

Ravel's status as one of the finest composers of French music is ironic considering his part-Swiss, part-Basque heritage and his infusion of non-French traditions such as Eastern, Spanish, and jazz into his music. His Piano Trio 1914, the only trio he wrote, is no exception. From the opening Basque melody in the first movement to the Eastern scales in the last, cultural blending pervades the work. Part of what makes his music so "French" is actually this mixing of other cultural elements, which was also done by such composers as Bizet and Debussy. What makes his music so distinctly "Ravel," however, is his own treatment these borrowed ideas, which includes soft textures, subtle colors, creative rhythms, and delicate orchestration, Ravel's specialty.

The period 1906 – 1914 was one of Ravel's most productive, with such works composed as *Rapsodie espagnole*, *Gaspard de la nuit*, *Ma Mère l'Oye*, and *Daphnis et Chloé*. He began focusing on the piano trio in March of 1914 and worked steadily until war broke out in August of that year. At that point, he thought of nothing else but enlisting, despite his weak health, and sought to finish the trio as soon as possible: "I did five months work in five weeks," said Ravel in September 1914. He finished the trio that month and went to war soon after, writing almost nothing more until his discharge in 1917.

The first movement is in a lilting 3 + 2 + 3 meter, yet the music never feels awkward or unbalanced. Furthermore, despite many marked tempo changes, there are no abrupt edges or splintering surprises in the movement. Each event moves seamlessly from one to the next. The piano presents a velvety, Basque-like melody in the beginning, which is then taken by the strings and developed. A second theme, initially given by the violin, is more sparse and reserved than the first. After a large climax fit for an orchestra, the movement slowly winds to a close, ending with the piano playing the opening rhythm on its lowest C.

The title of the second movement, *Pantoum*, comes from the Malay verse form *Pantun*, which calls for two distinct ideas to be treated in strict alternation with each other in such a way that they make sense both by themselves and in combination with each other. Ravel chose a bouncy, staccato theme as his first idea and a legato, Spanish-style melody as his second, and he alternates them continuously while developing both. In the middle section, he introduces a new, broader melody that floats over the chattering first theme. The movement has incessant, almost over-flowing energy and ends with a bang.

The mood of the third movement, *Passacaille*, is far removed from that of the second. The spacious, hymn-like melody, first played in the lowest register of the piano, breathes tranquility and calm. Though the movement is not strictly a *passacaglia*, as the melody is not continuously repeated, the melody is passed to the cello and then to the violin, rising higher and higher in pitch until an ecstatic climax in the upper registers of all instruments. After this intense apex, the movement carefully makes its way downward, pausing for a sublime duet between the cello and violin before giving way to final statements of the theme by the cello and piano, both in the lowest depths of the instruments.

The final movement is yet another antithesis of the third movement. Its twinkling opening theme is Basque in its 5/4 meter but Eastern in its pentatonic pitches. A second theme in 7, another Basque meter, soon presents itself. Throughout the movement, the breadth and scope of the sonorities are more orchestral than anything else and include extensive arpeggios, trills, tremolos, scales, and chords from the instruments. The movement ends in victory and triumph.