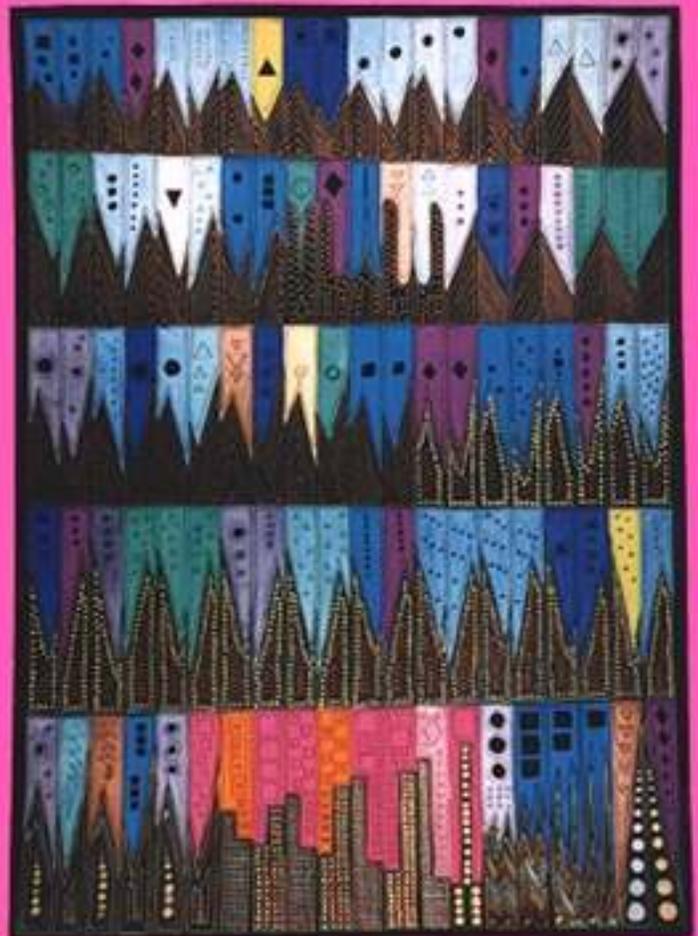


Boléro: Rhythms, Obsession, and Art



Artist Anne Adams' depiction of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*: Unraveling Boléro; via radiolab.org



Title: *Boléro*: Rhythms, Obsession, and Art

Time Frame: 30-45 minutes

Overview: Students will learn about Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*, the pervasive ostinato, and the art inspired by the work through age-appropriate activities.

Standard: **Creative Expression:** Explore and express basic elements of music through voice, musical instruments, electronic technology, or available media (M-CE-E4, M4, H4); **Critical Analysis:** Describe relationships among music, other arts, and disciplines outside the arts (M-CA-M4, H4); **Creative Expression:** Improvise or compose and perform simple musical ideas, such as echoing melody or short rhythmic patterns (M-CE-E4)



Maurice Ravel was born in 1875 in the Basque region of France. His mother's Basque-Spanish heritage had a big impact on his life and particularly on the music he wrote—he often borrowed from Spanish folk tunes. He gave his first public piano recital at 14 years old and later in life admitted to being “sensitive to music, to every kind of music” as a child. His father introduced him to a wide range of musical styles, from French to the Russians and he was particularly influenced by Erik Satie and his unorthodox musical style and by Rimsky-Korsakov. At the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel was considered “very gifted” but also “somewhat heedless” in his studies. He studied composition with Gabriel Faure, though he

was expelled twice for not meeting requirement of earning enough composition medals. However, he continued to audit classes and studied privately with Faure until 1903. In 1922, Ravel composed an orchestral arrangement of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (originally written for piano), which was widely popular and brought Ravel great fame and substantial profit. Because of his increasing popularity, Ravel traveled to America in the late 1920s on a four-month concert tour.

In 1932, Ravel suffered a blow to his head in a taxi accident. Afterwards he was frequently absent-minded. About six years after Ravel finished *Boléro*, the remainder of his life was plagued by a malfunction of the brain probably caused by Pick's disease which increasingly affected his speech and movement. He died after a final, unsuccessful operation in 1937.

Boléro was originally composed for a ballet choreographed by Ida Rubenstein—but is now most often played as a concert piece. It premiered in 1928. Rubenstein's balletic interpretation of *Boléro* was set in a rustic Spanish tavern and portrayed a dancer who stomps and whirls on a



table and it incites the men in an increasing fervor. With growing intensity, they join in her dance until knives are drawn and violence flares on stage at the moment where the music modulates. After its premiere, *Bolero* did not receive positive critical reviews, however everyday concertgoers LOVED it and it became one of the most popular concert pieces of the 20th century.

Boléro represents Ravel's preoccupation with reinventing and he told the composer Arthur Honegger, "I have written only one masterpiece. That is the *Boléro*. Unfortunately, it contains no music." The score is built on a single melody of two 16-bar phrases. Two snare drums play the basic 3/4 rhythm for four measures repeatedly. The flute begins the melody, which is repeated by the clarinet; the solo bassoon takes up the second phrase. After a change from C major to E major—in which saxophones and a solo trombone are prominent—the piece ends with shocking dissonance. Essentially, it is one long, very gradual crescendo.

Boléro is a very rhythmic piece. It is built on an eighth notes and triplet sixteenth notes **ostinato** (a short musical pattern that is repeated persistently throughout a composition; in Italian it translates to “stubborn”) in the percussion which the winds, brass, and strings play two contrasting melodies on top of. Listen to *Boléro* and then pick an activity below to deepen students’ understanding of the piece. *Boléro*, performed by the Vienna Philharmonic with Gustavo Dudamel conducting: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KgpEru9lhw>



For early elementary students: Can students pick out the ostinato played by the snare drum in *Boléro*? Take a look at the notes and rhythm of the snare part below. To help learn the rhythm, encourage students to come up with a phrase that fits the rhythm like “Dark chocolate sauce melted on top of my ice cream sundae so tasty can I eat two more please”.

For older elementary students: As students listen to *Boléro*, do they hear the ostinato all the way through? What instrument families play this rhythm? Wikipedia has a handy table that shows what instruments have the ostinato, first theme, and second theme and at what time in case your students need guidance: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bol%C3%A9ro#Structure>. If students are able to identify individual instruments, they should do that instead of naming the family of instruments.

Middle and high school students: After listening to *Boléro*, what did students hear or see in their imagination from the music? Colors? Shapes? Other forms of art, like dance or a story? In a 2012 Radiolab podcast, they tell the story of a biologist-turned-artist who becomes obsessed



with painting and paints a diptych based on what she hears in *Boléro* (<http://www.radiolab.org/story/217340-unraveling-bolero/> 20 minute). The artist appears to contract the same disease as Ravel at the same pace. After listening to the podcast and viewing Anne Adams' artwork, how do students think *Boléro* relates to other art forms? Do they relate at all to the obsessive nature of *Boléro*?



Unraveling Bolero by Anne Adams

Boléro is also a popular piece outside the concert hall:

- In a flash mob: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrEk06XXaAw>
- The music to Torvill & Dean's famous perfect-score ice dancing performance at the 1984 Olympics: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2zbbN4OL98>

You can see the LPO play *Boléro* during our [Open Rehearsal](#) on Friday, February 7th at 10 AM at Mahalia Jackson Theater, that evening at 7:30 PM at First Baptist Church Covington, and Saturday, February 8th at 7:30 PM at Mahalia Jackson Theater.

