

Maurice Ravel

“Le Tombeau de Couperin”

JOSEPH MAURICE RAVEL was born in Ciboure near Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Basses-Pyrénées, in the Basque region of France just a short distance from the Spanish border, on March 7, 1875, and died in Paris on December 28, 1937. He composed “Le Tombeau de Couperin” as a suite in six movements for piano solo between 1914 and 1917, then orchestrated four of those movements in 1919. The orchestral suite was first performed on February 28, 1920, Rhené-Baton conducting.

THE SCORE OF “LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN” calls for a modest orchestra of two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, harp, and strings.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries French poets frequently wrote short poems—or assembled collections of such poems—commemorating the death of a notable person. Such poems were called “*tombeaux*” (“tombstones”). Usually the deceased person to be so honored was of the high nobility, though occasionally the death of a great poet, like Ronsard, might generate an outpouring of literary tributes. During the seventeenth century the *tombeau* tradition was adopted by French composers, who wrote their works most frequently for solo lute or solo harpsichord, usually in the form of a slow, stately dance movement. A group of French composers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concerned with recapturing some of the history of the French musical tradition, began reusing the neo-classical dance forms in their compositions. Ravel was the first to reuse the term *tombeau*, in his tribute to his great predecessor François Couperin (1668-1733), whose music shares with Ravel’s own a characteristic concern for grace, elegance, and decoration.

The original piano-solo version of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* occupied Ravel for some three years, on and off, during the devastating course of World War I, which was personally shattering to him. The piano work was a *tombeau* not only to the Baroque composer Couperin but also to deceased friends—each of the six movements was dedicated to a victim of the war. The piano version contained the following sections: Prélude, Fugue, Forlane, Rigaudon, Menuet, and Toccata. When Ravel decided to orchestrate the work in 1919, he omitted the Fugue and Toccata entirely and reversed the positions of the Menuet and Rigaudon.

The music of Ravel’s *Tombeau* is not really an evocation of Couperin’s own style—not even in a very extended way. Ravel simply hoped to pay tribute to the entire French musical tradition (then evidently under attack—culturally as well as militarily—from Germany). In its orchestral guise, the Prélude, with its running sixteenth-note figurations, makes extended demands on the articulation and breath-control of the woodwind players, especially the oboist. The Forlane is fetchingly graceful, delicate, and highly polished. (Oddly enough, given Ravel’s evident intention of commemorating French music, the *forlane* is an old dance from Italy, not France!) Ravel was evidently especially fond of the Menuet, which was the last music to be seen on his music rack when he died in 1937. And the Rigaudon, with its brassy outbursts, brings the *Tombeau* to a cheerful and lively conclusion.

Steven Ledbetter