

Boléro

Boléro is a one-movement orchestral piece by the French composer Maurice Ravel (1875–1937). Originally composed as a ballet commissioned by Russian actress and dancer Ida Rubinstein, the piece, which premiered in 1928, is Ravel's most famous musical composition.^[1]

Before *Boléro*, Ravel had composed large-scale ballets (such as *Daphnis et Chloé*, composed for the Ballets Russes 1909–1912), suites for the ballet (such as the second orchestral version of *Ma mère l'oye*, 1912), and one-movement dance pieces (such as *La valse*, 1906–1920). Apart from such compositions intended for a staged dance performance, Ravel had demonstrated an interest in composing re-styled dances, from his earliest successes—the 1895 *Menuet* and the 1899 *Pavane*—to his more mature works like *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, which takes the format of a dance suite.

Boléro epitomizes Ravel's preoccupation with restyling and reinventing dance movements. It was also one of the last pieces he composed before illness forced him into retirement. The two piano concertos and the song cycle *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* were the only completed compositions that followed *Boléro*.



Ida Rubinstein commissioned *Boléro* (1922)

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Composition

The work had its genesis in a commission from the dancer Ida Rubinstein, who asked Ravel to make an orchestral transcription of six pieces from Isaac Albéniz's set of piano pieces, Iberia. While working on the transcription, Ravel was informed that the movements had already been orchestrated by Spanish conductor Enrique Fernández Arbós, and that copyright law prevented any other arrangement from being made. When Arbós heard of this, he said he would happily waive his rights and allow Ravel to orchestrate the pieces. However, Ravel changed his mind and decided initially to orchestrate one of his own works. He then changed his mind again and decided to write a completely new piece based on the musical form and Spanish dance called bolero.^[2]

While on vacation at St Jean-de-Luz, Ravel went to the piano and played a melody with one finger to his friend Gustave Samazeuilh, saying "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 as best I can."^[2] It has been suggested that this unusual interest in repetition was caused by the onset of progressive aphasia.^[3]

Premiere and early performances

The composition was a sensational success when it was premiered at the Paris Opéra on 22 November 1928, with choreography by Bronislava Nijinska and designs and scenario by Alexandre Benois. The orchestra of the Opéra was conducted by Walther Straram. Ernest Ansermet had originally been engaged to conduct during the entire ballet season, but the musicians refused to play under him.^[4] A scenario by Rubinstein and Nijinska was printed in the program for the premiere:^[4]

Inside a tavern in Spain, people dance beneath the brass lamp hung from the ceiling. [In response] to the cheers to join in, the female dancer has leapt onto the long table and her steps become more and more animated.

Ravel himself, however, had a different conception of the work: his preferred stage design was of an open-air setting with a factory in the background, reflecting the mechanical nature of the music.^[5]

Boléro became Ravel's most famous composition, much to the surprise of the composer, who had predicted that most orchestras would refuse to play it.^[1] It is usually played as a purely orchestral work, only rarely being staged as a ballet. According to a possibly apocryphal story from the premiere performance, a woman was heard shouting that Ravel was mad. When told about this, Ravel is said to have remarked that she had understood the piece.^[6]

à IDA RUBINSTEIN
BOLERO
MAURICE RAVEL

Tempo di Bolero, moderato assai. 4/4 72

D. & F. 11 829

Partie 4. Piece de la Madelon.

Score for *Boléro* (67 pages)

The piece was first published by the Parisian firm Durand in 1929. Arrangements of the piece were made for piano solo and piano duet (two people playing at one piano), and Ravel himself arranged a version for two pianos, published in 1930.

The first recording was made by Piero Coppola in Paris for the Gramophone Company on 8 January 1930. The recording session was attended by Ravel.^[7] The following day, Ravel conducted the Lamoureux Orchestra in his own recording for Polydor.^[8] That same year, further recordings were made by Serge Koussevitzky with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Willem Mengelberg with the Concertgebouw Orchestra.^[9]

Toscanini

Conductor Arturo Toscanini gave the American premiere of *Boléro* with the New York Philharmonic on 14 November 1929.^[10] The performance was a great success, bringing "shouts and cheers from the audience" according to a New York Times review, leading one critic to declare that "it was Toscanini who launched the career of the Boléro", and another to claim that Toscanini had made Ravel into "almost an American national hero".^[10]

On 4 May 1930, Toscanini performed the work with the New York Philharmonic at the Paris Opéra as part of that orchestra's European tour. Toscanini's tempo was significantly faster than Ravel preferred, and Ravel signaled his disapproval by refusing to respond to Toscanini's gesture during the audience ovation.^[11] An exchange took place between the two men backstage after the concert. According to one account, Ravel said, "It's too fast", to which Toscanini responded, "You don't know anything about your own music. It's the only way to save the work".^[12] According to another report, Ravel said, "That's not my tempo". Toscanini replied, "When I play it at your tempo, it is not effective", to which Ravel retorted, "Then do not play it".^[13] Four months later, Ravel attempted to smooth over relations with Toscanini by sending him a note explaining that "I have always felt that if a composer does not take part in the performance of a work, he must avoid the ovations" and, ten days later, inviting Toscanini to conduct the premiere of his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, an invitation which was declined.^[14]

Early popularity

The Toscanini affair became a cause célèbre and further increased *Boléro*'s fame.^[1] Other factors in the work's renown were the large number of early performances, gramophone records, including Ravel's own, transcriptions and radio broadcasts, together with the 1934 motion picture Bolero starring George Raft and Carole Lombard, in which the music plays an important role.^[1]

Music

Boléro is written for a large orchestra consisting of:

- woodwinds: piccolo, 2 flutes (one doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes (one doubling on oboe d'amore), cor anglais, 2 clarinets (one doubles on E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, 3 saxophones (one sopranino, one soprano and one tenor), 2 bassoons, contrabassoon
- brass: 4 horns, 4 trumpets (3 in C, one in D), 3 trombones (2 tenor and one bass trombone), bass tuba
- 3 timpani and percussion: 2 snare drums, a bass drum, one piece/pair of orchestral cymbals, tam-tam
- celesta and harp

■ strings

The instrumentation calls for a soprano saxophone in F, which never existed (modern sopranos are in E \flat). At the first performance, both the soprano and soprano saxophone parts were played on the B \flat soprano saxophone, a tradition which continues to this day.^[15]

Structure

Boléro is "Ravel's most straightforward composition in any medium".^[5] The music is in C major, $\frac{3}{4}$ time, beginning *pianissimo* and rising in a continuous crescendo to *fortissimo possibile* (as loud as possible). It is built over an unchanging ostinato rhythm played 169 times^[16] on one or more snare drums that

remains constant throughout the piece:



On top of this rhythm two melodies are heard, each of 18 bars' duration, and each played twice alternately. The first melody is diatonic, the second melody introduces more jazz-influenced elements, with syncopation and flattened notes (technically it is mostly in the Phrygian mode). The first melody descends through one octave, the second melody descends through two octaves. The bass line and accompaniment are initially played on pizzicato strings, mainly using rudimentary tonic and dominant notes. Tension is provided by the contrast between the steady percussive rhythm, and the "expressive vocal melody trying to break free".^[17] Interest is maintained by constant reorchestration of the theme, leading to a variety of timbres, and by a steady crescendo. Both themes are repeated a total of eight times. At the climax, the first theme is repeated a ninth time, then the second theme takes over and breaks briefly into a new tune in E major before finally returning to the tonic key of C major.

The melody is passed among different instruments: 1) flute, 2) clarinet, 3) bassoon, 4) E \flat clarinet, 5) oboe d'amore, 6) trumpet, and flute (latter is not heard clearly and in higher octave than the first part), 7) tenor saxophone, 8) soprano saxophone, 9) horn, piccolos and celesta; 10) oboe, English horn and clarinet; 11) trombone, 12) some of the wind instruments, 13) first violins and some wind instruments, 14) first and second violins together with some wind instruments, 15) violins and some of the wind instruments, 16) some instruments in the orchestra, 17) and finally most but not all the instruments in the orchestra (with bass drum, cymbals and tam-tam). While the melody continues to be played in C throughout, from the middle onwards other instruments double it in different keys. The first such doubling involves a horn playing the melody in C, while a celeste doubles it 2 and 3 octaves above and two piccolos play the melody in the keys of G and E, respectively. This functions as a reinforcement of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th overtones of each note of the melody. The other significant "key doubling" involves sounding the melody a 5th above or a 4th below, in G major. Other than these "key doublings", Ravel simply harmonizes the melody using diatonic chords.

The following table shows how the composition is actually played by what instruments (in order):

Part	Instruments that follow the...		
	...snare drum's rhythm	...melody	...three-beat quarter/eighth-note rhythm
Intro	1st snare drum (pp)	1st flute (pp)	violas, cellos (both in <i>pizz.</i> , pp)
1st	2nd flute (pp)	1st clarinet (p)	violas, cellos
2nd	1st flute (p , also snare drum)	1st bassoon (mp)	harp, violas, and cellos (all p)
3rd	2nd flute	E \flat clarinet (p)	harp, violas, and cellos
4th	bassoons	oboe d'amore (mp)	2nd violins (<i>pizz.</i>), violas, cellos, and double bass (<i>pizz.</i>)
5th	1st horn	1st flute (pp), and 1st trumpet (mp , <i>con sord.</i>)	1st violins (<i>pizz.</i>), violas, cellos, and double bass
6th	2nd trumpet (mp , <i>con sord.</i>)	tenor saxophone (mp , <i>espressivo</i> , <i>vibrato</i>)	flutes, 2nd violins, cellos, and double bass (all mp)
			1st clarinet (interchanged from 2nd flute, last four bars)
7th	1st trumpet	sopranino saxophone (original score) / soprano saxophone (either instrument, mp , <i>espressivo</i> , <i>vibrato</i>)	oboes, cor anglais, 1st violins, violas, cellos, and double bass
		soprano saxophone (original score, interchanged from sopranino saxophone, mp , last four bars)	
8th	1st flute (mp , same with snare drum), 2nd horn (mf)	2 piccolos (pp), 1st horn (mf), and celesta (p)	bass clarinet, bassoons, harp, 2nd violins, violas, cellos, and double bass
9th	4th horn, 3rd trumpet (<i>con sord.</i>), 2nd violins, and violas (all mf)	1st oboe, oboe d'amore, cor anglais, and clarinets (all mf)	bass clarinet, bassoons, 1st/2nd trumpets (<i>con sord.</i>), harp, 1st violins, cellos, and double bass
10th	1st flute, 2nd horn, and violas (<i>arco</i>)	1st trombone (mf , <i>sostenuto</i>)	clarinets, bass clarinet, contrabassoon, harp, 2nd violins, cellos, and double bass
11th	4th horn, 1st trumpet (<i>senza sord.</i>), and 2nd violins (<i>arco</i> , all f , also snare drum)	piccolo, flutes, oboes, cor anglais, clarinets, and tenor saxophone (all f)	bass clarinet, bassoons, contrabassoon, harp, 1st violins, violas (<i>pizz.</i>), cello, double bass (all f)
12th	1st/2nd horns	flutes, piccolo, oboes, clarinets, and 1st violins (<i>arco</i>)	1st oboe, clarinets (both at first two bars), and below
			bassoons, contrabassoon, 3rd/4th horns, timpani, 2nd violins (<i>pizz.</i>), violas, cellos, double bass
13th	3rd/4th horns	flutes, piccolo, oboes, cor anglais, clarinets, tenor saxophone, and 1st/2nd violins (2nd violins <i>arco</i>),	1st oboe, clarinets (both at first two bars), and below
			bass clarinet, bassoons, contrabassoon, 1st/2nd horns, sopranino saxophone, timpani, harp, violas, cellos, and double bass
14th	1st/2nd horns	flutes, oboes, cor anglais, 1st trumpet, and 1st/2nd violins	flutes, oboes (first two bars), and below
			clarinets, bassoons, contrabassoon, 3rd/4th horns, sopranino saxophone, tenor saxophone, 1st/2nd trombone,

			tuba, timpani, harp, viola, cello, double bass
		bass clarinet, 4th horn (interchanged from 1st trumpet), and violas (<i>arco</i> , interchanged from 2nd violins, last four bars)	Above, and 2nd violins (<i>pizz.</i> , interchanged from violas, last four bars)
15th	1st–4th horns	flutes, piccolo, oboes, cor anglais, clarinets, soprano saxophone, 1st trombone (<i>sostenuto</i>), 1st/2nd violins, violas, and cellos (2nd violins, cellos in <i>arco</i>)	2nd violins and cellos (both <i>pizz.</i> , first two bars), and below
		bass clarinet, tenor saxophone (last four bars, tenor interchanged from soprano)	bass clarinet, bassoons, contrabassoon, trumpets (2nd/3rd trumpets <i>senza sord.</i>), 2nd/3rd trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, and double bass (<i>arco</i>)
16th	flutes, piccolo (first two bars), and below	flutes, piccolo, D piccolo trumpet, C trumpets, soprano saxophone, tenor saxophone, and 1st violins (all <i>ff</i>)	C trumpets (first two bars), and below (<i>ff</i>)
	oboes, clarinets, horns, 2nd violins, violas, cellos (all strings in <i>pizz.</i>), and a second snare drum playing throughout (all <i>ff</i>)		bass clarinet, bassoons, contrabassoon, trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, and double bass (all <i>ff</i>)
17th	flutes, piccolo (first two bars), and below.	flutes, piccolo, D piccolo trumpet, C trumpets, 1st trombone (<i>ff possibile</i>), soprano saxophone, tenor saxophone, and 1st violins	C trumpets, 1st trombone (first two bars), and below
	oboes, clarinets, horns, 2nd violins, violas, and cellos (all strings in <i>arco</i>)		bass clarinet, bassoons, contrabassoon, 2nd/3rd trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, and double bass
Finale (last 5 bars)	flutes, piccolo, horns, D piccolo trumpet, C trumpets, 1st/2nd violins, violas, and cellos	Glissando: trombones, soprano saxophone, and tenor saxophone (no glissando note on the saxophones)	oboes, cor anglais, clarinets, bass clarinet, bassoons, contrabassoon, tuba, timpani, harp, and double bass; together with the <u>bass drum</u> , <u>cymbals</u> and <u>tam-tam</u>

The accompaniment becomes gradually thicker and louder until the whole orchestra is playing at the very end. Just before the end (rehearsal number 18 in the score), there is a sudden change of key to E major, though C major is reestablished after just eight bars. Six bars from the end, the bass drum, cymbals and tam-tam make their first entry, and the trombones play raucous glissandi while the whole orchestra beats out the rhythm that has been played on the snare drum from the very first bar. Finally, the work descends from a dissonant B \flat minor over F minor chord to a C major chord.

Tempo and duration

The tempo indication in the score is *Tempo di Bolero, moderato assai* ("tempo of a bolero, very moderate"). In Ravel's own copy of the score, the printed metronome mark of 76 per quarter is crossed out and 66 is substituted.^[18] Later editions of the score suggest a tempo of 72.^[18] Ravel's own recording from January 1930 starts at around 66 per quarter, slightly slowing down later on to 60–63.^[7] Its total duration is 15 minutes 50 seconds.^[18] Coppola's first recording, at which Ravel was present, has a similar duration of 15 minutes 40 seconds.^[18] Ravel said in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* that the piece lasts 17 minutes.^[19]

An average performance will last in the area of fifteen minutes, with the slowest recordings, such as that by Ravel's associate Pedro de Freitas Branco, extending well over 18 minutes^[18] and the fastest, such as Leopold Stokowski's 1940 recording with the All American Youth Orchestra, approaching 12 minutes.^[20]

In May 1994, with the Munich Philharmonic on tour in Cologne, conductor Sergiu Celibidache at the age of 82 gave a performance that lasted 17 minutes and 53 seconds, perhaps a record in the modern era.

At Coppola's first recording, Ravel indicated strongly that he preferred a steady tempo, criticizing the conductor for getting faster at the end of the work. According to Coppola's own report:^[21]

Maurice Ravel ... did not have confidence in me for the *Boléro*. He was afraid that my Mediterranean temperament would overtake me, and that I would rush the tempo. I assembled the orchestra at the Salle Pleyel, and Ravel took a seat beside me. Everything went well until the final part, where, in spite of myself, I increased the tempo by a fraction. Ravel jumped up, came over and pulled at my jacket: "not so fast", he exclaimed, and we had to begin again.

Ravel's preference for a slower tempo is confirmed by his unhappiness with Toscanini's performance, as reported above. Toscanini's 1939 recording with the NBC Symphony Orchestra has a duration of 13 minutes 25 seconds.^[10]

Reception

Ravel was a stringent critic of his own work. During *Boléro*'s composition, he said to Joaquín Nin that the work had "no form, properly speaking, no development, no or almost no modulation".^[22] In a newspaper interview with *The Daily Telegraph* in July 1931 he spoke about the work as follows:^[19]

It constitutes an experiment in a very special and limited direction, and should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything different from, or anything more than, it actually does achieve. Before its first performance, I issued a warning to the effect that what I had written was a piece lasting seventeen minutes and consisting wholly of "orchestral tissue without music"—of one very long, gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, and practically no invention except the plan and the manner of execution.

In 1934, in his book *Music Ho!*, Constant Lambert wrote: "There is a definite limit to the length of time a composer can go on writing in one dance rhythm (this limit is obviously reached by Ravel towards the end of *La valse* and towards the beginning of *Boléro*)."^[23]

Literary critic Allan Bloom commented in his 1987 bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, "Young people know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse. That is why Ravel's *Bolero* is the one piece of classical music that is commonly known and liked by them."^[24]

In a 2011 article for the *Cambridge Quarterly*, Michael Lanford noted that "throughout his life, Maurice Ravel was captivated by the act of creation outlined in Edgar Allan Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*." Since, in his words, *Boléro* "[defies] traditional methods of musical analysis owing to its melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic repetitiveness," he offers an analysis of *Boléro* that "corresponds to Ravel's documented reflections on the creative process and the aesthetic precepts outlined in Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*."^[25] Lanford also contends that *Boléro* was quite possibly a deeply personal work for Ravel. As evidence, Lanford cites Ravel's admissions that the rhythms of *Boléro* were inspired by the machines of his father's factory and melodic materials came from a berceuse sung to Ravel at nighttime by his mother.^[26] Lanford also proposes that *Boléro* is imbued with tragedy, observing that the snare drum

"dehumanizes one of the most sensuously connotative aspects of the bolero",^[27] "instruments with the capacity for melodic expression mimic the machinery,"^[28] and the *Boléro* melody consistently ends with a descending tetrachord.^[29]

In popular culture

The piece gained new attention after it was prominently featured in the 1979 romantic comedy *10*, costarring Dudley Moore and Bo Derek. This resulted in massive sales, generated an estimated \$1 million in royalties and briefly made Ravel the best-selling classical composer 40 years after his death.^[30]

The 8-minute short film *Le batteur du Boléro* (1992) by Patrice Leconte concentrates on the drummer, played by Jacques Villeret, and the problems of his musical part. The film was screened out of competition at the 1992 Cannes Film Festival.^{[31][32]}

Public domain

This piece's copyright expired on 1 May 2016 for many countries, but not worldwide.^[33]

The work is public domain in Canada, China, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, and many others where the copyright term is "Life + 50 years". It is also public domain in the European Union (where the term is Life + 70 years). In the United States, the work is under copyright until 1 January 2025 as it was first published in 1929 with the prescribed copyright notice.^[34] The last remaining rights owner, Evelyne Pen de Castel, has entered a number of claims that the work was in fact co-composed with the designer Alexandre Benois.^[35] The effect would be to extend the copyright until 2039. The claims have repeatedly been rejected by French courts and the French authors society Sacem.

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