

1914

2014

WORLD WAR ONE

BBC

1918

2018

How did WW1 affect French composer Maurice Ravel?

Introduction – A composer at war - Narrated by Sara Mohr-Pietsch

This is Wigmore Hall in London. It's one of the world's finest concert halls. Just over 100 years ago, in 1913, the famous French composer Maurice Ravel gave one of his recitals here.

Back then this hall was called the Bechstein Hall, after the German piano firm which built it. A year after Ravel played here, the outbreak of World War One dramatically changed both their fates - because of anti-German feeling, Bechstein were forced to sell their prestigious venue; and meanwhile in Paris, Ravel turned his back on the lifestyle he had come to enjoy.

Even today, Maurice Ravel is one of France's best known composers. He's famous for his Bolero, for his colourful Rhapsody Espanol and his ballet Daphnis and Chloë.

But even though he was technically born in France, it was in the Basque region, very close to the Spanish border. His mother was Basque, and his father was Swiss, and because of that international heritage, Ravel was all the more keen for acceptance when France prepared for war.

Ravel was considered one of the most important musicians in France. But he had always been something of a renegade, a man ill at ease with authority.

By the time war broke out, Ravel really wanted to play his part in defending his country. He tried to join both the infantry and the air force, but he was a couple of kilos underweight and eventually he served on the frontline as a truck driver supporting his countrymen fighting off the German attack at Verdun.

Ravel was living a charmed life in Paris as a famous artist in cocktail bars and concert halls, so what made him give all of that up to join the fight? And what impact did his war experiences have on him and his music?