

Maurice's minor mysteries

His music is passionate and distinctive, yet Ravel was a secretive, repressed figure who shunned relationships. By Jessica Duchon

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"Sincerity is of no value unless one's conscience helps to make it apparent. This conscience compels us to turn ourselves into good craftsmen. My objective, therefore, is technical perfection. I can strive unceasingly to this end, since I am certain of never being able to attain it. The important thing is to get nearer to it all the time."

So wrote Maurice Ravel, the composer of Bolero, possibly the most popular piece in the history of Western music. Sure enough, the craftsmanship of Bolero is astonishing - the shimmering orchestration, the mother of all extended crescendos and a single, earth-shattering change of key. It's not only thanks to Bo Derek and Torvill and Dean that the piece is ubiquitous. How strange it is, then, that Ravel, the most public of composers, should still remain the most mysterious of personalities.

Ravel, born in the Basque region of France in 1875, was nothing if not private. The writer Romain Rolland, who met him in 1907, appreciated his fine qualities, commenting: "He is intelligent, open and natural in everything he says. He judges himself and others with a strong desire for impartiality and a clear-sightedness which is quite rare in an artist." Yet Ravel took as much trouble to conceal his personal life from those around him as he did to hide the painful, protracted creative processes behind his music's "technical perfection". He destroyed most of his sketches and was loath to let himself be photographed working. At his home at Montfort l'Amaury, near Paris, he liked to entertain his friends with secret cocktail mixes but would never let anyone see him concocting them. He enjoyed an active social life in the nightclubs of the French capital, but his private life remained so private that to this day nobody has uncovered conclusive evidence that he ever had a sexual relationship. Perhaps it was inevitable that at some stage Ravel would be branded "heartless".

The French violinist Philippe Graffin has found a way to draw out Ravel's well-hidden heart. In two concerts at the Wigmore Hall on 29 February, he performs a hefty chunk of Ravel's chamber music, alongside works by the composer's most important teacher, Gabriel Fauré. For Graffin, the elusive human side of Ravel is crucial - and Fauré, Ravel's "cher maître", could provide the key. "Ravel is extremely precise and leaves the interpreter comparatively little freedom," Graffin says. "The more rigorous, detached spirit of the post-war years brought about a revision of the way his music was viewed. But there is

more of him that is human, that is tender, that is very much of his time, at the start of the 20th century, than maybe we like to think."

The intimate, other-worldly quality of Fauré's music was something to which the young Ravel seems to have responded strongly. "I wanted to put Ravel in perspective with Fauré, because I am always fascinated by composers through their youth," Graffin continues. "In Ravel's early pieces you can see his love of Fauré's music: there's a certain indulgence in his melodic writing and a tenderness, even nostalgia, that is very much like Fauré. The quartet's first theme could almost have been written by Fauré himself."

Nevertheless, while Fauré seems to have composed from the heart and Debussy from the gut, Ravel went on to compose primarily from the head and the nerve-endings. He had striking features and intense, dark eyes, but was only around 5ft 2in tall, something about which he was hypersensitive all his life. Perhaps to make up for this quirk of fate, he exercised extreme control in many other areas, from the decoration of his house, to his view of performers as "slaves" to his musical instructions.

Was it Ravel's high personal standards - the same "conscience" that guided his rigorous composing - that prevented him from finding fulfilment in his private life? He once proposed marriage to a close friend, the violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, who premiered several of his chamber works. She turned him down. The incident was recalled by a pupil of Ravel, the conductor and composer Manuel Rosenthal. "His emotional life was utterly simple and unhappy," Rosenthal wrote. "He was very conscious both of his short stature and of his position as an artist." Ravel had said to him: "An artist has to be very careful when he wants to marry someone, because an artist never realises his capacity for making his companion miserable. He's obsessed by his creative work and by the problems it poses. He lives a bit like a daydreamer, and it's no joke for the woman he lives with."

That may still not be the whole picture, according to two of Ravel's biographers, who offer intriguing, conflicting viewpoints. Benjamin Ivry, whose book about Ravel was published in America in 2000, is convinced that Ravel was gay, or at least repressedly so. "It's a pretty plausible explanation of his life, which would mean that he isn't such a mystery," Ivry says, suggesting that the theory tallies with such matters as Ravel's extreme closeness to his mother and his dandy-like care over his choice of clothing.

Gerald Larner, author of the Phaidon biography of Ravel, is unconvinced, saying: "The truth is that we simply don't know." Ravel's famous declaration, "My only mistress is music," was not, Larner feels, a glib excuse but a confession: "He didn't have time for anyone except his music and did not want anyone to take his attention away from it. I think that sexual matters were a source of embarrassment for him. He was certainly repressed."

Did Ravel's sexuality, lack of it or embarrassment about it have an effect on his music? Larner points out that Ravel's ballet score for *Daphnis et Chloé* represented enormous problems for the composer. "The original Greek story is semi-pornographic, but Ravel insisted that the scenario was altered so that hardly any love scenes were left," he explains. As for composing *Daphnis's*

bacchanalian, orgiastic conclusion, Ravel told Manuel Rosenthal: "I was in a very bad mood over it, so much so that I put Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade on the piano and tried, very humbly, to write something like it."

"When I first hear a composer's music, I don't think about his sexuality," Graffin remarks. But he concedes that "It may have some relevance to where he got his inspiration." Ravel's sources of inspiration were eclectic too, of course: from the tiny mechanical toys that he collected to the writing of Edgar Allan Poe, whose technical descriptions in "The Raven" Ravel regarded as exemplary. Add to that the magical, demonic sounds of Liszt's transcendental piano works and the mesmerising Gypsy violin that sparked Ravel's violin masterpiece, Tzigane. Graffin recalls a Hungarian friend of one of his violin professors, Lorand Fenyves, suggesting that Tzigane derived not from Hungarian Gypsy violin-playing but rather from its Spanish equivalent - logical, as Ravel always identified deeply with his Basque origins. "We're wrong to think of him as solely a French composer," says Graffin. "He was a Basque composer."

But Graffin, who spent his childhood in Provence and studied at the Paris Conservatoire before going to the USA, has another idea to throw into the Ravellian cocktail-shaker: he suggests that Ravel held a peculiarly French attitude toward his own public image. "He was ambitious and he eventually became very successful. I've known some of those characters in France! His relationship to the world is first about himself as a great composer, before himself as a man. The way that he was always so careful about what he wrote, even in his shortest letters, the way that he powdered his face, the way that everything in his home is so clean and preserved - all this shows that he paid a great deal of attention to the way the world perceived him."

We do not know whether Ravel's character was informed by excessive conscience, repressed sexuality or overriding artistic ambition, or a combination, and we may never know. But we have the music, and what music it is - each piece unique, yet formed in the same ephemeral sound-world with incisive intelligence and Mozartian precision, gently opening up what one critic called "the ironic and tender heart that beats under the velvet vest of Maurice Ravel". Perhaps that's all that matters. "Perfectionism is part of being secretive," Lerner comments. "Ravel's surface perfection ensures that you can't see what's hidden underneath. But that may be nothing more dramatic than being 5ft 2in."

'Ravel: A Masterly Pupil', Wigmore Hall, London WC1 (020-7935 2141), Sunday, 29 February, 11.30am & 4pm. Pre-concert talk by Jessica Duchon at 3pm. Jessica Duchon's biography of Fauré is published by Phaidon Press (£12)