Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Boléro

Maurice Ravel wrote to composer Arthur Honneger: "I've written only one masterpiece—*Boléro*. Unfortunately, there is no music in it."

In 1922, Ravel was commissioned by the dancer Ida Rubinstein to create an orchestral arrangement of Isaac Albeniz's set of piano pieces, Iberia. Unfortunately, copyright laws made Rubinstein's request impossible. Still leaning into her desire for Spanish-influenced music, Ravel sat down at a piano while on vacation and plucked out the theme of what would become *Boléro*. He wrote to a friend: "Don't you think this theme has an insistent quality? I'm going to try and repeat it a number of times without any development, gradually increasing the orchestra the best I can." And that is exactly what he did.

An unchanging machine-like rhythm played by the snare drum sounds constantly throughout the piece: 169 times. On top of that, two melodies (the second a little jazzier than the first) alternate for a total of eighteen melodic statements. The melodies never vary, but the orchestration changes with each statement of the melody as a different instrument or group of instruments takes over. And there is a gradual crescendo that lasts the duration of the piece. Ravel accomplishes this by two means: the number of instruments playing slowly increases, while at the same time the dynamic marking gradually grows from pianissimo (very soft) to fortissimo possibile (as loud as possible).

Rubinstein and her choreographer Bronislava Nijinska provided the following scenario at the ballet's premiere: "Inside a tavern in Spain, people dance beneath the brass lamps hung from the ceiling… the female dancer has leapt onto the long table and her steps become more and more animated." Ravel imagined the scene slightly differently. Inspired by his Basque mother and his engineer father, he imagined a Spanish woman dancing a slow Latin dance in front of a factory. The constant repetitive rhythm of the factory gives the work its unusual form and character.

Ravel anticipated that orchestras would refuse this piece that, as he said, "consists wholly of orchestral tissue with no music." But from its premiere in Paris in 1928, *Boléro* was a success.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Piano Concerto in G

In 1928, Ravel undertook a triumphant tour of the United States, where he met with adoring audiences and made a big splash with *Boléro*. Upon his return, he set to work composing his piano concerto, with plans to perform it himself on an even grander tour that would include Europe, the United States, South America, and East Asia. Ravel was a pianist and, throughout his career, frequently composed his works for piano before orchestrating them. But it wasn't until he was in his fifties that he set to work on a piano concerto.

No sooner had he started composing this concerto than he received a commission from Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein had lost his right arm during World War I and asked Ravel to compose a concerto that used only the left hand. Ravel set aside his intended concerto to compose the Piano Concerto in D Major for Left Hand. He then returned to his original concerto, finishing it a year later.

As he was nearing completion of the work in the summer of 1931, Ravel wrote that "the music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be lighthearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or at dramatic effects. It has been said of certain classics that their concertos were written not 'for' but 'against' the piano. I heartily agree. I had intended to title this concerto 'Divertissement.' Then it occurred to me that there was no need to do so because the title 'Concerto' should be sufficiently clear."

The Concerto is lighthearted from its very beginning. The whack of the slapstick gets the piece started as the rapid, staccato first theme is introduced by the piccolo before being passed to the clarinet and the brass. When the piano slows things down for its first entrance, its more serious theme borrows from the American popular music that had recently captured the imagination of all of Europe's composers: jazz. A deceptively simple song-like second movement is followed by a rip-roaring four-minute finale. Musicologist Michael Fleury writes that it is "an unstoppable onslaught, spurred by the shrieks of the clarinet and the piccolo, the donkey brays of the trombone, and occasional fanfare flourishes in the brass."

Sadly, Ravel's failing health kept him from assuming the soloist position at the premier of the Concerto in Paris in 1932. Instead, pianist Marguerite Long was the soloist with Ravel conducting. And the ambitious plans for a grand world tour had to be discarded in favor of a smaller European one. This Concerto would be Ravel's penultimate composition. The composer fell silent after 1932, when a neurological disease made it difficult for him to write, speak, play piano, or conduct. He lived another five years without composing.

Florence Price (1887-1953)
Piano Concerto in D minor

In 1943, Florence Price began a letter to Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, writing: "My dear Dr. Koussevitzky, To begin with I have two handicaps—those of sex and race. I am a woman; and I have some Negro blood in my veins." At this point in her life, Price had already established herself as a successful composer. Conductor Frederick Stock had premiered her First Symphony with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933: the first performance by a major orchestra of a composition by a Black female composer. Stock returned to her work the following year to perform her Piano Concerto in D minor (often called the "Concerto in One Movement") with Price as soloist. A critic at the time of the premiere wrote that it was "real American music, and Mrs. Price is speaking a language she knows."

The three movements of the Concerto each allude to a different tradition of Black American music. The minor key first movement hints at the Spiritual tradition, with singable melodies that are tainted with sadness and longing. The second movement brings in some jazz harmonies and includes a call-and-response between the oboe and the rest of the orchestra. And the final movement is inspired by Juba dance. Price frequently draws on Juba dance for her fast movements. Juba — a style of dance that includes body percussion — originated on Southern plantations when slaveholders took away the drums of enslaved people out of fear that they were using them to communicate. Enslaved people persisted in their music-making, using their bodies as instruments.

Like much of Price's music, the score for this concerto was lost and forgotten for decades. In 2015, the Center for Black Music Research in Chicago commissioned a composition professor to reconstruct the score from some existing rehearsal materials and reductions. His arrangement of the work was premiered in 2016. Two years later, the original manuscript for the Concerto appeared at an auction in St. Anne, Illinois, where, nine years earlier, 200 of Price's works were found in an abandoned house. The first performance of Price's original concerto outside of her lifetime took place in 2020.

George Gershwin (1898-1937)
An American in Paris

American pianist, songwriter, and composer George Gershwin wrote four large-scale concert works: Rhapsody in Blue, the Concerto in F—often called "The Jazz Piano Concerto"—the opera Porgy and Bess, and An American in Paris, which he subtitled "A Tone Poem for Orchestra." Rhapsody in Blue came first, a commission from the bandleader Paul Whiteman for a 1924 concert called "An Experiment in Modern Music." The Concerto in F quickly followed in 1925. At their premieres, both works featured the composer at the piano.

The next year, while on a three-month trip to Europe, George Gershwin began work on a commission he had received from the New York Philharmonic, the piece that would become An American in Paris. This tone poem does not place the piano at its center, but rather tells its story using the diverse timbres of a symphony orchestra, augmented by saxophones, a huge variety of percussion instruments, and four automobile horns. (Gershwin brought Parisian taxi horns with him to the rehearsals for the premiere.)
In a 1928 interview in Musical America, Gershwin said that this work was "the most modern music I ever attempted." And while it may be modern in its urban subject matter and its free, rhapsodic form, its reliance on singable melodies gave it staying power. Gershwin provided a short program note, which leads the listener through his piece:

"The opening gay section is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American… perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simpler than in the preceding pages. This blues rises to a climax, followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impression of Paris. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant."

Gershwin centers his work on two primary melodies. One is the walking theme heard at the beginning, which suggests a stroll through the streets of Paris. The second is the bluesy melody of the middle section, which captures the tourist's homesickness. Using his gifts of melodic composition, honed by years of songwriting, Gershwin transports the listener to the Paris of the années folles, or what the American would have called "the roaring twenties."

Notes by Sarah A Ruddy, Phd