



Maurice Ravel's 'La Valse'

Maurice Ravel's idea to conceive a tribute to the Viennese waltz started in 1906, with the original title of "Wien," meaning "Vienna." The Great War started, and Ravel was exempted from military service for poor health. He became an ambulance driver in 1915. After the war, art patron Sergei Diaghilev asked Ravel to write a ballet.

Ravel set out to write "Wien," with a title change to "La Valse," and completed it in 1919. After Ravel played the piece for Sergei, Ravel told him it was not a ballet; however, it was a masterpiece of a portrait of a ballet. The two at one time threatened to fight a duel, and only calmer heads prevented the duel.

The celebration of the Viennese waltz has been the subject of many interpretations, from the struggles of Austro-German militarism and civilization to a struggle between Life and Death. One should listen to the piece with eyes closed and every sound taken in. The sounds will tell a story of 1919 with the knowledge of the present.

Remember, the piece was conceived before the Great War and completed after the war. Darwin's theory of evolution had just been published a few years before in 1859, and Sigmund Freud's works on the human mind were developed as recently as 25 years before Ravel finished his "La Valse." Did Ravel subconsciously express the idea that the Germans can create great things like the waltz but they are genetically defective and will destroy whatever they create?

The music begins with a sound that is primeval, like in a mist, and is a little sinister. It slowly and gradually moves to a graceful melody of the waltz. At times, there is a dissonant sound that creeps into the music as it shifts to an agitated and irritatingly grand sound that swings back and forth with more vehement disintegration of the calm melody. The piece ends with a crescendo sound that can be identified as that of machine-gun fire.

And 30 years later, Germany is back with destruction and death.

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. www.HistoryDepot.com