

Tzigane, rapsodie de concert (1924)
Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)

While visiting London in 1922, Ravel met the young Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Arányi, great-niece of the violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim. Ms. d'Arányi introduced Ravel to gypsy music, which so fascinated him that he decided to compose a piece in this style for her. The result was “Tzigane,” a title derived from the French word for gypsy – gitan, tsigane, or tzigane. Well aware of Ms. d'Arányi's virtuosic skills, Ravel deliberately made it supremely difficult to perform. The original work, for violin and piano, premièred in London in April, 1924 with Ms. d'Arányi accompanied by pianist Henri Gil-Marchex. Having heard Ms. d'Arányi's phenomenal performance, Ravel commented that he should have made the work even more challenging! The orchestral version premièred in November, 1924 in Paris with the Concerts Colonne conducted by Gabriel Pierné.

Although Ravel is almost universally regarded as an Impressionist composer, “Tzigane” demonstrates clearly his ability to imitate the (late) Romantic style of violin showmanship promoted by such composer-virtuosi as Nicolò Paganini and Pablo de Sarasate.

The single-movement work begins with an extended solo exposition of the melodic material by the soloist, who presents a free-flowing rhapsodic succession of ideas employing the so-called gypsy scale, one of several musical scales named after their association with gypsy music. The soloist presents a dazzling display of virtuosic effects, including harmonics, double, triple, and even quadruple stopping. Eventually the orchestra enters, and soloist and orchestra begin a tour-de-force of ever-rising tension and emotional intensity, which concludes with a headlong rush to the finale.

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