

presents...

The Robert and Ruth Dell Piano Series

LOUIS LORTIE | Piano

Tuesday, March 25, 2025 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

RAVEL

Pavane pour une infante défunte

Sonatine

Modéré

Mouvement de menuet

Animé

Gaspard de la nuit

(Trois poèmes pour piano d'après Aloysius Bertrand), M. 55

Ondine

Le gibet

Scarbo

INTERMISSION

Jeux d'eau

Valses nobles et sentimentales

Modéré-très franc

Assez lent (avec une expression intense)

Modéré

Assez animé

Presque lent (dans un sentiment intime)

Vif

Moins vif

Épilogue: Lent

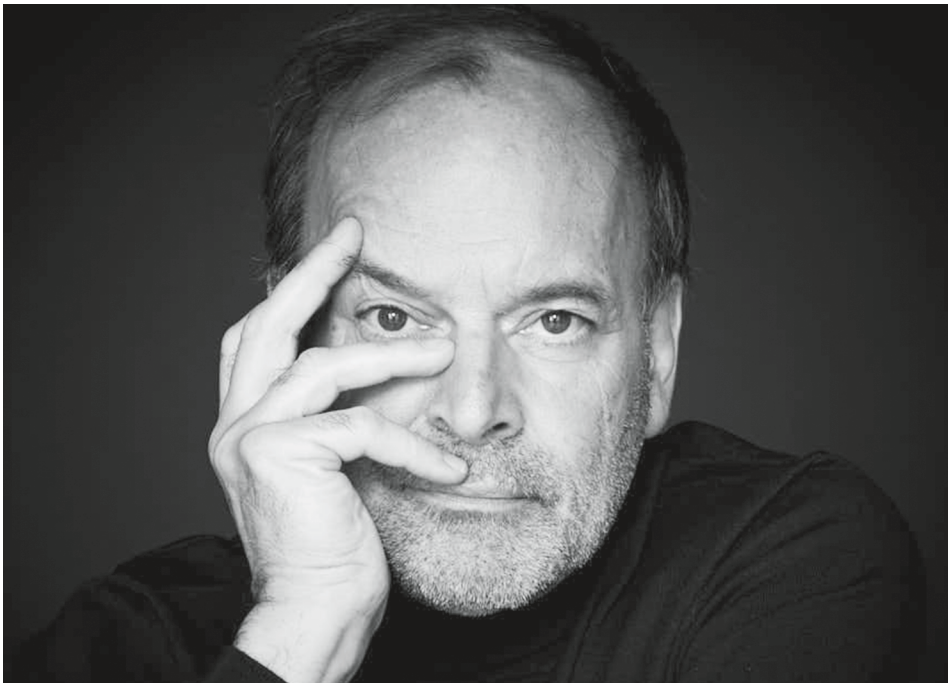
La valse (Poème chorégraphique)

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ARTIST PROFILES

Louis Lortie made his San Francisco Performances debut in February 1993 and tonight appears for the fifth time.

Louis Lortie has earned an international reputation as a versatile musician critically acclaimed for the fresh perspective and individuality he brings to the grand masters of the piano repertoire. In demand on five continents for more than 30 years, Louis Lortie performs with the most prestigious orchestras and in major concert halls around the world. A prolific artist, he has produced more than 45 recordings for Chandos Records featuring the pillars of piano literature. He is followed by more than 300,000 listeners monthly on streaming platforms and generated more than six million streams in 2022.

In Great Britain, his long-standing relationship with the BBC, the BBC Symphony and BBC Philharmonic orchestras have resulted in numerous recordings and concerts as well as more than ten invitations at the BBC Proms. In his native Canada, for half a century, he has regularly played with all the major orchestras: Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa and Calgary. Close collaborator of Kurt Masur, he was a regular soloist with the Orchestre National de France and the Gewandhaus orchestra during his tenure as Music Director. He has also collaborated with the Deutsche Sinfonieorchester Berlin, the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra, the Leipzig MDR Orchestra in Germany and in the United States, The Philadelphia Orchestra, Dallas Symphony,

San Diego Symphony, St. Louis Symphony, and New Jersey Symphony. Further afield, his collaborations include the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra where he was Artist in Residence, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra and the National Symphony Orchestra of Taiwan, as well as the Adelaide and Sydney Symphony Orchestras and the Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo in Brazil. Regular partnerships with conductors include, among others, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Edward Gardner, Sir Andrew Davis, Jaap Van Zweden, Simone Young, Antoni Wit and Thierry Fischer.

In recital and in chamber music, Louis Lortie regularly performs at Wigmore Hall in London, the Philharmonie de Paris, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Carnegie Hall, the Chicago Symphony Hall, the Beethovenfest Bonn and the Liszt Festival Raiding. He is particularly sought after for his performance of the complete *Years of Pilgrimage* of Liszt in one evening, the *Etudes* of Chopin (complete) in one evening, or his cycles of Beethoven sonatas; the latter filmed at the Salle Bourgie in Montreal and broadcast on Medici TV in 2021. For more than 20 years, with Hélène Mercier, the Lortie-Mercier duo has brought new perspectives on the repertoire for four hands and two pianos in concert as well as their numerous recordings.

His discography, exclusively for Chandos records, includes, in the solo piano repertoire, seven volumes of works by Chopin; Beethoven's 32 sonatas; the complete works of Ravel; Liszt's *Years of Pilgrimage*; and two volumes of works by Faure. With

Edward Gardner he recorded Lutoslawski's *Concerto* and *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, particularly praised by critics, as well as the complete concertos of Saint-Saëns with the BBC Philharmonic and the Vaughan Williams concerto with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Peter Oundjian.

Louis Lortie is co-founder and Artistic Director of the LacMus Festival, which has been held yearly since 2017 on Lake Como. He was master in residence at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in Brussels from 2017 to 2022. Louis Lortie continues to mentor pianists of exceptional talent by introducing the new generation through concert cycles, recently a cycle of Beethoven/Liszt symphonies at Wigmore Hall and the Dresden International Festival as well as the Scriabin Marathon at the LacMus Festival and Bolzano Festival Bozen..

Louis Lortie made his debut with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra at the age of 13. In 1984, he won the first prize at the Busoni competition and fourth prize at the Leeds Competition. He studied with Yvonne Hubert (student of the legendary Alfred Cortot), with Dieter Weber in Vienna, then with Leon Fleisher. Louis Lortie was honored with the title of "Officer of the Order of Canada" in 1992, and "Chevalier Ordre national du Québec" in 1997, and received an honorary doctorate from the University of Laval the same year.

PROGRAM NOTES

Pavane pour une infante défunte

MAURICE RAVEL
(1875-1937)

Ravel composed the *Pavane pour une infante défunte* ("Pavane for a Dead Princess") for solo piano in 1899. A pavane is an ancient dance of stately character and in duple meter, probably of Italian origin. There is an old custom that during periods of mourning in the Spanish court, a pavane might be danced before the funeral bier. Ravel may have been referring to this custom when he chose the title for this music, though he later admitted choosing it simply because he liked the sound of the words. He said: "Do not attach to the title any more importance than it has. Do not dramatize it. It is not a funeral lament for a dead child, but rather an evocation of the pavane which could have been danced

by such a little princess as painted by Velazquez at the Spanish court.”

The *Pavane* opens with the simple but haunting main theme. The piece is in rondo form, with the theme treated in three episodes, developed and harmonized differently each time. Ravel is said to have become tired of the *Pavane*’s great popularity, and he is known to have insisted that the music be played straight: without sentimentality or undue expression. This did not prevent his making the famous crack—after sitting through a dull performance of the *Pavane*—to the pianist: “I have written a pavane for a deceased princess, not a deceased pavane for a princess.”

Sonatine

Ravel completed his polished and poised *Sonatine* in 1905, just as he was achieving artistic maturity. One of the words used most frequently by critics to describe the *Sonatine* is “jewel-like,” and the music’s clarity, beauty, and delicacy make that description altogether apt. Its three movements span a total of only 11 minutes, but each of them is almost perfect in its control and clarity. Some of the music’s delicacy is the result of Ravel’s decision to set much of it in the piano’s high register: both hands are frequently written in the treble clef, and the music never loses its shimmering quality.

The opening *Modéré* is a miniature sonata-form movement. Its opening idea, marked “gentle and expressive,” barely has time to be stated before Ravel offers a more stately second subject. The middle movement is marked “Tempo of a Minuet,” and the music takes on some of the grace of that form, though this minuet is set in 3/8 rather than the expected 3/4 and there is no trio section. The concluding *Animé* is more consciously virtuosic, and it leaps to life with rippling, arpeggio-like figures that support the rhythmic main idea. This movement also is in a sort of sonata form, with a second subject in 5/4. Once again, Ravel’s working out of these ideas is very concise, and the music almost flies to its exultant conclusion.

Gaspard de la nuit (Trois poèmes pour piano d’après Aloysius Bertrand), M. 55

Maurice Ravel had a lifelong fascination with magic and the macabre, and they

shaped his music in different ways. While still a student, he fell in love with a curious book written sixty years earlier: *Gaspard de la nuit*, a collection of prose-poems by Aloysius Bertrand (1807–1841). Bertrand said that these spooky tales from the middle ages were “after the manner of Callot and Rembrandt,” and he gave these tales a further whiff of brimstone by claiming that the manuscript had been delivered to him by Gaspard himself, simply an alias for Satan.

Ravel composed his *Gaspard de la nuit*—a set of three pieces that blend magic, nightmare, and the grotesque—in 1908. Each of the three pieces of *Gaspard de la nuit* was inspired by a particular prose-poem, and Ravel included these in the score. *Ondine* pictures the water sprite who tempts mortal man to her palace beneath the lake. Ravel’s shimmering music evokes the transparent, transitory surfaces of Bertrand’s text, the final line of which reads: “And when I told her that I was in love with a mortal woman, she began to sulk in annoyance, shed a few tears, gave a burst of laughter, and vanished in a shower of spray which ran in pale drops down my blue window-panes.”

Le gibet (“The Gallows”) evokes quite a different world, and all commentators sense the influence of Poe here (during his American tour of 1928, Ravel made a point of visiting Poe’s house in Baltimore). Bertrand’s text begins with a question: “Ah, what do I hear? Is it the night wind howling, or the hanged man sighing on the gibbet?” He finally offers the answer: “It is the bell that sounds from the walls of a town beyond the horizon, and the corpse of a hanged man that glows red in the setting sun.” Muted throughout, this piece is built on a constantly-repeated B-flat, whose irregular tolling echoes the sound of that bell.

The concluding *Scarbo* is a portrait of some bizarre creature—part dwarf, part rogue, part clown—who seems to hover just outside clear focus. The text concludes: “But soon his body would start to turn blue, as transparent as candle wax, his face would grow pale as the light from a candle-end—and suddenly he would begin to disappear.” Ravel’s music—with its torrents of sound, sudden stops, and the unexpected close—suggests different appearances of this apparition.

Jeux d’eau

Ravel composed his *Jeux d’eau* in 1901. This music is at once a connection with the past and a departure toward the future. The connection with the past may at first seem an unlikely one: Franz Liszt. In 1877,

while living in Rome, Liszt had composed a brief piano piece called *Les jeux d’eaux à la Villa d’Este*, a depiction of the play of the water in the fountain of the estate where he was living. Ravel borrowed both the general conception of Liszt’s music and the first part of his title when he wrote *Jeux d’eau* (“Play of the Water”), but he achieved a range of sparkling color from the piano that Liszt never dreamed of.

In the score, Ravel prefaced the music with a quote from Henri de Regnier: “The river god laughs at the water as it caresses him.” One should take this as a general suggestion of spirit rather than as something the music sets out to depict literally—Ravel himself said that *Jeux d’eau* was “inspired by the bubbling of water and the musical sounds of fountains, waterfalls, and brooks.” In this music he achieves an enormous range of sounds that evoke sparkling waters: the very opening (which Ravel keeps it in the piano’s ringing high register) suggests a completely new sound-world from the piano, and Ravel contrasts this with a variety of sonorities, from delicate tracery cascading downward to thundering music that sweeps across the keyboard.

Valses nobles et sentimentales

In 1911, Ravel took time off from his work on the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* to compose a very different sort of music, a set of eight waltzes for piano, which he called *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. The inspiration for these dances may at first seem an unlikely one for so French a composer, for Ravel wrote these waltzes as an act of homage to Franz Schubert. Schubert wrote an enormous amount of dance music for piano: waltzes, laendler, minuets, German dances, and so on. All piano students are familiar with it, and as a young man Ravel fell deeply in love with it. Among Schubert’s dances for piano are a set of *Valses sentimentales* and a set of *Valses nobles*, and these were the inspiration for Ravel’s own set of waltzes for piano. His title, he said, “sufficiently indicates my intention of writing a cycle of waltzes after the example of Schubert.”

The first performance of the piano version of *Valses nobles et sentimentales* was given by Louis Aubert in Paris on May 9, 1911, under unusual circumstances. The Société Musicale Indépendante, which sponsored the concert, had decided that audiences and critics were prejudiced against certain composers and kinds of music. To circumvent these prejudices, all works on

the program were performed without the composers' names announced. While this may seem a good idea, it proved an uncomfortable experience for Ravel, who sat stoically while his friends seated around him made fun of the *Valses*. The audience's attempt to guess the composer of this music may have been even more disconcerting to Ravel: guesses included not only Zoltán Kodály and Erik Satie, but also Mozart, Chopin, Gounod, and even Wagner. The music, however, proved attractive enough that Ravel was encouraged to orchestrate it the following year as a ballet.

These eight brief waltzes require little introduction. By turns languid, sparkling, lilting, and vivacious, they show a rhythmic sophistication and suppleness (as well as a harmonic language), far beyond Schubert, but they also capture much of the fun and spirit of Schubert's waltzes.

La valse (Poème chorégraphique)

Though Ravel, like many French composers, was profoundly wary of German music, there was one German form for which he felt undiluted affection: the waltz. In 1906 Ravel planned a great waltz for orchestra. His working title for this was *Wien* (Vienna), but the piece was delayed, and Ravel did not return to it until the fall

of 1919. This was the year after the conclusion of World War I (Ravel had served as an ambulance driver in the French army during the war), and the French vision of the Germanic world was quite different now than it had been when Ravel originally conceived the piece. Nevertheless, he still felt the appeal of the project, and to a friend he wrote: "I'm working again on *Wien*. It's going great guns. I was able to take off at last, and in high gear." The orchestration was completed the following March, and the first performance took place in Paris on December 12, 1920. By this time, perhaps wary of wartime associations, Ravel had renamed the piece *La valse*.

If *La valse* is one of Ravel's most opulent and exciting scores, it is also one of his most troubling. Certainly the original conception was clear enough, and the composer left an exact description of what he was getting at: "Whirling clouds give glimpses, through rifts, of couples waltzing. The clouds scatter little by little. One sees an immense hall peopled with a twirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of chandeliers bursts forth fortissimo. An Imperial Court, about 1855." The music gives us this scene exactly: out of the murky, misty beginning, we hear bits of waltz rhythms; gradually these come together and plunge into an animated waltz in D major. If *La valse* concluded

with all this elegant vitality, our sense of the music might be clear, but gradually the music darkens and drives to an ending full of frenzied violence, and we come away from *La valse* not so much exhilarated as shaken. Ravel made a telling comment about this conclusion: "I had intended this work to be a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, with which was associated in my imagination an impression of a fantastic and fatal sort of dervish's dance."

Is this music a celebration of the waltz—or is it an exploration of the darker spirit behind the culture that created it? Many have opted for the latter explanation, hearing in *La valse* not a *Rosenkavalier*-like evocation of a more graceful era, but the snarling menace behind that elegance. Ravel himself was evasive about the ending: "Some people have seen in this piece the expression of a tragic affair; some have said that it represented the end of the Second Empire, others that it was postwar Vienna. They are wrong. Certainly, *La valse* is tragic, but in the Greek sense: it is a fatal spinning around, the expression of vertigo and the voluptuousness of the dance to the point of paroxysm."

Ravel arranged *La valse* both for solo piano and for two pianos, and the solo version concludes this program.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger