

Ravel in One Evening

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet Plays Ravel's Complete Published Works for Solo Piano at CMS

By Winston Cook-Wilson



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Pianist Jean-Efflam Bavouzet will perform Ravel's complete published works for solo piano on November 18, 2025, in Alice Tully Hall.

I sat down with pianist Jean-Efflam Bavouzet to discuss his upcoming CMS concert in which he will play Ravel's complete published works for solo piano. It is rare for a performer to undertake all of this music in one evening, so this is an opportunity that any fan of classical music will not want to miss. The program takes place at 7:00 PM on November 18, 2025, in Alice Tully Hall. An edited and condensed version of our conversation follows.

Winston Cook-Wilson: What was your earliest experience with Ravel's music?

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet: The first piece by Ravel I ever studied was the *Jeux d'eau* [the title means "Water games"]. I was struggling with it; it's a complex piece. It needs a lot of dexterity, and it's not easy to play fast and light at the same time. From the very start, Ravel and water were closely related for me; I realized that he wrote several pieces with water as a theme. One of them is "Une barque sur l'océan" [from *Miroirs*]. Another one is, of course, "Ondine" [from *Gaspard de la nuit*] with its incredible beginning. I say "incredible" because nobody had thought of imitating the shimmering water of a lake by alternating one

chord with one note in a pattern. And if we dig a little bit, it's absolutely amazing that a non-virtuoso—he never mastered the piano very well, he struggled to play even some of his easiest pieces and was not a stage performer—could invent an effect that works only if it's played fast and soft. It takes an immense amount of work to master it. It's one of the miracles of music history that a composer invented an effect without actually being able to realize it himself.

So *Jeux d'eau* was my first Ravel piece, but I always felt at home with Ravel's music. I studied the major French composers (Debussy, Fauré, and so many others), but I found Ravel more French than Debussy. Ravel is more into perfect proportions, into classicism. He expresses passions, but with a surface that is very elegant, as he was himself. People thought of



Composer Maurice Ravel in 1925.

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him as really a dandy. When he stayed with Alma Mahler in Vienna, she described him as arriving in makeup and a silk jacket for breakfast! He cared a lot about his appearance, but deep inside he was a very touching soul, full of passions and some melancholy and nostalgia. His music is a very interesting mixture of a kind of naïveté and an incredible subtlety of craft, with proportion and elegance, but under it a passion of sometimes unbearable power.

WCW: How do you think his body of solo piano works fits into his story? And why have you chosen to champion it in a single performance?

JEB: Ravel is an example of a major composer who wrote so little music that you can play his entire pianistic output in one evening. It's long, but not *that* long—it's only two hours and twenty minutes of music. You cannot play the entire pianistic output of Beethoven or Chopin in one concert, but with Ravel we can hear his evolution in these few pieces. Now, we have to say that he composed works for solo piano only for about a 20-year



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Jean-Efflam Bavouzet performing at CMS in 2023.

period, so these do not encapsulate his entire style. But throughout this evolution, all the pieces are really masterworks. There is no secondary level, even in the small pieces. Although one, we have to admit, stands out: it's *Gaspard de la nuit*.

WCW: Can you describe the trajectory of this solo-piano concert? What can the audience expect when listening to it?

JEB: Frankly, I think Ravel would be shocked to have a concert of his entire piano pieces played in one evening, because of course for him, each piece is individual and autonomous. On the other hand, the advantage of hearing everything within a specific genre by one composer is that it allows you to make connections among the pieces and hear the trademark of their style.

There may even be some things that the composer did not realize were similarities. Some who witnessed Ravel's evolution during his life were sometimes surprised at the directions he took, but with 100 years of vision we can recognize Ravel immediately. It fits very well in a concert program to play these pieces in an almost strict chronological order. The last piece he wrote for solo piano is the "Toccata" from *Le tombeau de Couperin*. The ending is massive, so it fits perfectly at the end of a concert that with two intermissions is basically three hours long.

WCW: Tell us about your recent recording of these works.

JEB: I can happily share that I just recorded the complete works of Ravel again, as I did 20 years ago.

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Pianists Jean Efflam Bavouzet and Alessio Bax performing at CMS in 2023.

You might think that I did it again because my view on this repertoire changed. Actually, not at all. I wanted to present a different sonic experience because the first recording I did was on a very old Steinway, from 1901. And although I like this recording very much, I wanted to have another sound for this music—something more modern, more crystalline. With my recording company, Chandos, we agreed on a beautiful instrument, a Yamaha, and I succeeded in getting the sound I wanted for this.

Honestly, I don't have the feeling that my view on the music changed. My only purpose was to satisfy Ravel: the metronome markings, the phrasing, the dynamics he asks for. Of course, in these 20 years, I have changed as a human being, and I have performed some of these pieces more than

100 times. So there is inevitably an evolution, but it's not something that I was conscious of. Ravel is extremely precise in his musical instructions, and therefore there is very little space for personal initiative from the interpreter.

The only thing I would like to ask him is: when he writes *espressivo* or *molto espressivo*, what liberty is he giving us? In music, this *espressivo* never tells you what kind of expression to have! [Laughs.] Okay, but what do I need to express? When we take liberties in the case of Ravel, the margin is very little. For me, his music works the most when you do less.

Winston Cook-Wilson is the Social Media Manager at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.