

Gaspard de la nuit (Gaspard of the Night)

Gaspard de la nuit remains to date one of the most imaginative, evocative and technically most formidable works in the solo piano repertoire. Ravel described them as “three romantic poems of transcendental virtuosity.”

Gaspard de la nuit, very often without any translation in order to retain its origin, was inspired by a collection of prose-poems of the same title, written by French poet Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841). The collection was finished in 1836 but did not get published until 1842, after the poet's death. Ravel was introduced to the poems in 1896 by his pianist friend Ricardo Viñes, who eventually gave the first performance of Ravel's adaptations. Ravel was fascinated with the grotesque nature of the poems that deal with death, demons, nightmares and nymphs, etc., and embarked on composing three tone poems for the piano in 1908. The remarkable difficulty of these poems is no coincidence, as Ravel proclaimed to write something technically more difficult than *Islamey*, an *Oriental Fantasy* by written by Balakirev in 1869, which was known for its technical challenges. Ravel picked three of Bertrand's fantasies as the blueprints of his tone poems: *Ondine*, *Le Gibet*, and *Sacrébo*.

Ondine

This tone poem was dedicated to the celebrated pianist Harold Bauer (1873-1951) who started his career as a violinist. According to European legends, *Ondine* was a beautiful but rather wicked water spirit who fell in love with a mortal man. In Bertrand's hand, *Ondine* tried to win the man's heart by singing seductive songs, while spattering raindrops on his windows under moonlight. But the man told her that he was in love with a mortal woman, *Ondine* was vexed and burst into tears and laughter, and eventually vanished in the rain. Throughout the movement, besides the seductive melodies, the water spirit is continuously represented by rapid and soft repeated notes or chords which creates a shimmering effect, or by scales and arpeggios splashing up-and-down. Besides the horrendous key of C-sharp major (with seven sharps!) and the countless changes of accidentals, playing repeated notes and let alone chords rapidly and softly on the piano, unlike on other instruments, is already an awkward and tricky feat.

Le Gibet (The Gibbet)

Ravel was apparently joking when he dedicated this piece to his pianist friend Jean Marnold: “I have the intention to dedicate *Le Gibet* to you. It is not because I think you merit a rope to hang yourself, but because it is the least difficult of the three pieces.” There is no storyline in this tone poem. It simply evokes a spooky atmosphere of a desolate scene, in which a carcass is hanging from the gibbet. Soft pedal is required throughout as the dynamic never goes beyond mezzo piano. The most outstanding feature of the piece is the constant ostinato of B-flat (or A-sharp enharmonically), which is to be played monotonously and unyieldingly, undisturbed by all other musical lines. The last lines of Bertrand's poem give us a clue of what such ostinato represents: “It is the bell that tolls from the walls of a city, under the horizon, and the corpse of the hanged one is reddened by the setting sun.”

Scarbo

Dedicated to pianist Rudolph Ganz (1877-1972), the final piece of the suite is back to the subject of spirits. According to Betrand's poem, Scarbo was a malicious, sneaky and speedy dwarf-like goblin, who appeared at midnight to play tricks and to scare the poet. Scarbo laughed in the dark and made scraping noise with his nails. He pirouetted and twirled across the room. He could suddenly grow from a dwarf to as gigantic as belfry of a cathedral. He could change color or become translucent... and suddenly he vanished. Both musically and technically, Ravel's rendition is as devilish and frightening as the poem. This is the piece that he wanted to rival Balakirev's Islamey. It requires ultimate precision and agility, and transcendental acrobatic prowess from the player. Repeated notes are to be played precisely but at a lightning speed. Double-notes scale, chords and arpeggios are so complex that it would almost need more than ten fingers or even one more hand to handle.