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Ravel's Bolero

**"It is a piece for orchestra
without music"**

– Maurice Ravel on Bolero



Introduction

This pack is designed to help you use Ravel's Bolero in the classroom as a creative tool and features easy warm-up activities, a step-by-step guide to composition and links to amazing HD footage of the LSO performing Ravel's famous work.

Bolero is an incredibly simple yet daring piece. It is made up of three ideas that repeat over and over for 16 minutes with little change other than a gradual thickening of texture and increase in volume. Ravel was one of the greatest orchestrators of all time and over the course of the piece he uses every instrument of the orchestra as soloist and in unique combinations with others.

Watching our HD footage will give your children a close-up tour of the orchestra, all its instruments and sounds, and a real feel for what its like to be up there on stage.

We've also provided a step-by-step 'recipe' for making your own classroom version of the piece which encourages your children to invent their own melodies on top of Ravel's actual motifs. You can even use the piece as a way to begin teaching musical notation.

Maurice Ravel (1875 - 1937)

Ravel was born in France close to the Spanish border. His Spanish mother was an amateur musician and his father was an inventor of engines and machines. The family moved to Paris when Maurice was only months old but his mother's Spanish heritage and father's mechanical brain greatly influenced Ravel and nowhere more so than in his Bolero composition of 1928.

Ravel had piano lessons from the age of 6 and progressed quickly performing in public at the age of 14 and eventually studying at the Paris Conservatoire.

After WW1 and the death of Debussy he found himself at the top of the French music scene. His experiences during the war had added a touch of melancholy to his music which, coupled with his unique rhythmic energy and luscious orchestrations appealed to many.

Ravel died in 1937 after five years of declining health brought on by a major blow to the head sustained during a taxicab accident in New York. He is now considered to be one of France's greatest ever composers and until recently was the highest earning French musician of all time, out-earning even Elvis Presley!

Bolero (1928)

Bolero is the longest single-idea crescendo in the history of music. It is the most repetitive piece ever written and it divides opinion unlike any other work. Generally audiences love it, musicians hate performing it! Bolero was originally commissioned as a one-act ballet for the famous Russian ballerina Ida Rubinstein and whilst these days it is rarely danced, the music is now Ravel's most famous composition by far. Rubinstein wanted something with a Spanish feel and after many experiments Ravel came up with his melody by doodling at the piano with just one finger. He was taken by the tune's insistent nature and decided to try and repeat it over and over undeveloped whilst increasing the size of the orchestra. That is exactly what he does for 16 minutes!

The piece consists of one repeating bassline, one repeating rhythm and two melodies that alternate. Each time either melody is heard it is given to a new combination of instruments and the accompaniment around it grows thicker and louder. At a crucial point towards the end the whole piece is transposed up a third briefly before collapsing back down to C for an enormously exciting close.

Critics were divided in their opinion whilst audiences universally loved it. Initially Ravel cashed-in on the success by creating an easy piano version for the audiences to buy and take home, but by the end of his life he had become sick of hearing it. Bolero is responsible for his estate's enormous wealth but Ravel would probably be saddened to know that we are all still obsessed by a piece he considered to be a simple experiment 'devoid of music'.

The Instruments

As Ravel uses every instrument of the orchestra to play his theme you can use the video (Ravel_Bolero.mp4) to show your pupils all the different instruments of the orchestra up-close.

On the next page follows a guide to the instruments:

Time	Instrument	Notes
0'15	Conductor Valery Gergiev prepares	
0'30	Snare drum begins the rhythm	This will continue throughout*
	Violas and cellos play the bassline	This will continue throughout*
0.40	Flute	Melody 'A'
1'30	Clarinet	Melody 'A'
2'20	Bassoon	Melody 'B'
3'07	Harp fills out the harmony*	
3'11	Eb clarinet (the 'baby' clarinet)	Melody 'B'
4'00	Oboe	Melody 'A'
4'50	Flute and trumpet	Melody 'A'
5'40	Tenor saxophone	Melody 'B'
6'30	Soprano saxophone	Melody 'B'
7'19	2 piccolos, french horn, celeste**	Melody 'A'
8'08	Oboes and clarinets	Melody 'A'
8'59	Trombone	Melody 'B'
9'49	Flutes, oboes, clarinets, saxes	Melody 'B'
10'39	Woodwind, 1st violins	Melody 'A'
11'27	Woodwind, all violins	Melody 'A'
12'17	Woodwind, trumpets, violins	Melody 'B'
13'06	Woodwind, trombone, violins, violas, cellos	Melody 'B'
13'56	Woodwind, all trumpets, violins	Melody 'A'
14'45	Woodwind, all trumpets, violins	Melody 'B'
15'29	KEY CHANGE up to E! (everyone)	extension to melody 'B'
15'50	Back to C for ending	Massive brass/percussion!

* Listen out for how these elements also keep moving around the orchestra onto different instruments.

** This is the most interesting version so far – the melody is played in parallel triads to give it an exotic sound. (The celeste is a keyboard instrument that sounds like bells)

The Ingredients

Bassline

consists of just three pitches, repeats constantly.

Rhythmic Ostinato

gives the piece its distinctive 'Spanish' feel. Also repeats constantly.

Two Melodies

Melody 'A' is made up of just the white notes. It snakes around and turns in and back on itself very cleverly. It is in C major and is relatively simple.

Melody 'B' begins on a black note – Bb, and includes further unexpected black notes (Eb and Ab) which give it an exotic feel. There is further exoticism from the use of repeated notes and syncopation. Musicians are encouraged to over-emphasise these features in their interpretation.

The Ending

After all the ingredients are transposed up to E major the music returns to C for the ending. Each beat of the bar is further emphasised by the percussion section which now includes tam-tam, cymbals and bass drum, and by snarling glissandos on trombone and sax. The very end is suspended momentarily by a complex, clashy chord that falls dramatic 'home' to C.

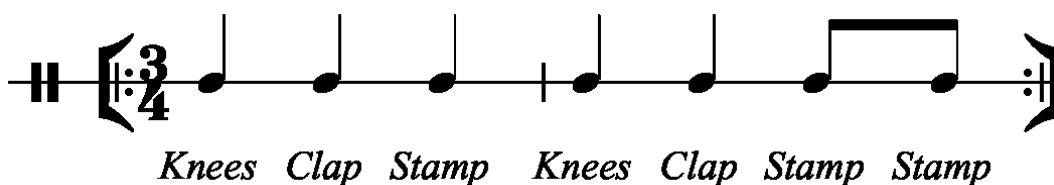
Classroom Projects

How to make your very own class Bolero!

Here's a step-by-step guide to making your own version of Ravel's Bolero with your class.

You will need, ideally, a mixture of pitched and unpitched instruments, one for each child. If this is impossible don't worry, most of the project can be made using body percussion. A large space and 12 empty chairs will also come in handy!

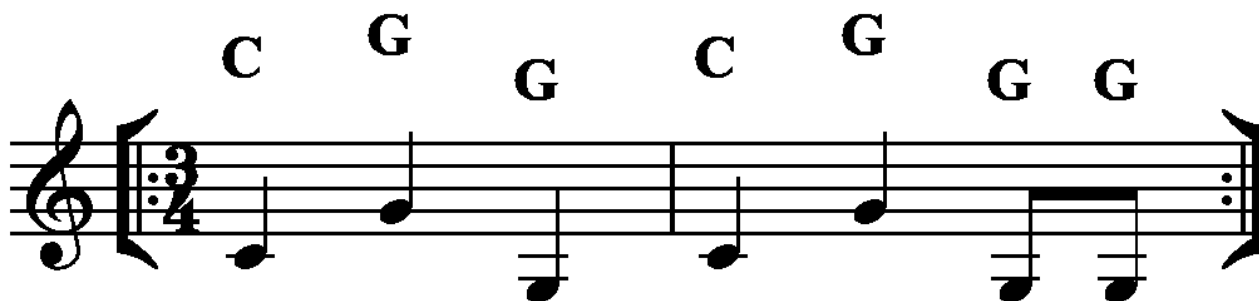
1. Begin by asking your whole class to stand in a circle. Explain to them that you are going to re-create and re-compose one of the most famous pieces of music ever written. Perhaps tell them a little about Ravel and his piece. They may be familiar with the name of it from watching Torvill & Dean on Dancing on Ice. Explain that Bolero is made from three simple ideas repeating around and around and growing louder and louder.
2. The **Bassline** - The first idea to get to grips with is the bassline. Teach it to your class using the following body percussion pattern:



(By using the knees, the hands and the feet you are also helping to visualise the pitches you are going to use later – middle, high, low)

Watch the video [RL_Bassline.mp4](#) to see Rachel Leach demonstrate teaching the bassline.

3. When this is strong and confident, invite children one by one to try and perform it on a xylophone using just three notes, C, high G and low G. Like this:

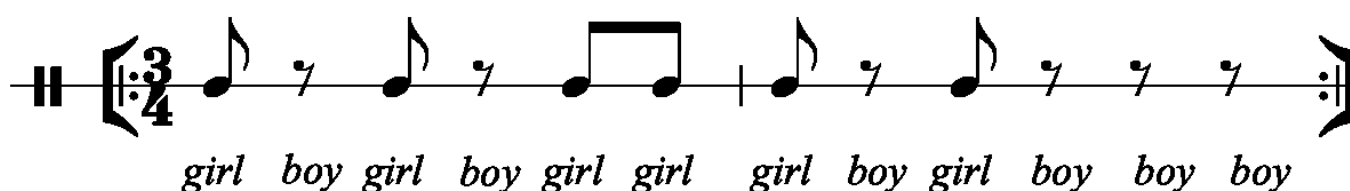


4. **The Rhythm** - Now move onto the rhythm. Ravel's rhythmic ostinato is extremely complicated when written down but you can easily demonstrate it to your class by arranging 12 children as a 'score'. Simply line up the following:

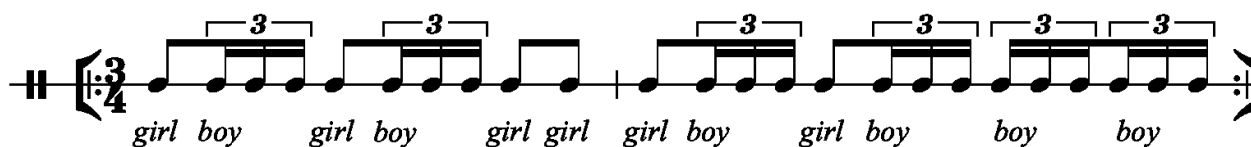
girl boy girl boy girl girl girl boy girl boy boy boy

Organise your space so that the rest of the class are looking at this line-up like an audience. (If you work in a single-sex school have children standing/sitting, or use objects such as 12 chairs facing forward and backwards).

5. Explain to the 'audience' that they are going to read the line-up as they would read a sentence, from left to right. When they see girl they are going to clap once. When they see a boy they leave a gap of equal length. The rhythm they are performing at this stage is this:



6. Taking things one step further, encourage your 'audience' to clap three quick claps into the gaps they left for boys. So they perform one clap for a girl, three quick claps for a boy resulting in this rhythm:



This is Ravel's rhythm!

Watch the video RL_Rhythm.mp4 to see Rachel Leach demonstrate teaching the rhythm.

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- Grp 1 (shake)
- Grp 2
- girl boy girl boy girl girl girl boy girl boy boy boy

EXTENSION ACTIVITY - Notation

By doing this task you are beginning the journey towards reading music.

8. When your class can play this confidently, split them into two groups as follows:

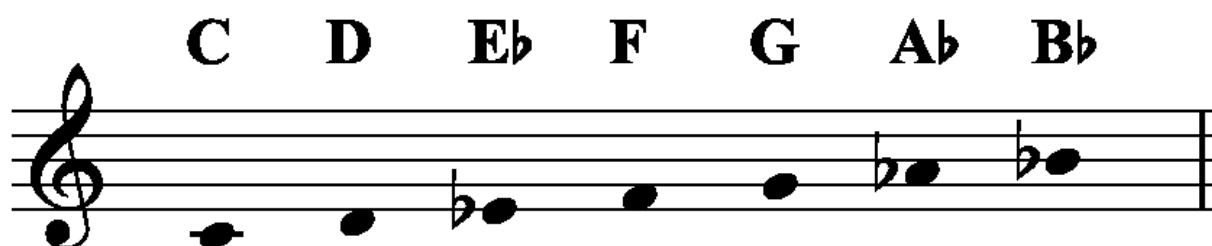
Group 1 - perform the bassline on pitched percussion using Cs and Gs

Group 2 - perform the rhythm on unpitched instruments

If both groups can perform their patterns at the same time you have made $\frac{2}{3}$'s of Bolero!

9. **The Melody** - Bolero contains two melodies. Each one is challenging and tricky and requires considerable skill. Here's how to encourage your class to invent their own version:

Split your class into two groups, each group should contain both children who up until now have been playing the bassline and children who are good at the rhythm. Give one group instruments that feature just the white notes. Give the other group instruments that feature black and white notes. Xylophones with only the black notes will work fine, but if you can, the ideal combination of notes is as follows:



Ask each group to create a melody using the following rules:

- a. Use only next-door notes
- b. **White-note group** must begin on C and snake up and down
- c. **Black-note group** must begin on Bb and must occasionally get stuck on one pitch
- d. Melody must be fixed and the same every time
- e. Some members of each group must continue to play the bassline/ rhythm as accompaniment.

10. When this is achieved hear each group and give feedback. Listen out for the neatness of the tunes and whether or not they fit with the accompaniment and are the same every time. Encourage your children to make short repetitive melodies rather than long complicated tunes that are easy to forget.

If you are low on pitched percussion instruments encourage your children to share. When playing the melody they don't have to begin on the same note, they can play in parallel creating the same shaped melody but starting three or four notes higher or lower than the original. It will sound a little weird, just as it does in Ravel's piece (see the recording at 7'19). Remember also that some children have to stick to the bass and rhythm to help keep the piece together.

You now have all your ingredients!

Structure

The structure of Bolero is simple. It begins softly with few players and ends loudly with everyone playing together. The melodies alternate back and forth throughout. Can you and your class structure your ideas in the same way to create one huge, repetitive crescendo?

Taking It Further

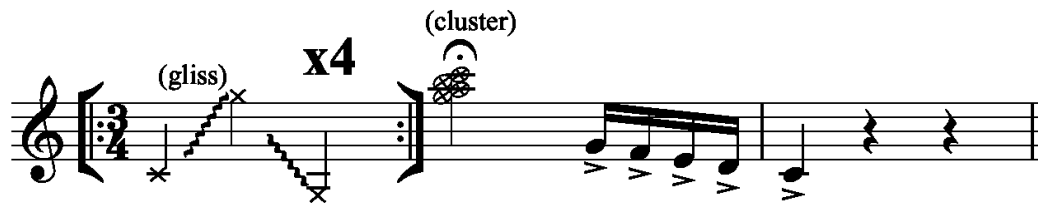
Ravel employs two further compositional tricks to his piece. Can you add them to yours?

1. **Transposition** near the end of Bolero, the whole piece is moved up by two notes (the bassline therefore moves to E and Bs). Can you transpose your whole piece as well?

It might be easiest just to move the bass and rhythm and let the melodies rest at this point, and one note up might be easier that two (ie to D and As)

How do you signal the moment when everyone moves? Do you need a conductor? Or an audible signal such as a gong?

2. CODA Ravel adds a 'Coda' (special ending) to his piece. It looks (roughly) like this:



Can you add this onto your piece? You perhaps need to get out some of the bigger percussion instruments you may have such as djembes, cymbals or gongs, and you may need a conductor to help hold the cluster chord before everyone crashes down to a final C.