
LA VALSE
SEAN CHEN
piano
STEINWAY & SONS

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Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

1	Valse in A flat major, Op. 38	6:29

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

2	Menuet antique	6:50

Scriabin
Piano Sonata No. 4 in F sharp major, Op. 30

3	I. Andante	3:10
4	II. Prestissimo volando	5:14

Ravel
Valses nobles et sentimentales

5	I. Modéré – tres franc	1:28
6	II. Assez lent	2:45
7	III. Modéré	1:39
8	IV. Animé	1:11
9	V. Presque lent	1:28
10	VI. Assez vif	:39
11	VII. Moins vif	2:55
12	VIII. Epilogue; Lent	4:08

Ravel

13	Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn	2:27
14	Prélude (1913)	1:38

Scriabin

15	Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53	12:33

Ravel (arr. Chen)

16	La valse	13:21

Playing Time: 67:57

LA VALSE

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937) BEGAN WRITING *LA VALSE* IN 1919 at the request of the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev. He completed it in 1920, but Diaghilev famously turned it down: "Ravel, it's a masterpiece ... but it's not a ballet... It's the portrait of a ballet." Although he was vexed by Diaghilev's dismissal, Ravel published the work as a *Poème chorégraphique* for orchestra and it received a successful premiere in Paris in December 1920. At the same time, the composer prepared versions for solo piano, and for two pianos. The version on this album is Sean Chen's own arrangement drawn from Ravel's different scores.

La valse provides the chronological bookend to the album, a selection of virtuosic piano music by Ravel and Scriabin. With the exception of *La valse*, all of these works were composed after 1895 and before the beginning of World War I. The years between 1900 and 1914, as historian Philipp Blom notes in his book *The Vertigo Years*, were a "period of extraordinary creativity in the arts and sciences, of enormous change in society and in the very image people had of themselves." Viewed in this context, these compositions are emblematic of that creative ferment, poised between the 'good old days' and the rapid onslaught of modernity.

By its very nature the waltz—a formal dance in triple meter—evokes the elegance of nineteenth century Vienna. Ravel's own preface to the orchestral score of *La valse* is an almost surreal evocation of this past:

"Through whirling clouds, waltzing couples may be faintly distinguished. The clouds gradually scatter: one sees at letter A an immense hall peopled with a whirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of the chandeliers bursts forth at the fortissimo letter B. Set in an imperial court, about 1855."

And yet the music of Ravel's *La valse* belies this soft-hued civility, gradually turning into a whirling *danse macabre*, which some critics have read as a metaphor for the destruction of European civilization in World War I. Ravel denied this was his intention, arguing that the music only speaks for itself, "an ascending progression of sonority." With the hindsight of history, however, the ironic juxtaposition of past and present—of pre-war and post-war—is hard to ignore.

Ravel was born in 1875 in Ciboure, a small village in the Basque region of France, and brought up in Paris where he won a place at the Conservatoire as a pianist. After a two-year hiatus he returned to focus on composition, studied with Gabriel Fauré, and found himself drawn to the new language of

impressionism epitomized by Debussy. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Ravel expanded his own harmonic language with important works, including piano compositions such as *Jeux d'eau, Miroirs*, and *Gaspard de la nuit*. In 1911, he wrote a series of perfect miniature waltzes following the example of Schubert, which he titled *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. In doing so, Ravel revealed his intense attraction to what he called the "wonderful rhythms… and the joie de vivre expressed in the dance." Ravel prefaced the work with a line from the poet Henri de Régnier: "…the delightful and ever-fresh pleasure of a useless pastime." But even as Ravel looked back to the forms of the nineteenth century, the new harmonic language he used confounded many in the audience at its first presentation. In this way, these waltzes look back nostalgically, while also anticipating his later *La valse* composition.

Although coming from a very different tradition, the work of the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915) also thrives within this creative tension between old forms and progressive harmonies. The Scriabin pieces sit comfortably side by side with those by Ravel, as the trajectory of this repertoire proves. Both composers, notes Sean Chen, are interested in expanding the orchestral possibilities of the piano, showing the range of colors available on the instrument, finding the impressionistic poetry inside the music. In addition to Scriabin's Valse in A-flat major, Op. 38 (published in 1903), his two sonatas composed during the first decade of the twentieth century are featured here—Piano Sonata no. 4 in F-sharp major, Op.30, and Piano Sonata no. 5, Op. 53—interspersed between the Ravel works.

Born in Moscow in 1872, Scriabin was a contemporary of Rachmaninov. The two studied with the same piano teacher in their early years, Nikolai Zverev, and also at the Moscow Conservatory where they were both taught composition by Anton Arensky. (Many years later, Rachmaninov toured Russia in a series of all-Scriabin recitals.) As a young man, Scriabin made his name as a pianist even as he was busy trying to establish himself as a composer, with works mostly written for the piano. He was initially influenced by Chopin and Liszt—what might be considered a late-Romantic style—but soon

developed his own idiosyncratic harmonic language marked by chromaticism and unconventional harmonies. Chen likens these qualities—evident in both Piano Sonata nos. 4 and 5—to "early Russian jazz," noting the extensive use of 7th and 9th chords, and even more progressive harmonies that are now characteristic in the jazz sound world.

In this so-called middle period of his composing career, Scriabin still relied on the structures of the sonata form to deliver his music, although Sonata No. 4 is the shortest of his ten sonatas, and built around two contrasting movements—a pensive, day-dreaming *Andante* that flows without pause into a hyperactive *Prestissimo volando,* which concludes with an ecstatic climax. Although this piece isn't technically a waltz, its triple meter gives it a dance-like groove. At this point the waltzing couples (imagined in Ravel's note) would seem to be airborne, whirling several feet above the dance floor.

It was around this time that Scriabin embraced esoteric philosophical ideas, in particular those expounded by the Russian theosophist Helena Blavatsky. Her teachings in books such as The Secret Doctrine, her magnum opus, inspired followers to seek Divine Knowledge. These philosophical musings coincided with a gradual transformation of Scriabin's musical language, leading to the development of the composer's so-called "mystic" chord—a turn away from tonality—and from which his later harmonies were derived.

It's indicative of this move towards atonality that, beginning with Piano Sonata no. 5, Scriabin no longer designates a key signature in the title of his sonatas. Scriabin conceived his fifth as a "grand poem for piano," writing it in 1907 at the same time as his orchestral work Poème de l'extase ("The Poem of Ecstasy"), Op. 54. Before he composed these works, Scriabin wrote a poem in verse form as a kind of literary manifesto to help define his artistic intent, even placing several lines of the text at the head of the score:

> *I summon you to life, secret yearnings!*
> *You who have been drowned in the dark depths*
> *of the creative spirit, you timorous*
> *Embryos of life, it is to you that I bring daring!*

The music of the Poème, and the Sonata no. 5—rhythmically complex, harmonically extended with mysterious sonorities—is designed to evoke exhilaration and ecstasy. Scriabin's expression marks throughout the sonata score are very specific, with instructions to the pianist to play at times "impetuously," "languid," and "caressingly." The sonata takes the listener on a sensual journey towards an ecstatic climax. In this way, Scriabin believed he could bring mankind into a state of bliss.

—Damian Fowler

SEAN CHEN

Pianist Sean Chen is the 2013 recipient of the American Pianists Association's DeHaan Classical Fellowship, one of the most lucrative and significant prizes available to an American pianist. He also won Third Prize at the 14th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, becoming the first American to reach the finals since 1997. Born in 1988 in Margate, FL, Chen grew up in the Los Angeles area of Oak Park, CA. His impressive achievements before college included receiving an NFAA ARTS week award, a prize at the California International Young Artist Competition, and the Los Angeles Music Center's Spotlight Award. These honors combined with his extraordinary intellect facilitated offers of acceptance by MIT, Harvard, and the Juilliard School; choosing to study music, Chen earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Juilliard, and his Artist Diploma from the Yale School of Music. At Juilliard he won the 2010 Gina Bachauer Piano Competition and received a notable third-party scholarship: the 2010 Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans.

The American pianist has appeared recently as soloist with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra under Gerard Schwarz, Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra under Leonard Slatkin, the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra, Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra, and in recitals at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and Jordan Hall in Boston. He has performed new works by Lisa Bielawa, Michael Williams, Nicco Athens, Michael Gilbertson, and Reinaldo Moya, among others. His CD releases include an album of Michael Williams's solo piano works on the Parma label, a recording from the Cliburn competition on Harmonia Mundi, and this solo recording on the Steinway label as part of his American Pianists Association prize.

Chen's performances have been broadcast on *From the Top*, *Performance Today*, WQXR (New York), WGBH (Boston), WFMT (Chicago), and WFYI (Indianapolis).

When not at the piano, Chen enjoys tinkering with computers and composing.

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Engineer: Daniel Shores
Equipment: Metric Halo ULN-8, DPA 4006 microphones
Executive Producers: Eric Feidner, Jon Feidner
Art Direction: Oberlander Group
Piano: Steinway Model D # 590904 (New York)
Piano Technician: John Veitch
Photos: Chris Lee

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