

# LISTENING GUIDE: RAVEL



## *Bolero*

By Maurice Ravel

**Listening Link:** Click [HERE](#) to access a recording of *Bolero* by the London Symphony Orchestra (Valery Gergiev, conductor).

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**The Piece:** Ravel finished composing *Bolero* in 1928 and said this about the piece: “I have written only one masterpiece. That is *Bolero*. Unfortunately, it contains no music.” Despite what Ravel said, the piece has become one of the most famous works in the history of orchestral music.

In *Bolero*, Ravel explores what he calls “an experiment in a very special and limited direction.” Check out some of his “experiments” to gain a better understanding of this piece.

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**Dynamics:** **Dynamics** refers to the volume of the music. While composers use **dynamics** in many different ways, *Bolero* focuses on the **crescendo**. To **crescendo** means to gradually get louder over time (like slowly turning the volume knob up on a radio). *Bolero* is actually one BIG 17-minute **crescendo**. As you listen, pay attention to how the volume gradually gets louder until the end of the piece.

**Orchestration:** *Bolero* is considered a masterpiece in **orchestration**. **Orchestration** refers to the process of choosing which instrument(s) play which part(s) and when and how they play them. Ravel uses two main themes in *Bolero* and passes them around the orchestra. The first theme is introduced by the flute, then passed to the clarinet (see chart below). The second theme is introduced by the bassoon, then passed to the clarinet. Sometimes one instrument plays the theme and sometimes multiple instruments play the theme together. Also, be sure to check out what’s happening in the “background” underneath the themes. How does the energy of the piece change when Ravel adds the harp? The timpani? How about when he adds other instruments to the motor?

Part	Time
Flute, Theme One	0:24
Clarinet, Theme One	1:14
Harp (background)	1:59
Bassoon, Theme Two	2:04
Clarinet, Theme Two	2:54
Timpani	10:16

This [cool, interactive page](#) allows students to hear different instruments in the orchestra, then guess which instrument they are listening to. This is a great way to get students’ ears tuned-in (no pun intended) to different instruments as you delve into *Bolero*. (Note: flash player required).

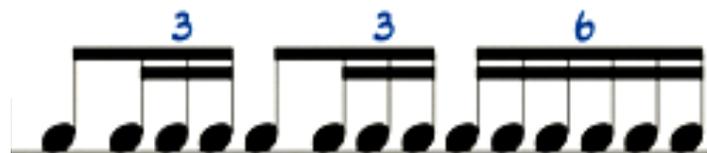
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**Musical Motor:** As this concert focuses on “Musical Motors,” let’s explore *Bolero’s* rhythmic motor in more detail. This motor is played on the snare drum for the duration of the piece (17 minutes!) without stopping. Ravel himself described the rhythm as “hypnotizing.”

See the written music for the motor below. Two versions are shown – 1) *Bolero’s* written part (with a fun phrase to vocalize!), and 2) a variation with elementary-level rhythm names. As you listen to this piece in preparation for the concert, have students follow along by vocalizing or clapping one of the phrases below (just don’t do it at the concert!). It may seem monotonous, but remember, the snare drummer plays this “motor” for the entire piece!



Sauce. Bar—be—que sauce. Bar—be—que sauce, please



Sauce. Barbeque sauce. Barbeque barbeque barbeque



Ti ti ka ti ti ka ti ti



Ti ti ka ti ti ka ti ka ti ka

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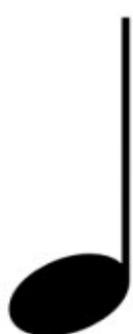
**Create your own motor!** After learning about *Bolero’s* “motor,” encourage students to create their own rhythmic motors using the “rhythm units” on the next page.

1. Print and cut out the “rhythm units.”
2. Split students into pairs.
3. Instruct students to arrange the “rhythm units” in whatever order they like. (Students could also write out their motor on a piece of paper).
4. Have each pair clap (teach) their “motor” to the class and have the class repeat it back. (This is a good opportunity to evaluate individual student’s rhythmic ability).
5. Discuss which motors seem more natural or more engaging (i.e. could you listen to – or play – a specific pattern for 17 minutes?!).

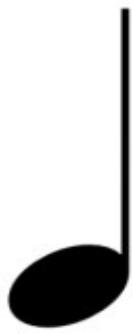
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**Conduct *Bolero*:** Check out the San Francisco Symphony’s [SFSKIDS](https://www.sfskids.org/) website. Select the “**Conduct**” tab, try out the tutorial, then select *Bolero* to try conducting the orchestra (with the mouse).

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