

TZIGANE (RAPSDIE DE CONCERT)

By MAURICE RAVEL

Born March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées;
died December 28, 1937, in Paris

During 1922 and 1923, Ravel was involved in an extensive concert tour that took him to Belgium, Holland, Italy, and England. Following a private concert at the London residence of Lord Rothermere, the British newspaper magnate, he met the Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Aranyi, who was a great-niece of the celebrated violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim. In addition to being a concert violinist, Madame d'Aranyi was an accomplished performer of gypsy music and she quickly captivated Ravel with her playing of these exotic, fiery pieces. Wishing to add a display piece of his own to her repertory, Ravel decided to compose for her, as he put it, “a virtuoso piece in the style of a Hungarian Rhapsody.” The result was *Tzigane*, which he subtitled *Rapsodie de Concert*. Its title is the French approximation of *cigány*, the Hungarian word for “gypsy.” For additional inspiration while working on the piece, Ravel had another violinist-friend, Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, come to Le Belvédère, the grandiose name that he whimsically bestowed upon his tiny home in Montfort-l'Amaury, and play for him some of Niccolò Paganini's fiendishly difficult *Caprices for Solo Violin*.

In its original form, *Tzigane* was written for violin and piano, the latter either with or without the attachment of the *luthéal*, a short-lived device then in vogue that apparently made the instrument sound like a harpsichord or a *cimbalom*, a Hungarian folk instrument similar to the hammered dulcimer. Madame d'Aranyi, accompanied by the pianist Henri Gil-Marchex, gave the first performance of the work on April 26, 1924, at an all-Ravel concert at Aeolian Hall in London. That same year, Ravel transcribed the piano accompaniment for orchestra. To a relatively standard instrumentation of winds and brasses in pairs and the usual strings, he added triangle, glockenspiel, cymbals, harp, and celesta. Madame d'Aranyi was also soloist for the premiere of the orchestral version of *Tzigane*, which took place in Paris on November 30, 1924, with Gabriel Pierné conducting l'Orchestre des Concerts Colonne.

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As befits a virtuosic *tour-de-force*, Ravel filled the solo part of *Tzigane* with every bit of violinistic fireworks that he could. Included among the many technical difficulties that the soloist must negotiate are double-, triple-, and quadruple-stoppings, harmonics, pizzicatos, glissandos, and brilliant passages in perpetual motion. As are most of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies, *Tzigane* is cast in two contrasting sections: the first, slow and quasi-improvisatory; the second, fast and fiery. It opens with the solo violin, unaccompanied, playing fifty-eight measures of some of the most demanding music imaginable. At nearly midpoint, the orchestra finally enters, playing an exotically scored chord, and assumes a role that is supportive and occasionally assertive, but never challenges the solo violin's dominance. Together, they develop Ravel's Franco-gypsy melodies with unrestrained abandon and whip them up to a passionate and quite frenetic climax.

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-Kenneth C. Viant