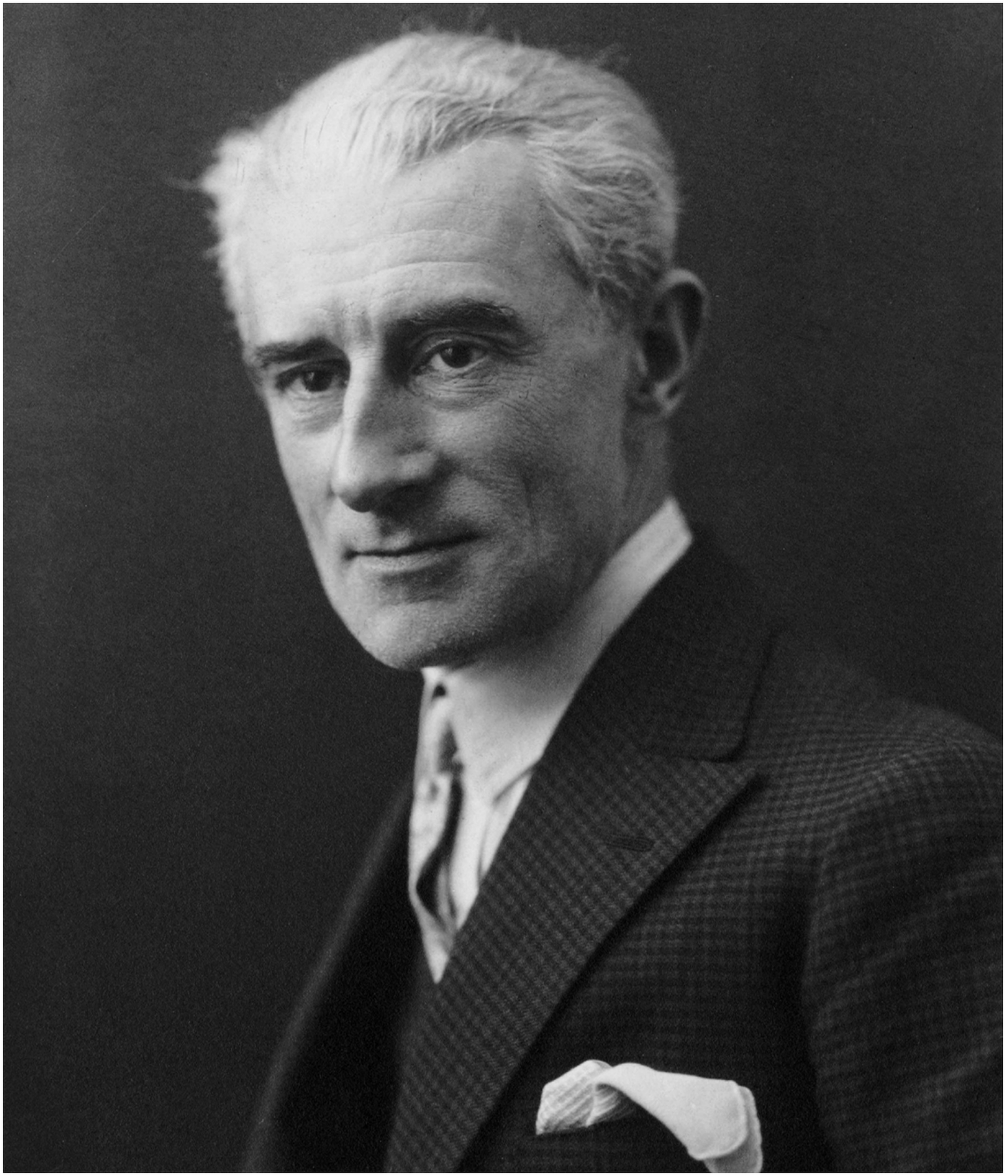
Ravel Abroad

Pierre Bleuse | Odense Symphony Orchestra

La Valse, Rapsodie espagnole, Alborada del gracioso, Bolero



Warmth and Coolness – Intimacy and Perfection

It is always risky to draw direct parallels between an artist and his work. Yet in the case of Maurice Ravel, and especially in the four works presented on this recording, such a comparison can be illuminating.

Ravel's father was a Swiss engineer, while his mother came from Spain. That simple biographical fact alone offers a valuable key to understanding many of the composer's works and the forces that shaped his creative imagination.

From his mother, Ravel inherited an intimate knowledge of Spanish music and song, together with a profound emotional closeness. She remained the most important personal relationship of his life. From his father came a fascination with mechanics and machinery, an appreciation of precision, and a relentless pursuit of perfection that informed his work from beginning to end. Both influences are richly present in the four works heard here. Although every composition arises from a multitude of artistic impulses, these two contrasting aspects of Ravel's musical identity run like a finely woven silver thread through them all.

Machinery, Perfection, and the Cool Element

Ravel repeatedly described the pursuit of technical perfection as an artistic goal in itself – perhaps even the most important one. Refining every aspect of musical form, sonority, melody, and rhythm came naturally to him, and he approached this task with fearless dedication. He was on a continual search for knowledge: an exploration of new instrumental combinations, new orchestral colours, and new possibilities of musical expression.

Ravel was neither a traditionalist, nor a sentimentalist intent on recreating the sounds of the past. Equally, he was not a revolutionary determined to reject musical history altogether.

He encouraged every aspiring composer to study Mozart, whose music embodied the ideal balance between emotional expression and flawless craftsmanship. Neither overheated passion in an imperfect form, nor impeccable construction devoid of genuine feeling, was enough. The equilibrium between the two was everything.

The same balance is essential when listening to Ravel. How could works such as *La Valse* or *Boléro* possibly succeed without it? Their extraordinary concepts can only function because the apparent madness is held firmly under control. The more extravagant the idea, the cooler the execution. The quieter and more concentrated the music becomes, the more deeply it moves us through its simplicity.

At first glance, Ravel's lush, seductive and often enigmatic sound world seems far removed from that of composers such as Arnold Schoenberg, who developed the twelve-tone method during the very years in which Ravel was composing in the 1920s, or from Schoenberg's pupils Alban Berg and Anton Webern. Yet the admiration between these composers was genuine and

mutual. Ravel himself remarked that his *Chansons madécasses* could never have been written had Schoenberg not first written his own music.

Craftsmanship, the constant refinement of technique, the determination to ensure that every mechanism functions perfectly without ever running out of control – these remain fundamental building blocks of Ravel's music. Musical architecture, melodic balance, imaginative orchestration, and rhythm as the living backbone of the score must all exist in perfect equilibrium.

Beauty, Terror, and Wit

Yet there is another side to Ravel's music: the breathtaking stillness, the deeply moving lyricism, the unsettling, the humorous, and the beautiful. These expressive qualities achieve their extraordinary precision precisely because they rest upon impeccable craftsmanship. His works are never merely technical exercises or academic studies; they are profoundly imagined musical experiences, intended to touch the listener both emotionally and physically.

As suggested at the beginning of these notes, it would be simplistic to reduce Ravel's expressive world to the influence of his beloved mother's Spanish heritage. Nevertheless, that influence was immense. In his *Notes sur Ravel* (quoted in Arbie Orenstein's *Ravel: Man and Musician*, Columbia University Press, 1975), the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla wrote of the *Rapsodie espagnole*:

"The Rhapsody astonished me by its Spanish character... How could I explain its subtly authentic quality... when I knew that Ravel knew our

country only as a neighbour, having been born close to the border? I soon found the answer. Ravel's Spain was the Spain ideally preserved by his mother."

Falla goes on to describe how Ravel's mother captivated him with stories from her youth in Madrid.

Ravel never denied the importance of sudden inspiration in his creative life. Yet he frequently cited writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe when emphasising that inspiration is almost always inseparable from disciplined, daily work.

La Valse

Perhaps the least Spanish work on this recording, *La Valse* is at once a wildly unhinged parody and a profoundly affectionate tribute to the very essence of the Viennese waltz. Many years before completing the work in 1920, Ravel had already spoken of his desire to compose an orchestral waltz in honour of Johann Strauss. Although his admiration for the Austrian "Waltz King" is unmistakable, *La Valse* is ultimately an entirely different creature from even the greatest Viennese waltzes such as *An der schönen blauen Donau*.

Ravel described the work as "a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz" and as "the impression of a fantastic and fatal whirl". That final phrase casts a revealing light on the relentlessly driving conclusion of the work.

The opening is dreamlike. Over dark strings and bassoons, one gradually senses distant dancers moving through a vast ballroom. Ravel slowly draws the listener closer until, almost imperceptibly, we find ourselves inside the ballroom, swept into the delirious whirl of the dance. Throughout the work

we catch fleeting glimpses of countless different waltzes, some delicate and intimate, others broad and sweeping, all carried past us in an increasingly feverish musical procession. Eventually the music paints itself into a corner from which there is no escape. Rather than reaching a triumphant conclusion, it seems to implode, collapsing under its own momentum in one final exhausted sigh.

La Valse also demonstrates Ravel's extraordinary ability to use dance rhythms as structural foundations capable of sustaining remarkably diverse musical ideas. The habanera, malagueña, bolero, sarabande, rigaudon, and many other dances inhabit his music, providing the rhythmic framework upon which melody, colour, and form are built.

Rapsodie espagnole

I. *Prélude à la nuit*
II. *Malagueña*
III. *Habanera*
IV. *Feria*

If one were to hear only the opening minutes and the final pages of *Rapsodie espagnole*, it would be difficult to believe they belong to the same work. Musically, the distance from the silken nocturnal atmosphere of the opening to the exuberant street festival of the conclusion is immense. Yet everything falls perfectly into place when the work is experienced as Ravel intended – from beginning to end.

The velvety night of the *Prélude* gradually gives way to the warmth and supple rhythms of the *Malagueña*, which in turn gently sinks back into the music of the night. Then comes the *Habanera*, poised, elegant and quietly smiling. Originally composed as a piano piece, Ravel returned to it more than a decade later, orchestrating it and incorporating it into this larger work. The concluding *Feria* is a dazzling explosion of anticipation and celebration: cascading harp glissandi, triumphant trumpet fanfares, bursts of percussion, and the almost sensuous colours of strings and woodwinds. *Feria* is quite simply a magnificent celebration.

Completed in 1908, *Rapsodie espagnole* was Ravel's first major orchestral work, and it already displays many of the characteristics that would define his mature style: irresistible dance rhythms, incomparable orchestration, melodies inspired by popular tradition without directly quoting folk songs, and an almost flawless balance in the use of the orchestra, from the most intimate whisper to overwhelming brilliance, from suspended stillness to sweeping momentum.

Alborada del gracioso

The title of this glittering orchestral miniature has been the subject of endless discussion in programme notes and scholarly articles. In simple terms, an alborada is a morning song or music celebrating sunrise, while a gracioso is a jester, clown, or mischievous comic figure. "The Jester's Dawn Song" is perhaps the closest English equivalent.

The work began life in 1905 as the fourth movement of the piano cycle *Miroirs* before Ravel transformed it into an orchestral showpiece in 1918.

From the very first bars, the strings imitate the sound of a guitar, immediately conjuring an unmistakably Spanish scene. One can almost picture the brightly dressed jester sitting with his guitar in the first light of dawn after a long night of revelry. At first he seems to reminisce about the festivities, but the mood suddenly changes as a deeply expressive bassoon solo gives voice to the clown's hidden sorrow beneath the rising sun. Soon enough the festivities return, and the work ends in a blaze of exuberant orchestral colour, leaving the listener with both the exhilaration of the celebration and a lingering sense of compassion for the melancholy fate that may lie behind the jester's smile.

Boléro

One of the world's most famous pieces of music began as nothing more than a short melodic idea at the piano. From that modest fragment Ravel fashioned more than fifteen minutes of some of the most relentlessly compelling orchestral music ever written.

Completed in 1928 as a ballet score, *Boléro* is built from just three fundamental elements: the rhythm of the snare drum, the accompanying string figures, and the melody, passed from one wind instrument to another. (As the work progresses, the last two gradually exchange their musical roles.) One might even think of them as a classic Spanish ensemble: the snare drum standing in for castanets, the strings becoming a gigantic guitar, and the wind instruments taking the role of the singer.

Throughout the work these three elements remain essentially unchanged. Ravel himself was careful to describe *Boléro* as an experiment, an orchestral

laboratory devoted to the creation of a single, continuous crescendo. He even remarked that Boléro contained "no music", only an extended crescendo.

This was by no means the first time that Ravel achieved extraordinary expressive power with the sparsest possible means. In *Le Gibet* from *Gaspard de la nuit*, he evokes the terrifying image of a gallows standing alone in a desert landscape with astonishing economy. The result is so haunting that one immediately understands why Edgar Allan Poe was among the writers who inspired him.

What, then, makes hearing the same melody unfold again and again for more than a quarter of an hour such a gripping experience? No one truly knows. Even Ravel himself urged audiences not to overestimate the work. In his own view, there was nothing exceptional about it: it merely employed one of his familiar Spanish-Arabic melodies and offered little in the way of sophisticated orchestral development.

Listeners may well be surprised by such modesty. Yet Ravel is not alone. Numerous critics have argued that *Boléro* is overrated and that one should instead turn to his more subtle masterpieces. One certainly should, but it is difficult to maintain that *Boléro* itself is overrated.

For almost a century it has captivated audiences in concert halls across the world. It has become part of popular culture through films, television and countless other contexts, while continuing to thrive in the ballet theatre for which it was originally conceived.

Why *Boléro* exerts such an irresistible fascination remains difficult to explain. What is beyond doubt, however, is its extraordinary place in both musical history and the public imagination. Perhaps it represents the perfect union of Spanish warmth and Swiss precision.

> *"The idea behind this Ravel project was really to work deeply with my dear musicians of the Odense Symphony Orchestra on French music, and especially the music of Ravel. It's an extremely distinctive music that really represents such a significant part of the French color. And at the same time, of course, a period in history when the French were looking towards Spain. The musicians of the orchestra managed to capture all the colors, all the articulation details needed to bring this extraordinary music to life. The rhythmic power of this music also requires a great flexibility in its interpretation. It is ultimately about being able to rediscover the rhythmic power of traditional music, dancing between notes, between beats."*
> – Pierre Bleuse

Pierre Bleuse

French conductor Pierre Bleuse has established himself as one of the most dynamic and versatile musicians of his generation. Since 2021 he has served as Music Director of both the Ensemble intercontemporain in Paris, one of the world's leading ensembles for contemporary music, and the Odense Symphony Orchestra. He is also Artistic Director of the Pablo Casals Festival in Prades.

Equally at home in the great symphonic repertoire and the music of our own time, Bleuse is a frequent guest with many of the world's foremost orchestras. His recent and forthcoming engagements include appearances with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Orchestre National de France, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Finnish Radio Symphony



PHOTO: MARINE PIERROT DETRY

Orchestra, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra, SWR Symphony Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, and São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, among many others.

A passionate advocate of contemporary music, Bleuse has conducted numerous world premieres and major productions, including Hèctor Parra's opera *Orgia* at Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu and performances with the Ensemble intercontemporain at the Festival d 'Aix-en-Provence. In 2025 he opened the centenary celebrations of Pierre Boulez with a landmark performance of *Répons* at the Philharmonie de Paris.

His collaborations with leading soloists include Joyce DiDonato, Karita Mattila, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Sol Gabetta, Bertrand Chamayou, Emmanuel Pahud, and Renaud and Gautier Capuçon.

Pierre Bleuse is particularly admired for his interpretations of the French orchestral repertoire, where clarity of texture, refined orchestral colour, and rhythmic vitality combine to illuminate the music of composers such as Maurice Ravel. His performances balance elegance with dramatic intensity, revealing both the brilliance of the orchestration and the expressive depth beneath its shimmering surface.

His growing discography has received widespread critical acclaim, including a Diapason d'Or de l'Année for his recording of Ligeti with the Ensemble intercontemporain. He studied conducting with Jorma Panula in Finland and Laurent Gay at the Haute École de Musique in Geneva.
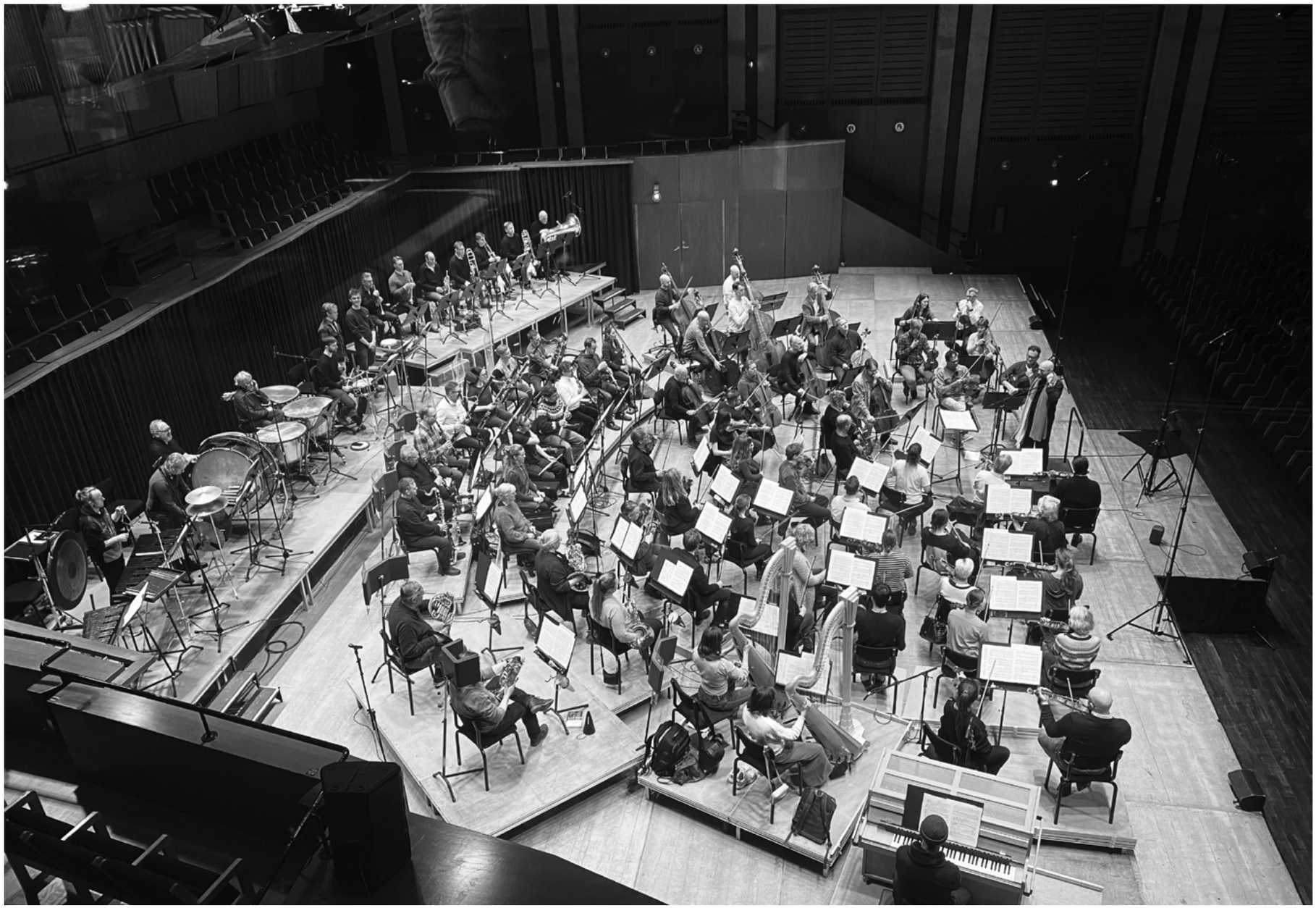
Odense Symphony Orchestra

Odense Symphony Orchestra is one of Denmark's five regional orchestras. The orchestra was founded in 1946, but its roots go as far back as around 1800. Originally conceived as a theatre orchestra that also played symphonic music, today the orchestra is a modern symphony orchestra employing 66 full-time musicians of the utmost professional level in a constant state of development.

The orchestra is based in Odense Concert Hall, which is located near H.C. Andersen's birthplace and was inaugurated in 1982. The majority of the orchestra's concerts take place in Carl Nielsen Salen, a concert hall with excellent acoustics, seating 1,200 people and equipped with a 46-stop organ built by one of the world's leading organ builders, Marcussen & Søn.

The orchestra has a wide artistic range and covers the great symphonic repertoire spanning from the Baroque era to contemporary music, often written specifically for the orchestra; film music concerts; various forms of chamber music concerts, family, school, kindergarten and children's concerts, concert talks with guest speakers and outdoor concerts. In 2018, the orchestra performed an entire cycle of Richard Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen, which was also live streamed under the baton of former chief conductor Alexander Vedernikov.

At its founding, Odense Symphony Orchestra had 22 musicians, but since then, it has grown to 66 tenured musicians from all over the world. The orchestra performs approximately 100 concerts a year, most often on their 'home turf'. The orchestra's touring activities include major concert tours to the USA, China, Germany, Greece, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Spain and in the former Soviet Union.



The discography is extensive: more than 100 releases have been issued, including several award-winning recordings. And plans are always in the pipeline for future release.



PHOTO: JULIA SEVERINSEN



Recording producer: Preben Iwan
Balance engineer, editing, mix and mastering: Preben Iwan
Recording assistance: Mette Due
Executive producer: Lars Hannibal
Cover photo: Marine Pierrot Detry
Cover notes: Trine Birgitte Boje Mortensen
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Orchestra manager: Trine Birgitte Boje Mortensen

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Maurice Ravel(1875-1937): Ravel Abroad

1	La Valse	13:02
	Rapsodie espagnole	
2	I. Prélude à la nuit	4:54
3	II. Malagueña	2:13
4	III. Habanera	2:34
5	IV. Feria	6:47
6	Alborada del gracioso	7:43
7	Boléro	15:38
	Total	52:56

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