed the ascendancies of Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin. Alongside these tumults came musical revolutions, too. In 1882, the year Ravel took his first piano lessons, Richard Wagner premiered his final opera, *Parsifal*. As a young man Ravel attended all fourteen performances in the initial run of Claude Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*; a decade later he beheld Igor Stravinsky's explosive ballet *Le sacre du Printemps*. In the Roaring Twenties, he toured the United States, attending jazz concerts in Harlem at George Gershwin's invitation. As Ravel told an American journalist, "The world is changing and contradicting itself as never before. I am happy to be living through all this and to have the good fortune of being a composer."

Joseph Maurice Ravel was born in March 1875 in Ciboure, a fishing village in southwestern France. Soon after his father, a Swiss civil engineer and inventor, and his Basque-Spanish mother moved the family to Paris. Maurice quickly took to music, encouraged by both parents: his father had been a gifted young musician, and his mother sang him Basque and Spanish folk songs.

At fourteen, he gained admission to the Conservatoire de Paris, France's premier music school. Around that time, Ravel met one of his most important friends and collaborators, the pianist Ricardo Viñes. The pair bonded over a shared artistic curiosity; an entry from Viñes' diary recounts a day spent "experimenting with new chords" together at the piano. When the Exposition Universelle opened in Paris, the two teens were struck by performances of Russian works conducted by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

Throughout his career, responses to his piano playing were mixed; one reviewer quipped, "It is a tradition that composers play badly, and no one can complain that Ravel does not respect it." His friends joked about his large "strangler's thumbs." Knowing these limitations, Ravel asked Viñes to premiere his early solo works. While his pianism was limited, his classmates and teachers quickly noticed his "highly audacious music." He premiered the ***Sérénade grotesque*** (he added the adjective years later) at the Conservatoire. Afterward, a teacher said, "All this produces a most unusual impression. You must rein in your thoughts and take fewer liberties." But, he added, "Maybe one day you will present us with a new style." The *Sérénade* opens with *pizzicatissimo* chords to imitate plucking strings. Imitated string harmonics in the final measure further evoke the flamenco guitar of his mother's youth.

After six years of study, Ravel's professors expelled him for failing to win more prizes. Despite this rejection, Ravel soon published his first work, the ***Menuet antique***. Viñes wrote of his friend, "He is, moreover, very complicated, there being in him a mixture of Middle Ages Catholicism and satanic impiety...."

The *Menuet* is in ABA form, its middle book-ended by muted yet majestic outer sections. A professor once wrote that he showed "A great deal of temperament, but a tendency to pursue big effects. Needs to be held in check." The *Menuet's* restraint indicates that Ravel heeded these words, at least temporarily.

Ravel returned to the Conservatoire two years later, studying with André Gedalge and Gabriel Fauré. Fauré, to whom he later dedicated his String Quartet and *Jeux d'eau*, proved especially influential. One of Ravel's first "hits," the *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, emerged from these studies. Ravel composed it for Winnaretta Singer, heiress to the Singer sewing machine fortune, who hosted a popular salon for Parisian artists. He said the title recalled "a pavane that a little princess might have danced at the Spanish court."



Although Ravel produced substantial works during this period, including the overture *Shéhérazade*, his continued failure to win prizes led to another dismissal from the Conservatoire. Amid frustrations with the conservative faculty, Ravel and Viñes formed a collective of avant-garde artists called "Les Apaches." Self-styled "artistic outcasts," Les Apaches emboldened Ravel to break further from the conventions espoused by the Conservatoire.

Despite his expulsion, Ravel continued studying with Fauré. *Jeux d'eau* quickly followed. The score, replete with arcing arpeggios and cascading *glissandi*, illustrates the fountains of water evoked in sound. Ravel's use of medieval modes, open fifths, and pentatonic scales harkens to the past while giving these ancient gestures new life. While the Pavane immediately proved popular, audiences were lukewarm toward *Jeux*. Still, in a 1928 essay, Ravel reflected that it "stands at the beginning of all the pianistic innovations that have been noted in my work."

As his studies concluded, he came across a competition in a Parisian periodical and submitted what became the first movement of the *Sonatine*. The magazine never announced a winner (in fact, Ravel may have been the sole applicant). The elegant second movement waltz remains subdued save for one passionate eruption. The *Sonatine* concludes with a virtuosic finale that recalls the first movement's opening; Ravel told one pianist that it should be played "without prudence or mercy."



Ravel undertook a years-long quest to win the Prix de Rome. This prestigious award included a stipend to study in Rome; past winners included Berlioz, Bizet, and Debussy. Though favored to win, Ravel was eliminated in five consecutive attempts; a national scandal erupted after his final loss. "L'Affaire Ravel" resulted in the early retirement of the Conservatoire director and his replacement by Fauré.

Ravel composed *Miroirs* amidst these frustrating years. Each movement is dedicated to a member of Les Apaches. Ravel dedicated the first, "Noctuelles," to Léon-Paul Fargue, whose verses inspired it: "Night moths depart their rafters, in ungainly flight, circulating beneath other beams." Bitonality (playing music in two different keys simultaneously), clashing rhythms, and frequent meter changes illustrate the moths' erratic flight.

"Oiseaux tristes" he dedicated to Viñes. Ravel wrote, "It evokes birds lost in the torpor of a somber forest during the most torrid hours of summer." The movement opens with the high, thin cry of a blackbird in the right hand; below it, the left depicts the forest in thorny tangles of chromatic chords and melodic fragments. The avoidance of tonic chords heightens the feeling of restlessness. The middle section finds a chorus of birds screeching and flapping about the wood. A slow, cadenza-like finale settles back into gloomy languor.

A ceaseless rocking figure pervades “Une barque sur l’océan.” Contrasting meters push and pull like wind against a sail. Mercurial harmonies and tense rhythms spar, and the music grows turbulent before a thundering climax ushers in a relieved sigh.

In “Alborada del gracioso,” jangling arpeggios mimic plucked guitars and snapping castanets. The second section opens with unaccompanied recitative, a nod to flamenco folk song. In the third section, the lively strumming returns and concludes with a driving finish. Varied dynamics, rhythms, and pitches create a sense of three-dimensional space in the final movement, “La vallée des cloches.” Dissonance slowly builds as the bells layer upon one another.

Following the Prix de Rome affair, Ravel took an extended vacation. In a letter home, he wrote, “During all of this time, I didn’t compose two measures, but I was storing up a host of impressions, and I expect this winter to be extraordinarily productive. I have never been so happy to be alive, and I firmly believe that joy is far more fertile than pain.” These words proved prescient, both for the productivity they heralded and for the First World War, which brought his most fecund decade to an end.



Each movement of ***Gaspard de la Nuit*** is based on a poem from Aloysius Bertrand’s collection of the same name. Like his contemporary, Edgar Allan Poe, Bertrand was obsessed with the macabre; Ravel cited both as inspiration, especially Poe, whom he called his “greatest teacher in composition.” Vifès introduced Ravel to Bertrand’s poems and lent him his copy of *Gaspard*.

In “Ondine,” the titular nymph uses a siren song to lure men to her underwater kingdom; Ravel opens with this seductive tune, surrounded by shimmering arpeggios.

“The Gallows” concludes, “It is the bell that tolls from the walls of a city, / under the horizon, and the corpse of the hanged.” Eerie harmonies unfurl around an incessant B-flat; this “bell that tolls” recalls Chopin’s Funeral March. Another allusion, a snippet of Debussy’s *Clair de lune*, creates perverse tension between the horrific tableau of the gallows and Debussy’s portrait of nocturnal serenity.

“Scarbo,” *Gaspard*’s dazzling finale, marks the virtuosic zenith of Ravel’s piano music. Following two nightmarish climaxes, the movement concludes like its namesake poem, “his face blanched like melting wax – / and suddenly his light went out.”

The following year, Ravel accepted a commission honoring the centenary of Joseph Haydn’s death; that piece became the ***Menuet sur le nom d’Haydn***. Six composers contributed including Debussy, Vincent d’Indy, and Paul Dukas, whose symphonic poem *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* became a household name thanks to the disastrous wand-waving of a certain cartoon mouse. The commissioner requested the inclusion of a five-note motto (B–A–D–D–G) representing the name Haydn. Ravel introduces the theme in the opening bars; it repeats in various guises, including upside down and backward.



In 1910 Ravel and other musical progressives founded the Société musicale indépendante. On May 9, 1911, the SMI sponsored an unusual concert. Hoping to encourage adventurous composers, they announced, “To shield the public from the influence of preconceived ideas, the names of the authors whose works appear in the program will be kept secret.” Afterward, concertgoers voted for who they thought composed each piece. A slim majority correctly guessed that Ravel composed the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, though not without “the accompaniment of hoots and cat-calls.” Debussy, on the other hand, called the Valses “the product of the finest ear that has ever existed.”

Ravel borrowed the title from Schubert, who composed about 100 waltzes for piano. Besides the name, Ravel’s bear little resemblance to their predecessors. While Schubert’s waltzes are tonal and mostly in major keys, Ravel’s utilize major and minor keys, modal scales, and bitonality. Most of the waltzes flow into one another without pause. The first is dissonant and percussive. A slow, melodic waltz follows. The sparsely textured third speeds on like a wisp of cloud, directly into a dreamy fourth. The soft fifth waltz gives way to a brief sixth and restless seventh. After these, the unhurried Epilogue alludes to fragments from earlier movements.

At Fauré’s request, Ravel composed the **Prélude** as a sight-reading piece for a piano contest at the Conservatoire. The Prélude is hardly taxing at just twenty-seven measures, yet Ravel coaxes nostalgia from its open octaves and sparsely accompanied melodies.

Like the Haydn, Ravel’s **À la manière de...** pieces resulted from a commission. A former classmate asked Ravel to contribute to a volume of pastiches; Ravel chose Alexander Borodin and Emmanuel Chabrier, two of his favorite composers, as inspiration. Ravel first heard Borodin’s music as a teenager. The Borodin piece, a cheerful waltz, borrows the Russian’s use of chromatic harmonies over an ostinato bass.

In the second, Ravel transcribes an aria from Gounod’s Faust with hallmarks of Chabrier’s style: upward flourishes, repeating the melody two octaves higher, and an oscillating bassline.



Ravel spent much of the summer of 1914 in a seaside resort town adjoining Ciboure. It was there that he heard the dreadful tolling of bells signaling that France had declared war on Germany. As the war unfolded, Ravel vacillated between depression and determination, “working,” he wrote, “with the lucidity of a madman.” Small, frail—he was 5’3” and several pounds below the army’s official weight limit—and nearly forty, he was rejected multiple times before successfully enlisting as a driver on the Western Front.

During the war, he composed **Le tombeau de Couperin**, a six-movement Baroque dance suite dedicated to friends who died in combat. Though reflective, the music eschews excessive sentimentality. Ravel achieves this by largely avoiding overly somber harmonies and the lowest octaves of the piano; the latter reinforces the music’s lightness. Responding to criticisms of the suite’s tone, Ravel replied, “The dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence.”

The suite opens with a *moto perpetuo* inflected with modal harmonies. A contemporary described the second movement fugue as “timid voices of nuns at prayer.” Allegedly, one conductor covered his ears while rehearsing the third movement, the set’s most harmonically adventurous.

The fourth honors two brothers whom Ravel had known in childhood; they were killed by the same artillery shell the day they arrived at the front. In the outer sections, fanfare punctuates a rollicking dance; the pastoral inner section is more reflective. A graceful minuet and a florid toccata conclude the suite.

Ravel never fully recovered from the war. On Armistice Day he underwent lung surgery to treat an infection, and insomnia plagued him the rest of his life. To escape the bustle of Paris, Ravel retreated to the suburbs with his Siamese cats. Though he continued to compose and conduct new works including *Boléro*, arguably his most famous piece, his pace slowed, and he never again composed an original work for solo piano.

In 1932, a blow to the head during a taxi accident accelerated Ravel's cognitive decline. "His final years were cruel," reflected Stravinsky, "for he was gradually losing his memory and some of his coordinating powers, and he was ... quite aware of it." A failed brain surgery left Ravel in a coma, and three days after Christmas 1937 he died.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Seong-Jin Cho has established himself worldwide as one of the leading pianists of his generation and most distinctive artists on the current music scene. With an innate musicality and consummate artistry, his thoughtful and poetic, virtuosic, and colorful playing can combine panache with purity and is driven by an impressive natural sense of balance. He is celebrated unanimously across the globe for his expressive magic and illuminative insights.

Seong-Jin Cho was brought to the world's attention in 2015 when he won First Prize at the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw, and his career has rapidly ascended since. In early 2016, he signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon and, in 2023, Cho was awarded the prestigious Samsung Ho-Am Prize in the Arts in recognition of his exceptional contributions to the world of classical music. An artist high in demand, Cho works with the world's most prestigious orchestras including Berliner Philharmoniker, Wiener Philharmoniker, London Symphony Orchestra, Concertgebouworkest, and Boston Symphony Orchestra. Conductors he regularly collaborates with include Myung-Whun Chung, Gustavo Dudamel, Andris Nelsons, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Gianandrea Noseda, Sir Antonio Pappano, Sir Simon Rattle, Santtu-Matias Rouvali, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Lahav Shani.

In the 2024/25 season Seong-Jin Cho takes up the mantle of Artist in Residence with the Berliner Philharmoniker, a position which sees Cho work with the orchestra on multiple projects across the season including concerto performances, chamber music collaborations, on tour to the Osterfestspiele Baden-Baden, and in recital. Elsewhere, he notably returns to London's BBC Proms, to the Philadelphia Orchestra to open their season with Yannick Nézet-Séguin, to New York Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony Orchestra with Santtu-Matias Rouvali, and to the Cleveland Orchestra under Franz Welser-Möst. Cho embarks on several international tours, including his notable return to Wiener Philharmoniker with Andris Nelsons in Korea and to Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks with Sir Simon Rattle in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, following a performance of Brahms Piano Concerto. No. 2 in Munich.



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