



How did WW1 affect French composer Maurice Ravel?

The impact of WW1 - Narrated by Sara Mohr-Pietsch

In the last year of the war, 1918, Ravel composed just one work. It is an unusual piece for 5 hands at two pianos that lasts less than two minutes.

(Music: Frontispice)

Frontispice was written for a collection of poems by the early film theoretician Ricciotto Canudo, which are based on the author's war-time experiences and were published alongside a portrait of Canudo by Picasso.

The piece also contains imitations of birdsong, which could well reference the birdsong which Ravel noted down while serving at the front.

For a composer who aimed at technical perfection, Frontispice is a telling indicator of Ravel's state of mind: each hand seems to go off in its own direction, only coming together in the final moments in a whimper rather than a bang.

(Music: Piano Concerto in D major for the Left Hand)

One of Ravel's greatest works is his Left Hand Piano Concerto. It's highly dramatic in mood, and it plays with the theatre of the soloist's performance as the left hand dances its way up and down the length of the keyboard.

The concerto was commissioned in 1929 by the famous pianist Paul Wittgenstein, brother of the philosopher, and Ravel completed it in 1930.

Paul Wittgenstein had lost his right arm in the war, but refused to accept that his career as a pianist was over. He also commissioned works from Britten, Prokofiev and Richard Strauss, but Ravel's concerto is by far the most famous.