



Maurice Ravel: Trio in A (1914)

"My trio is finished. I only need the themes for it," remarked Ravel to his friend and student Delage while working on his piano trio.

Ravel's process of writing this trio was by no means straightforward. Initially, he encountered such difficulties that he loathed the piece! Only with the onset of the First World War did Ravel finally make progress; from then on, he worked feverishly on finishing this composition. This sudden motivation was probably also due to his resolute will to join the French army, despite his poor health, which made his repeated attempts to help his country inevitably fail.

Ravel definitely did not want to write a trio that would follow in the European tradition. Instead, he wanted to include a collection of unconventional voices, also from outside of Europe.

Basque influences are especially prominent in the first movement. They pay homage to the Basque homeland of Ravel's mother, to which Ravel often travelled to compose. Through the division of eight eighth notes into three plus two plus three, the movement does not feel as rhythmically grounded as in four-four time. Instead, it is malleable and less tangible.

The second movement includes a rather not uncomplicated Malayan lyric form whose structures are reflected with remarkable precision in the music: in the poetic form pantoum, the verses must be interweaved by a fixed pattern. Here, Ravel finds an exact match on a musical level in the form of two repeatedly varied themes.

In the third movement, the Passacaglia, Ravel does not only use an ancient Spanish processional dance as its form. Instead, he combines this form with pentatonics. Seemingly archaic and meditative, the movement

unfolds in an extensive arch, from a one-voiced pianissimo to an extensive climax, before ebbing away gradually to the empty pianissimo of the piano.

Only in the fourth movement does one recognize motives that refer to the time of creation and the beginning of the First World War: one senses the charged atmosphere and tension felt by patriots going to war. Add onto that fiery fanfares, and the end of the work cannot be more exuberant, grandiose and triumphant. As positive as the ending suggests, however, Ravel was certainly not for the war. He found the warmongering of many young people appalling; it was this shock and his solidarity with his country that led him to enlist with such ardour.

Despite this piece's exotic influences and Ravel's conscious efforts to avoid European traditions, it remains – interestingly enough – close to established forms, at least in terms of its structure. The first movement is in the classical sonata form; in the second, Ravel succeeds in uniting the pantoum with the classical form scherzo-trio-scherzo; the Passacaglia is a dance form that has been used over and over again by composers through the centuries. It is remarkable how convincingly and coherently Ravel brings together foreign elements and classical forms; this also explains the strong thematic relationships between the movements. It is impossible not to think of Igor Stravinsky's comparison of Ravel to a Swiss watchmaker for his elaborate composition technique. In all its technical perfection, this work – with its diversity of expression, richness of sonority and rhythmic features – is first and foremost one that is fascinating and heartrending.