

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: The 20th Century Viennese Waltz: Nostalgia and Decadence.

Abstract approved: _____

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The Viennese waltz is widely recognized as one of the most ubiquitous genres in classical piano literature. Despite the common characteristics that most of these waltzes share ---light, melodious themes, three-four meter, and varied tempos --- there is a large distinction between its earlier and later forms. Curiosity about its changing form, its place in the history of Western music, and love for the music itself has inspired this study.

Research for this project was focused on the piano scores of six major composers who contributed to the form of the Viennese waltz. Even with this approach, due to the inherent subjectivity of music, the results of this analysis may differ from those of other scholars. Several aspects of the waltz were examined in this analysis including structure and form, treatment of melody and harmony, rhythm, and at a certain level, the cultural forces surrounding the music.

Upon completion of this study, it was concluded that Ravel's twentieth century waltzes were a modernized take on the nineteenth century Viennese waltz in terms of modern application of structural features and form within the traditional waltz framework. From a cultural standpoint, Ravel's waltzes were a byproduct of an evolving European aesthetic since the waltz form in the early twentieth century was both a cultural symbol of a decadent society and a vehicle used to express a composer's own personal musical language. Ultimately, Ravel's applications of both traditional and progressive techniques were an effective culmination that ended the Viennese waltz genre both by reflecting its form in *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and symbolizing its "death" in *La Valse*.

Possibilities to expand this study include analyses of the evolution of piano dance music before the Viennese waltz in order to acquire a broader understanding of the significance of dance music in keyboard literature or a study of waltzes by post-modern composers to see how the waltz form evolved after Ravel's treatment.

Key Words: Waltz, Vienna, 20th century, Ravel, Chopin, Schubert, Brahms, Weber, Liszt

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The 20th Century Viennese Waltz: Nostalgia and Decadence.

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Committee Member, representing History.

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Brian G. Phan, Author

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Methodology:

The thesis of the following study is that Ravel's twentieth century waltzes were a modernized version of the nineteenth century Viennese waltz. To support this statement, the piano waltzes of five composers of the nineteenth century – Schubert, Weber, Chopin, Brahms, and Liszt – are studied and compared with Ravel's waltzes. The waltzes of each of these composers contribute something new and unique to the Viennese waltz leading to Ravel's interpretations. Analysis of each of these waltzes focuses on various excerpts illustrating matters of form, melody, rhythm, harmony, and texture. A brief cultural context surrounding their creation is included. Overall, this study provides a general chronicle of the evolution of the Viennese waltz from its origins to its symbolic "death" in Ravel's *La Valse*.

Introduction:

The waltz was the most popular ballroom dance of the nineteenth century and whereas other dance forms such as the minuet have come and gone, the waltz has persisted by adapting to the contemporary trends of its time. The name, "waltz," comes from an old German verb, *walzen*, which means to wander, turn, or glide. Though its origins are obscure, it is widely theorized that the waltz evolved from the simple peasant dance of the Austrian countryside called the *ländler* which was a slow dance that became popular in the late eighteenth century when musicians began composing music for the dance hall. In 1776, the *ländler*, now called the waltz, made its debut in formal musical society appearing as an interlude to an opera called *Una cosa rara*, by Spanish composer Vicente Martin (1754-1806). Its premiere in Vienna created a sensation in the Austrian aristocracy and was met with opposition by religious and political leaders who condemned the waltz as dangerous not only for medical reasons, because of the speed with which the dancers whirled around the room, but also for its lustful nature in requiring dance partners to be in close proximity to

one another. The waltz was also mocked by political figures for being too simple and that it was considered a step below other musical forms in terms of artistry and respect.

The waltz eventually caught on in the social set of the younger royals, who built their own private ballrooms to participate in this “forbidden” dance, particularly in Vienna where it became most popular. By the early nineteenth century, the waltz spread to the royal houses of Germany, France, and England, but despite its prominence in Western Europe, conservative social circles still considered the early waltz as too simplistic and associated it with low-class vulgarity and loose morals.¹

In spite of these objections, the waltz triumphed, especially in Vienna. The large leaping and prancing of the early waltz evolved into a series of smaller, gliding steps in order to give the waltz a lighter and gayer character in a more dignified and refined manner. Benefiting from their origins in the Viennese court, these waltzes became known as Viennese waltzes in order to distinguish them from the simple and traditional early waltzes. As a result of this new cultural vogue, composers began to elevate waltzes and dance music to the status of orchestral works and art songs.

Two significant composers behind this movement during the 1820s and 1830s were Joseph Lanner and Johann Strauss Sr. who collaborated together for many years before their split in 1825. Despite this split, they helped establish the Viennese waltz as one of the most successful genres in music literature. Their waltzes are characterized by their variety of lyrical and melodic themes, often violinistic in character (since both Lanner and Strauss were violinists), changes in tempo, contrasting sections, and strong trumpet fanfares. Another distinct feature of the Viennese waltz performance style is the slight delay between the second and third beat to create more dynamics and avoiding the

¹ In 1816, the Times of London printed an editorial after a royal ball which observed that the introduction of “the indecent foreign dance called the waltz...is quite sufficient to cast one’s eyes on the voluptuous intertwining of the limbs and close compressure on the bodies in their dance to see that it is indeed far removed from the modest reserve which has hitherto been considered distinctive of English females. So long as this obscene display was confined to prostitutes and adulteresses, we do not think it deserving of notice.” Hood, J. *The Freeman*.

monotony of the heavy and repetitive three-four beat. The most famous composer of these light Viennese waltzes was Strauss's first son, Johann Strauss Jr., who eventually became known as the "Waltz King." Strauss, like his father, toured across America and Europe and between 1863 and 1872, was charged with conducting the Austrian court ball. The popularity of his most famous waltz, "*By the Beautiful Blue Danube*" (1867) helped to dissolve the century-old prejudice against the waltz as a simple peasant dance and establish the fast and graceful Viennese waltz as one of the most popular and familiar pieces of music in classical literature.

While the orchestra and opera house did much to aid the development of the Viennese waltz, the piano was also just as important by allowing amateur composers to further stylize the waltz. As a byproduct of the Industrial Revolution, access to music printing gave rise to freelance composers who wrote music for personal pleasure at home or for intimate chamber group gatherings. Some of these early freelance composers who composed their own Viennese waltzes include Johann Hummel (1788-1837) who composed *Tänze für den Apollo-Saal*, Op. 27 which is a series of "German dances" with delicate trios and brilliant codas; Anton Diabelli (1781-1858), a Viennese music publisher whose waltz inspired Beethoven to write the *Diabelli Variations Op.120*, and Carl Czerny (1791-1857) who wrote a set of variations based on Schubert's *Trauerwalzer*, Op. 9. While many of these early composers adapted the waltz for the keyboard, dance music was still restricted to the ballroom. With the rise of the middle class and decline of the Viennese aristocracy, keyboard composers worked to expand the waltz genre from the dance hall into concert pieces, much like what Lanner and Strauss had done with the waltz for the orchestra. As a result of this transformation, the piano waltz became more recognized as an autonomous piece of music rather than a dance accompaniment. In the following decades, many of these composers began to expand the possibilities of tempo, accompaniment patterns, and texture of the piano waltz to create their own Viennese waltzes.

Part One: The Nineteenth Century Viennese Waltz.

Since the 1820s many composers ventured outside the time-honored limitations and traditions of the Viennese waltz to compose waltzes in innovative ways. This section discusses the solo-piano waltzes of five major composers who contributed to the stylization and development of the nineteenth century Viennese waltz: Schubert, Weber, Chopin, Brahms, and Liszt.

These nineteenth century Viennese waltzes for the piano each have their own distinct styles, but many of them share key characteristics in formal structure, melody, tempo, and rhythm. **Figure 1** outlines these key traits among waltzes written by the five major nineteenth century waltz composers.

Waltz feature	Who used it?
Formal Structure: Ternary (ABA)	Chopin, Brahms
Defined melody: Soprano, inner, or bass	Schubert, Weber, Chopin, Brahms
Tonal Harmony: Parallel key relationships	Schubert, Chopin, Brahms
Tempo changes/cross rhythms/hemiola	Chopin, Brahms, Liszt
Program music	Weber, Liszt

Figure 1. Key traits of the Viennese waltz used by major waltz composers of the nineteenth century.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828):

Throughout his largely private and short life, Schubert composed 452 short dances for solo piano that included minuets, German dances, ländler, waltzes, and ecossaises. Though some of his later works were more technically demanding, most of Schubert's waltzes were short, technically undemanding for the performer, and simple in structure, which would exclude them from being considered concert pieces. In addition, his waltzes were usually in binary form (two distinct sections) rather than ternary. As a result, these waltzes were both appropriate for actual dancing and as

entertainment in the intimate space of the home. Two of his most well-known waltz sets were his Thirty-four *Valses Sentimentales*, Op. 50, D. 779 and Twelve *Valses Nobles*, Op. 77, D. 969.

Each of Schubert's *Valse Nobles* have thick textures and strict rhythms, elements that contribute to the impression of dignified music for a noble and royal court. They are generally characterized by thick chords and a consistent "ohm-pah-pah" three-beat rhythm.



Example 1-1: *Valse Nobles No.7 in E major*, mm. 1-5.²

By contrast, the *Valses Sentimentales* were more emotive and atmospheric which gives them a sentimental nature. These waltzes are often more melodious than the noble type and feature long phrases played at the dynamic of "piano."



Example 1-2: *Valse Sentimentales No.13 in A major*, mm. 1-6.³

Though Schubert's waltzes appeared as some of the first examples of the waltz in the Viennese style, they were very similar to the early nineteenth century waltzes, with simple rhythms and structure. They are recognized for their dance-like rhythms and were probably not meant to be stand-alone works of art.

² Franz Schubert, *Klavierwerke, Series IV: Tänze*, 53.

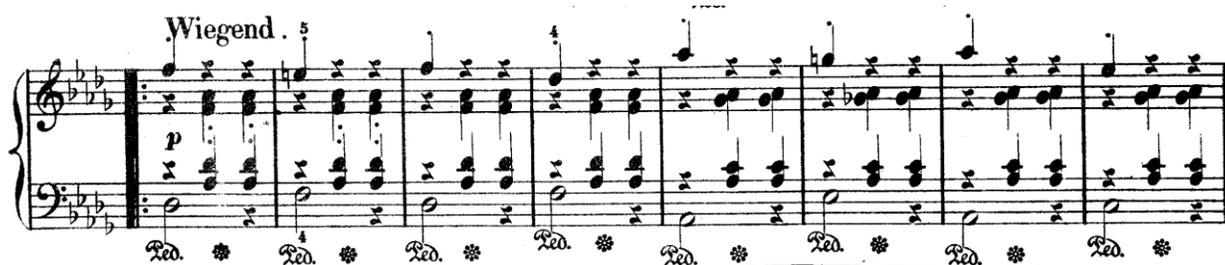
³ *Ibid*, 35

Carl Maria Von Weber (1786-1826):

The first piano waltz to find its way into the recital hall was Weber's *Invitation to the Dance*, Op. 65 J. 260. Dedicated to his wife Caroline, *The Invitation to the Dance* probably exerted the most significant influence on the development of future waltzes because it transferred the waltz from the dance hall to the concert hall by expanding on the formal structure of the waltz.

As the first example of the Romantic concert waltz, the structure of *The Invitation to the Dance* featured an introduction followed by a series of waltzes and a conclusion. With several tempo and key changes added to it, this new formal structure gave *Invitation to the Dance* a programmatic framework that portrayed a miniature drama.

Parts of this waltz suggest that the waltz is still meant to accompany a dance. In mm. 96-127, the composer marks "wiegend," which means "rocking," to describe the feeling of gentle swaying back and forth in the music.



Example 1-3. *Invitation to the Dance* mm. 96-104.⁴

Though it still employs some of the simple rhythms found in Schubert's waltzes, Weber's *Invitation to the Dance* expands on the structure and form of the waltz. With this expanded structure, *The Invitation to the Dance* requires virtuoso technique as a *bravura* piece from the performer making it more appropriate for performance in a recital hall rather than in a ballroom.

⁴ Carl Von Weber, *Aufforderung zum Tanze*, 4

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849):

Chopin continued Weber's design by varying the character of the piano solo waltz making it either too fast or too slow for dancing. He wrote at least seventeen waltzes with moods ranging from elegant, joyful, carefree, and brilliant to melancholy and dark. Like that of Weber, these waltzes were often brilliant and virtuosic which helped facilitate the transformation of the waltz into a showpiece. Chopin is credited for introducing the waltz to the Parisian salons where the middle class movement had already started to dominate cultural and social life. Rather than in dance halls or the royal courts, the waltz began to find its home at these venues where wealthy patrons and the members of the European bourgeois gathered to listen. The Rothschilds in Paris, for whom Chopin often performed, held dazzling gatherings where the most famous artists of the day would assemble and perform in front of guests who were both knowledgeable and supportive of the arts.⁵

As a common genre, the waltz provided Chopin the opportunity to relate his music to his own performing style. His particular performance style and traits made his waltzes particularly difficult for dancing. It is inferred from this evidence that his waltzes were not intended for dance at all, but as stylized reflections of ballroom form. Chopin's contemporary, Robert Schumann went on to suggest that if Chopin's waltzes were to be danced, "at least half the ladies should be countesses".⁶ With the rapid growth of music-making on the piano in the middle class home, Chopin introduced non-dance elements into his waltzes which helped stylize piano waltzes from mere dance music to virtuoso *bravura* pieces. Chopin's methods of stylization involve devices used to disrupt regular meter, vary tempo, and stretch melodic arches which gave his waltzes a more distinct Viennese character. With these changes, Chopin's piano virtuosity may be viewed as the vehicle to express his overriding poetic sensibility despite the progressive evolution of the piano waltz into a showpiece.

⁵ Jim Samson, *The Music of Chopin*, 121

⁶ Robert Schumann, *Music and Musicians: Essays and Criticisms*, 203

Chopin's waltz introductions and codas display various characteristics that are different from those of Schubert and Weber. His *Opus 18* and *Opus 34* waltzes for example have ceremonial fanfare-like introductions with brilliant codas. Others such as *Op. 42*, "*Grande Valse*" feature cross rhythms in the main theme (**Example 1-4**).



Example 1-4. *Waltz in Ab Major, Op. 42* mm. 9-12⁷

Unlike Schubert and Weber, Chopin consistently employs the ABA ternary structure in his waltzes. These ternary form waltzes, such as the *Waltz in A-flat major* Op. 34 No.1, usually follow a general formula with one or two themes within each section and sandwiched by an introduction and conclusion:

Introduction – Section A: Theme 1-2 – Section B: Theme 1-2-1 – Section A': Theme 1 – Coda

Figure 2. General ternary waltz structure in Chopin's waltzes.

Chopin's waltzes established several important features in the Viennese waltz such as introducing contrasting themes, varied rhythms, and the general ABA formula with both an introduction and a coda. The introduction of *Waltz in A-flat major* Op. 34 No.1 starts with an series of alternating fanfare E-flat arpeggios and ascending chromatic chords that are strict in rhythm and noble in character before leading into the A section which feature two themes. The first of these two themes is in **Example 1-5**.

⁷ Frederic Chopin, *Complete Works for Piano*, 30.

Example 1-5. *Waltz in Ab Major, Op.34 No.1* mm.17-24⁸

By contrast, the B section of the waltz reflects a different mood from the opening section.

As seen in **Example 1-6**, the theme in the B section modulates from A-flat major to D-flat major create this effect. The recapitulation of the A section contains only the first theme before ending with a brilliant coda.

Example 1-6. *Waltz in Ab Major, Op.34 No.1* mm. 112-119.⁹

Compared to waltzes by Schubert, Chopin's waltzes are much longer and more technically demanding, and often feature contrasting sections and rhythmic changes. Along with ternary structure, Chopin's technical brilliance and his poetic artistry helped elevate the solo piano waltz to a standing that would serve as a model for the rest of the century by presenting a diverse range of styles—from the dazzling and virtuosic to the melancholy and elegant. With Chopin's influence, this new model of the waltz helped move them into the salon and transformed the waltz into *bravura* pieces.

⁸ *Ibid*, 12

⁹ *Ibid*, 14

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897):

Brahms' set of Sixteen Waltzes *Opus 39* was composed in 1865 and was originally conceived as a piano duet. Eventually, Waltzes *Opus 39* came to have three additional versions: the solo piano, two-piano, and a simplified solo version. Unlike Chopin's waltzes, Brahms' were more conservative in style and were written to express the sonorities of the piano. These waltzes show diverse moods and styles including the organ-chorale in *No.5*, the sentimental mood of *No.7*, the sigh-figure rhythms in *No.9* and the good humor of *No.10*. In addition, some of these waltzes employ moderate technical difficulties, such as melody in octaves, large skips, continuous chord passages, and parallel thirds. Overall, Sixteen Waltzes *Opus 39* were influenced by Schubert's waltzes and imitated the gentle swaying style of the *ländler* with simple formal structure either in binary or ternary form without an introduction or a coda.¹⁰

Even though Brahms did not expand upon the structure of the waltz, the individual pieces of *Opus 39* show ingenious thematic materials, rhythms and key relationships that separate the waltz from the ballroom. Brahms often made use of the hemiola, a rhythmic device used to modify and disguise the regularity of the three-four waltz meter. He used this device in several of his sixteen waltzes to build tension before returning to the waltz triple meter (**See Example 1-7**).



Example 1-7: Waltz *Op. 39 No. 1*, mm.9-12 (Second Part).¹¹

¹⁰ Andrew Lamp, "Brahms and Johann Strauss," *The Musical Times* 116 (Oct. 1975): 869.

¹¹ Johannes Brahms, *Complete Piano Works*, 37.

There are common elements in Brahms' writing style, such as thick textures, syncopated rhythms, inner-voice melodies, and rich sounds in low-tessitura accompaniments. Today these pieces are recognized more for their charm and beauty of material rather than for their association with the dance and can be seen as Brahms' personal and conservative reflection of the ballroom dance.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886):

From 1859 until his death, Liszt wrote four Mephisto Waltzes. These waltzes for solo piano represent the pinnacle of the nineteenth-century Viennese waltz and cemented the genre into the concert hall. Each Mephisto Waltz is known as a programmatic, orchestral tone poem. Of the four, the first is by far the most famous and well-known as an expression of the macabre elements inspired by episodes from Nikolaus Lenau's (1802-1850) *Faust*. Liszt created this diabolical element through a character known as Mephistopheles, the evil and demonic character in the Faust legend, to showcase his showmanship and virtuosity.¹² As a piano piece, it is a brilliant example of a nineteenth century virtuoso showpiece that stretches the limits of pianism and also featured several orchestral special effects. Despite being composed in A major, there are several changes of key signatures and formal harmonic changes that had not been seen before in a waltz. Liszt also employed several tempo changes in the piece and a three-eight meter rather than the traditional three-four meter of the waltz.

The first Mephisto Waltz can be broken into four sections and plays out like an orchestral work. Each section contains its own thematic motifs before being reunited in the final section. In addition, each section featured several key changes. In contrast to the style and goals of Chopin who is known for his artistic and poetic integrity within the virtuoso waltz model for the salon, it may be argued that Liszt stretched the technical limits of the pianist and capacities of the piano even further

¹² Dolores Pesce, "Expressive Resonance in Liszt's Piano Music," in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, 445.

in order to exhibit his sheer pianistic *bravura* in the concert hall. In his first Mephisto Waltz, there are five distinct piano techniques that showcase Liszt's virtuosity on the keyboard:

- 1) Dense, thick, repeated chords: Such chords recreate the dense texture of the orchestra on the piano.

Example 1-8. *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*, mm. 901-907.¹³

- 2) Chromatic passages in scales: Brilliant scalar passages showcases a pianist's nimble fingers.

Example 1-9. *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*, mm. 165-169.¹⁴

- 3) Consecutive repeated notes: Repetition creates rhythmical buildup of tension.

Example 1-10. *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*, mm. 1-5.¹⁵

¹³ Franz Liszt, *Works for Piano: Original Compositions for Two Hands*, 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 74.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 70.

- 4) Cadenzas: Liszt composed virtuosic passages to showcase the technical and improvisational pianism of the soloist.

Example 1-11. *Mephisto Waltz No.1*, m. 832.¹⁶

- 5) Octaves: Used to magnify the volume of the piano.

Example 1-12. *Mephisto Waltz No.1*, m. 185-186.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid, 91.

¹⁷ Ibid, 74.

Unlike earlier nineteenth-century waltz composers, Liszt did not base his *Mephisto Waltz No.1* from the popular ABA structure and instead divided the waltz into uneven sections to reveal a programmatic narrative, much like that of Weber's *Invitation to the Dance*. By pushing the limits of pianism through virtuosity, and with frequent changes in tempo, meter, and tonality, Liszt not only elevated the waltz to the concert hall, but, by making the music utterly inappropriate for dancing, he completely removed it from the conservative ballroom. Liszt himself described the *Mephisto Waltz No.1* as a caricature of the dance itself.¹⁸ By stretching and distorting the limitations of the traditional waltz into virtuoso showpieces, Liszt's *Mephisto Waltzes* signaled a significant departure from the traditional Viennese waltz.

¹⁸ William Lloyd Adams Jr. *A History of Concert Waltzes for Piano*. (D.M.A. Dissertation.) North Texas State University, 1978, 38.

Part Two : Ravel and the Twentieth Century Waltz

The sustained interest in the waltz at the turn of the century can be seen as a reaction to the evolution of aesthetic culture among the educated European bourgeoisie, a social class known for its association with materialism and hedonism.¹⁹ In the early days of the waltz, political and religious leaders controlled popular art by advising the public about what was and what was not culturally and morally acceptable, with the waltz carrying the unfortunate distinction of being regarded in the latter category. For the next several decades and especially in Vienna, artists, actors, authors, architects, and musicians became the leaders in the formation of aesthetic taste, and as a result, the popularity of their works spread through all parts of society. By penetrating into the psyche of the rising middle-class consciousness, these artists changed the function of art in middle-class society and made it more accessible to ordinary people.

By the early 1900s after the climax and recession of Romanticism, music became more diverse in style and approach as the world went through a rapid change in technology, society, and the arts. Nationalism, exoticism, and modernism inspired new developments and opinions in music. The waltz was still a compositional favorite due to its popularity, but it continued to be stylized on the keyboard. Many twentieth century composers employed their unique musical style and language in the piano waltz to the point where these new waltzes bore little resemblance to their predecessors.

These modernist ideas were often paradoxically accompanied by both a rejection of the old stable forms of earlier generations and a renewed interest in the same old forms. Both of these notions, however, were based on the artists' need to create works that were a subjective reflection of their individuality. The transformation of European art was first seen in the transition from Classicism to Romanticism in the early nineteenth century when composers recognized the potential

¹⁹ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, 7.

their compositions possessed for expressing personal feelings. Aided by the expansion of the symphony and the evolution of the pianoforte, music had become a medium for this kind of subjectivity as opposed to formulaic versions of the traditional structural forms such as the sonata, the four-movement symphony, and even the waltz. This new emphasis on the artists rather than the work of art appealed to all artisans at the time including painters, sculptors, authors, and playwrights. Fuelled by the desire to express their individual subjectivity, musicians began to demand the right and personal freedom to experiment with new and old forms. This created an avant-garde generation of modernist composers who sought to push the boundaries of sonority, tonality, rhythm, and structure in music to create modern music. Modernist composers in the first decades of the twentieth century including Claude Debussy and Arnold Schoenberg experimented in these new movements such as impressionism and expressionism to reflect their inner visions, convictions, and impressions of a changing world in decay. Others include neo-classicists such as Igor Stravinsky who, during the 1920s, sought to create updated versions of old structural forms.

The psychological reasons for this artistic revolution can be traced to the cultivation of art to reflect the selfhood and the personal uniqueness of its creator. The artist evolved from a feuilletonist who worked to express the attitudes of society to a narcissist who wished to transform objective representations of the world into a subjective expression of his or her personal feelings. In other words, art became transformed from an ornament to an essence or from an expression of value to a source value.²⁰ For the modernized piano waltz, the waltz became music more about the waltz form itself rather than reflections of ballroom dancing. The danger in using this approach was that the work of the artist may become unintelligible and detached from its audience, assuming the artist wanted an audience at all. Such experiments may make the artist appear more interested in conceiving the world as a succession of personal stimuli rather than an intelligible narrative or scene of action in the piece of art. The work would then sometimes be met with criticism and produce

²⁰ Ibid, 9.

unfounded conclusions such as the extra-musical symbolism of Ravel's *La Valse* as a metaphor to a world at war despite Ravel's own objection to this association. Due to the differing interpretations between the public and the artist, the artist would be accused of falling in love with his own spirit, and thus lose any standard of judging himself and others.²¹ This would leave popular and versatile art forms, such as the waltz, vulnerable to distortion and mutilation in order to express personal language and attitudes of these composers.

To begin with, Maurice Ravel is arguably the first twentieth century composer to take advantage of the modernized movement in order to transcend the characteristic features of the nineteenth-century waltz. Ravel had always been interested in dance forms and classical structures, and he sought to blend both traditional and modern forms to create his personal vision of the Viennese waltz. His *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* and *La Valse* both pay homage to the Viennese waltz in order to evoke the spirit of an earlier period but without sacrificing Ravel's own musical identity to its conventions. Ravel's intention was to both imitate the waltz in the style of his predecessors and use its figurations in his own musical idiom.

²¹ Ibid, 10.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937):

Valse Nobles et Sentimentales (1911)

In *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Ravel set out to create a nostalgic reflection of the nineteenth-century Viennese waltz. The set consists of seven waltzes and an epilogue which was adapted the following year into the ballet, *Adelaide ou le langage des fleurs*. The narrative takes place in the Paris salon of a courtesan named Adelaide in 1820 which is composed seven scenes and an epilogue (**Figure 3**).

Scene 1. While the couples are waltzing or engaged in tender conversations, Adelaide comes and goes. She is wearing a tuberose (a fragrant, white flower), the symbol of sensual pleasure.

Scene 2. Enter Lorédan in a melancholy mood. He offers her a buttercup, and the exchange of lowers that follows symbolizes Adelaide's pretended affection and her suitor's love for her.

Scene 3. Adelaide sees from the flower offered her that Lorédan's love for her is sincere but the marguerite (a daisy-like flower) she gave to Lorédan tells him that his love is not returned. Lorédan tries a second time, and this time the reply is favorable

Scene 4. The lovers dance together affectionately, but are interrupted by the entrance of the Duke.

Scene 5. The Duke presents Adelaide with a sunflower (a symbol of empty riches) and a diamond necklace, which she puts on.

Scene 6. Lorédan, in despair presses his suit, but she repulses flirtingly.

Scene 7. The Duke begs Adelaide to give him the last waltz. She refuses, and goes in search of Lorédan who strikes an attitude of tragic despair. Finally he yields to her insistence and they go off together.

Épilogue. The guests retire. The Duke, hoping to be asked to stay, receives from Adelaide's hands a branch of acacia (symbol of Platonic love) and departs in high dudgeon (angrily). Lorédan approaches looking very sad. Adelaide gives him a poppy (an invitation to forget), but he rejects it and goes off, bidding her farewell forever. Adelaide goes to the window and breathes the scent of the tuberose. Suddenly Lorédan appears on her balcony in a state of agitation, falls on his knees and presses a pistol to his head. But Adelaide smilingly produces from her corsage a red rose and falls into his arms.

Figure 3. Plot of Adelaide.²²

²² Maurice Ravel, *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, 3.

Despite its seemingly programmatic nature, *Valses nobles et sentimentales* was a work intended to showcase Ravel's ideas in non-traditional harmonies, melodies, and the sonorities of the piano. Dedicated to French composer and pianist, Louis Aubert, the set of waltzes premiered in May 1911, at the Société Musicale Indépendante in Paris. The unusual sounds of *Valses nobles et sentimentales* surprised the audience with daring harmonies in classical form. Despite its modernity and experimentalism, this work was directly influenced by Schubert's waltzes, an influence Ravel made obvious with references to the title reminiscent of Schubert's two sets of waltzes, *Valses nobles* (D.969) and *Valses sentimentales* (D.779). Ravel acknowledges in his biography, written by his friend Roland-Manuel, that this homage was explicit:

"The title *Valses nobles et sentimentales* sufficiently indicates my intention of composing a series of waltzes in imitation of Schubert."²³

Despite composing *Valses nobles et sentimentales* in the Schubertian style (harmonic subtleties, straight-forward form, and balanced phrases), Ravel also borrows some of the ideas from other composers of the Viennese waltz. In the following analysis of each waltz, it will become evident how Ravel blends these old styles with his own throughout *Valses nobles et sentimentales*.

Waltz I:

The opening is a vigorous cluster of chords in clashing major ninths with a noble and strict rhythm. Although the rhythmic patterns of the first two measures resemble the opening of Schubert's *Valse Nobles No.8*, in *Valses Nobles et sentimentales*, Ravel places the accent on the third beat which throws off the listener's expectation for traditional accents on the first beats (see **Example 2-1** and **Example 2-2**).

²³ Roland-Manuel, "Une Esquisse biographique de Maurice Ravel [dictée à Roland-Manuel]," *La Revue musicale* (1938), 17-23 from Orenstein, A., *Ravel Reader*, 28

Example 2-1. *Valse nobles et sentimentales, Waltz I* mm. 1-2 (left).²⁴

Example 2-2. *Valse nobles No. 8 in A major*, mm. 1-2 (right).²⁵

Ravel employs the ABA form for *Waltz I* which was a staple of Chopin's and Brahms' waltzes. The B section contrasts with the previous A section both by its softer and gentler character as well as in its texture, which is thinner in comparison to the chordal writing of section A.

Waltz I is also an example of how Ravel began to experiment around the edges of the traditional tonal system. Arbie Orenstein remarks "Ravel's adventurous harmonic language is solidly rooted in tonality, with many modal inflections, and some exploitation of bitonality..."²⁶ At the start of this waltz, Ravel leaves the seventh and ninth chords unresolved over rooted pedal points which centers around G-E-A-D in the first twenty measures.

Waltz II:

The second waltz displays a sentimental character with the melody appearing at mm. 9-17. The grace notes in the repetition of the theme in mm. 13-15 convey a more delicate mood. This waltz is written in binary form (à la Schubert) with an introduction and two contrasting themes.

²⁴ Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin and Other Works for Solo Piano*, 23.

²⁵ Franz Schubert, *Klavierwerke, Series IV: Tänze*, 53.

²⁶ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, 132.

Ravel also includes markings of “*expressif*” and *doux* (gently)” at the dynamic level of “*p*” in this waltz to encourage the performer to play with more expressive inner feeling rather than in another mood such as playfulness, perhaps in order to give the listener a sense of pause and nostalgia (**Example 2-3**). To add to this effect, Ravel grabs the listener with his use of light dynamics. Only the first and seventh waltzes contain wide dynamic markings ranging from *pp* to *ff*.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* and performance instructions like *Rit.* and *a Tempo doux et expressif*. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some longer note values and slurs.

Example 2-3. *Valse nobles et sentimentales, Waltz II* mm. 7-11.²⁷

Waltz III:

This waltz is in E minor and is light in character. Its structure reveals an ABA form that includes an alternation between triple and duple rhythmic patterns. In the B section, mm. 33-56, the accompaniment uses pedal points on F-sharp and on B and the reprise starts on mm. 57 in G major rather than E minor. Despite the straightforward and methodical tempo throughout *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Ravel requests “*rubato*” and “*Cédez*” (yielding or slowing) at several points, as seen in mm. 38-47 in *Waltz III*.

²⁷ Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin and Other Works for Solo Piano*, 26.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is marked with a red box containing the text "Cédez très peu" above the first measure and "au Mouvt" above the second measure. Dynamics are indicated as *p* (piano) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The second system also consists of two staves, with a red box containing the text "Cédez" above the final measure and a dynamic marking of *mf*.

Example 2-4. *Valses nobles et sentimentales, Waltz III* mm. 38-47.²⁸

In the old Viennese waltzes, a strong melody or tune was vital to the dance. In *Waltz III*, Ravel employs ambiguous harmonies to hide the melody. With mixed tonality and modality in the harmony, the melody in this waltz is unclear as seen in in mm. 48-51.

The image shows a single system of musical notation for a piano piece, consisting of two staves (treble and bass clef) with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is marked with "au Mouvt" above the first measure. Red circles are drawn around several notes and chords in both staves, and red arrows point from these circles to other notes and chords, highlighting specific harmonic elements.

Example 2-5. *Valses nobles et sentimentales, Waltz III* mm. 48-51.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid, 30.

²⁹ Ibid, 31.

Waltz IV:

Waltz IV is connected seamlessly with *Waltz III* in its opening and also uses the ABA formal structure. The crescendos and decrescendos along with the hemiola-like rhythm give it a strong Viennese character. In addition, *Waltz IV* features the only repeat sign in the entire set.

Like that of the first waltz, Ravel conceals the predictability of the three-four waltz meter by obscuring the proper location of the first beat. In the fourth waltz, the right hand displaces rhythmic accents to create this effect (**Example 2-6**). As a result, the waltz boasts less of a dancing character.

Assez animé $\text{♩} = 80$

Example 2-6. *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, *Waltz IV* mm. 1-4.³⁰

Waltz V:

The fifth waltz in E major is also in ABA form that gives the impression of a slow interlude within the set. The B section in particular is dreamlike and sensuous played within the softest dynamic realm of *pp* and *ppp*. The cross rhythm melody in mm. 19-20 and mm. 23-24 resemble those of Chopin's *Waltz in A-flat*, *Op.42* showing that Ravel may have been using other models from the past, not only the models of Schubert.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 32.

Example 2-7 *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Waltz V mm. 19-20 (left).³¹

Example 2-8. *Waltz in Ab Major*, Op. 42 mm. 11-14 (right).³²

Waltz VI:

Written in C major, *Waltz VI* demonstrates a lilting character in an ABA form. The hands combine duple and triple divisions of the bar in section A (**Example 2-9**). In mm 37-44, there is a chromatic ascent in the right hand that reaches a long dramatic crescendo to the peak of the piece, followed by a dying away to a quiet ending in C major. As the shortest waltz in the set, it is also monothematic with no changes in mood or character between sections.

Unlike the waltzes of traditional Romantic composers where the tonal motion phrases are stretched over several measures, *Waltz VI* repeats small harmonic phrase units to form the melody. This method is carried over throughout the entire waltz.

Example 2-9. *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Waltz VI mm. 1-5.³³

³¹ Ibid, 34.

³² Frederic Chopin, *Complete Works for Piano*, 30.

Waltz VII:

Waltz VII is the longest of the seven waltzes and the one Ravel considered his favorite and most characteristic of the set. As the most elaborate of the entire set, *Waltz VII* ranges from languid to brilliant to encompass the Viennese spirit. It is also written in ABA form with an introduction that sounds like a thematic bridge between the sixth and seventh waltz before the actual waltz begins. Throughout section A (**Example 2-10**), Ravel notates the rhythmic hesitation of the Viennese waltz where the second of the three beats is delayed to give the waltz a nostalgic and Viennese character. This appears throughout both themes of section A.

The second theme of section A (between mm. 39-66) starts with a vague and faint melody which eventually reaches a climax at mm. 59-66. The gradually increasing dynamics, from *pp* to *ff*, are an important element leading to the climax from mm. 59-66. The ascending right-hand ornamentation in measures 55-57 suggests the gliding character of the waltz, with again, a slight delay on the second beat. Section A ends on a triumphant A before changing to the dream-like B section. The Chopinesque cross rhythm (**Example 2-11**) reappears in the B section with the melody spanning over several measures. Like those of *Waltz V*, the rhythmic figures resemble Chopin's *Waltz* in A-flat major, Op. 42. The B section is followed by an exact repetition of section A.



Example 2-10. *Valses nobles et sentimentales, Waltz VII* mm. 19-20.³⁴

³³ Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin and Other Works for Solo Piano*, 35.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

Example 2-11. *Valses nobles et sentimentales, Waltz VII* mm. 67-70.³⁵

Example 2-12. *Waltz in Ab Major, Op. 42* mm. 9-14.³⁶

Épilogue:

The *Épilogue* recalls fragments of all the preceding waltzes to reveal a cyclic form. The accompaniment figures in the left hand use the low G sustained pedal point to give an effect of blurred images and an impressionistic character throughout the *Épilogue*.

In a span of eleven measures (mm. 50-60), Ravel condenses the themes of five of the previous seven waltzes (**Example 2-13**).

³⁵ Ibid, 40.

³⁶ Frederic Chopin, *Complete Works for Piano*, 30.

Despite basing *Valses nobles et sentimentales* on the Schubertian model, the *Épilogue* was a bit of an anomaly. In his waltzes, Schubert never wrote an epilogue or a coda that recalls his earlier waltzes either in their exact or varied form. It was typical, however, for Viennese composers to write their orchestral concert waltzes with a coda that include fragmented repetitions of themes from earlier waltzes. Examples include Strauss's "Emperor" waltz, which repeats several of its early waltz themes with a cello solo and a fanfare ending. Strauss's "By the Beautiful Blue Danube" repeats the themes of the first, third, and fourth waltzes in its coda. Robert Schumann also used this form in his suite of short character pieces, *Papillons*, which features a finale that is a thematic recollection of the entire set.

With *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Ravel pays homage to the Viennese waltz by adding a modern twist to musical elements borrowed from the Viennese composers of the past including changes in harmony, rhythm, melody, and form. These stylistic changes create a concert-like approach for the waltz that the piano composers of the nineteenth century had also aspired to in their compositions in order to portray the waltz as more than a simple dance. When performed properly, *Valses nobles et sentimentales* is a unique work that sets a perfect example of both a nostalgic and modern take on the Viennese waltz.

La Valse (1920)

If *Valses nobles et sentimentales* offers a pianistic and nostalgic interpretation of the Viennese waltz, *La Valse* provides an orchestral and expressionist evaluation. The famous and magnetically destructive climax to *La Valse* left wreckage of more than a hundred years of the Viennese waltz and has often been linked to Ravel's personal views of war-torn Europe. After its premiere in December 1920, many critics offered lavish praise and various interpretations to its possible programmatic meaning. One critic, Theodore Lindelaub, described Ravel's interpretation of

the Viennese past as a series of lively and spirited waltzes colliding with its anguished and modern counterparts.³⁸

This idea of *La Valse* as a construction of competing and opposing elements – life and death, light and dark, war and peace, nostalgic past and world weary present – continues to influence modern scholarship today. Sevin Yaraman suggests that the apparent struggle in *La Valse* may be traced to an artistic anxiety of influence, with Ravel both trying to pay homage to the orchestral waltzes of Strauss and yet attempting to break free from the Viennese model itself.³⁹ Deborah Mawer’s musical and choreographic study finds dualities on multiple structural levels, from surface-level rhythms and harmonies to large-scale antagonisms that evoke pre-War and post-War aesthetics.⁴⁰ Even so, Ravel claimed to remain baffled by the early commentary in *La Valse* and asserted that the work’s interpretation was independent from any current political and historical allusions.

In response to the early interpretations, Ravel was prompted to set the record straight. In an interview with *De Telegraaf* in 1922, Ravel was asked about the current situation in Vienna and if his last trip there influenced him when composing the final sections of *La Valse*. Ravel responded that it did not and followed up with his own interpretation:

“[*La Valse*] doesn’t have anything to do with the present situation in Vienna, and it also doesn’t have any symbolic meaning in that regard. In the course of *La Valse*, I did not envision a dance of death or a struggle between life and death.”⁴¹

³⁸ Theodore Lindenlaub, *A Travers les concerts, Le Temps* (1920). “There he found, among the ruins, among the void and misery of the present, the relentless waltzes of the past.....The artist’s sharp perception...[chronicles]...the contrast of these insouciant, jaunty waltzes of long ago with those unfortunate, distressed ones which turn by habit, or else to deaden their sadness and hunger with defunct jovialities. And this rising lugubrious frenzy, the battle between all this Johann Strauss which doesn’t want to die and that course toward ruin, takes on the aspect of a danse macabre.”

³⁹ Sevin Yaraman, *Revolving Embrace: The Waltz as Sex, Steps, and Sounds*, 108

⁴⁰ Deborah Mawer, *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, 151-154.

⁴¹ Arthur Orenstein, *Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, and Interviews*, 232.

Ravel admitted that *La Valse* was tragic but only in the Greek sense that “it is a fatal spinning around, the expression of vertigo and voluptuousness of the dance, to the point of paroxysm.”⁴² To make his original intentions clear, Ravel’s introduction of the opening scene prefaces the score:

“...Through breaks in the swirling clouds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed. Little by little they disperse: one makes out an immense hall filled with a whirling crowd. The stage is illuminated gradually. The light of the chandeliers peaks at the fortissimo. An Imperial Court, about 1855...”⁴³

Even though Ravel disliked political interpretations of his work, there are several programmatic interpretations that make *La Valse* into the expression of a tragic affair. The issue of the waltz genre portraying demise and destruction can be seen in this light as a metaphor of decadent Viennese culture. Since the beginnings of its conception, the waltz was associated with moral decadence and decay because of the closeness with which the partners danced with each other and the medical danger of whirling around to the fast tempo of the dance. This association can be used to explain why Ravel thought the genre was the perfect medium for depicting this affair. There have also been proposed links between Ravel and Edgar Allen Poe, whom Ravel deeply admired, specifically Poe’s short story “*The Masque of the Red Death*” (1842) which describes “a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence...[that] went whirlingly on” until the guests all dropped dead before leaving the ballroom.⁴⁴

Within *La Valse*, Ravel created a hedonistic energy through a waltz rhythm which may be taken to reflect the ironic tension between “life” and “death.” The inherent quality of this rhythm lies in its repetitiveness to exemplify the element of obsession which accelerates towards a destructive climax. Since he did not stray far from this rhythm (most Viennese waltzes benefit from contrasting dance meters), the constant repetitive spinning waltz gains tempo which becoming obsessively faster and faster, almost to the point of insanity. These repeated rhythmic patterns

⁴² Ibid, 434.

⁴³ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, 188.

⁴⁴ Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin and Other Works for Solo Piano*, 90

exhibit striking parallel to industrial ostinatos. This element might further explain Ravel's attraction to these rhythms, since he had always been fascinated by machines. According to his brother, Ravel was always struck and obsessed by the automation of machines, possibly influenced by his father's occupation as an engineer and the sounds heard in factories during his first years of musical instruction.⁴⁵ Ravel described his fascination with machines as an "impression made by [a] marvelous symphony of conveyor belts, whistles, and massive hammer blows."⁴⁶ The distortion of sonority and progression in *La Valse* is appropriate in recreating these sounds to reflect machines since they run the risk of going out of hand due to their intrinsic destructive elements.

The "life" and "death" qualities can also be explained by another metaphor of *La Valse* as a microcosm to the life cycle of the Viennese waltz. As George Benjamin described it, *La Valse* can be split into four sectional divisions, "birth," "life," "decay," and "death," with each section systematically broken down and modified from the original defining elements of the waltz, especially in the last two sections⁴⁷. To make use of these techniques in stylization, Ravel approached *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and *La Valse* with the same methods that earlier composers used in refinement, modification, and transformation to stylize their own nineteenth century Viennese waltzes. In *La Valse*, however, Ravel further explored and developed on these ideas through use of asymmetrical phrase structure, perpetual rhythm, fragmentation, dissonances, and hemiola to transform and ultimately destroy the Viennese waltz. Analysis of the score suggests that the two sections in the first half, "birth" and "life" were written before World War I and the final two sections in the other half, "decay" and "destruction" were written after Ravel's experiences during the war. With this in mind, it can be inferred that the death of his mother in 1917, whom he was very close to, and his service as a truck driver in Verdun as part of his war effort influenced Ravel's post-war changes in *La Valse*.

⁴⁵ Deborah Mawer, *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, 59.

⁴⁶ Gerald Larner. *Maurice Ravel*, 86.

⁴⁷ George Benjamin, "Last Dance." *The Musical Times* (135), 432-435.

At a macro-structural level, *La Valse* does not follow the classic ABA waltz form popularized in the last hundred years by Chopin and is instead built like Liszt's "*Mephisto Waltzes*" and Weber's *Invitation to the Dance* by starting with an introduction and ending with a conclusion interspersed by several waltz themes. In *La Valse*, however, the waltz themes are established in the exposition (pre-war) but are shuffled and repeated within the shorter recapitulation (post-war). This contrast bares striking similarity not only to pre- and post-war aesthetics but also to the life-cycle of the waltz genre. The exposition presents the heyday of the genre in the nineteenth century which celebrates the "life" of the waltz while the recapitulation presents its violent decay which builds towards the "death" of the waltz at the climax.

Analyzing the structure *La Valse* in greater detail reveals an introduction depicting the "birth" of the waltz which exhibits tonal and rhythmic ambiguity under a dark tremolo. This barely audible "heartbeat" evolves into "life" when the phrase structure becomes more apparent. This section is the exposition of *La Valse* which is where the arrival of the main tonality is announced and where rhythm and tone are both stabilized within flowing phrase structures that connect in an uninterrupted manner. Starting and ending from measures 67 to 431, is a series of eight waltzes that pay tribute to the Schubertian model and exhibit most similarities with Ravel's pre-war *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*.

If the exposition depicts the "pre-war" section of *La Valse*, the "decay" begins at the recapitulation at m.432 where the eight waltzes are repeated in distorted fashion. The recapitulation is much shorter and condensed than the previous section and is where Ravel defies waltz convention in order to distort and destroy the waltz. Throughout this section, where all eight waltzes are repeated, Ravel makes use of melodic fragmentation, rhythmic and meter changes, with an accelerando that hastens towards a spectacular and climactic death sequence. This climax is the distorted version of *Waltz No. 8* (See **Example 2-14** and **Example 2-15**).

Example 2-14. *Waltz No. 8* in the exposition of *La Valse*, mm. 370-374.⁴⁸

Example 2-15. *Waltz No. 8* in the recapitulation of *La Valse*, mm. 645-649.⁴⁹

The *fff*, thick chords and double glissandi in the climactic recapitulation is reminiscent of Liszt's virtuosic and orchestral effects on the piano as used in *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*. Following immediately the recapitulation, *La Valse* is brought full circle when it spins out of control to its destructive and fanatical finale. Lyricism and rhythm in the *danse macabre* coda have given way to a repeating A-flat note motif (**Example 2-16**) and a hemiola of four quarter notes in three-four time, the last vestiges of the Viennese waltz (**Example 2-17**).

⁴⁸ Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin and Other Works for Solo Piano*, 104.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 113.

Example 2-16. *La Valse*, mm.744-755.⁵⁰

Example 2-17. *La Valse* (orchestra), final three measures.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid, 116.

⁵¹ Maurice Ravel, *La Valse*, 132.

Conclusion:

From this study of the historical life cycle of the Viennese waltz, it is clear that the evolutionary trends of the waltz were a reflection of both a composer's personal style and of a changing perception of art throughout nineteenth and twentieth century Europe. These factors helped shape Ravel's twentieth century waltzes as a modernized version of the nineteenth century piano waltz. The beginnings of the waltz started out merely as an accompaniment designed to support the dance and was viewed as a substandard form of music. As it grew in popularity in Vienna, many composers began stylizing its form on the keyboard to create their own versions of the waltz. As the waltz form expanded under five major nineteenth-century composers, the genre slowly moved from the ballroom into the concert hall. As opposed to simple melodies and a clear three-four dance meter, the waltz was transformed with changes in form, meter, harmony, and added extra-musical elements. These changes created the Viennese waltz which eventually culminated in Liszt's Mephisto Waltzes at the height of Romanticism.

Despite the enduring popularity of the waltz at the turn of the twentieth century, new ideas in the social, cultural, and political sphere called for changes in the way music was composed. Ravel had taken the nineteenth century waltz and transformed it even further to follow modern trends in the same way his predecessors had with the Viennese waltz in the nineteenth century.

In *Valses Nobles et sentimentales* and *La Valse*, Ravel made use of the nineteenth century stylistic changes to the Viennese waltz and blended them with his own ideas. While *Valses nobles et sentimentales* was more of a nostalgic reflection of the Viennese waltz that imitated classic waltz features, *La Valse* achieved that effect by ultimately destroying the waltz. By modeling the old waltz forms and adopting modern trends in neo-classicism, impressionism, and expressionsim, Ravel distorted the Viennese waltz with his interpretations which in turn brought the "death" or end to the era of the Viennese waltz genre.

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