Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) Tzigane – Rhapsody for violin and (Luthéal) piano (1924)

The Luthéal piano was patented in 1919 by the prolific Belgian inventor George Cloetens, but it did not catch on. An elaborate mechanism was added to a normal grand piano which allowed three additional timbres to be produced independently for high and for low notes, under the control of organ-like stops: (i) a 'harpsichord-like' sound produced by a set of pins brought close enough to touch the vibrating string; (ii) a whispery timbre like a violin harmonic produced by a set of felts that could be lowered to touch each string halfway along its length; (iii) a sound like a Hungarian Cimbalom produced by both mechanisms used together. Ravel was clearly intrigued by the Luthéal's possibilities for gypsy music and specified it for Tzigane. He also wrote a part for it in his orchestral suite L’enfant et les sortilèges. The only surviving original example of the instrument, in Brussels' Musical Instrument Museum, has been renovated; their website (www.mim.be) has a recording of Tzigane being played using it.

Tzigane was commissioned from Ravel by the virtuoso violinist Jelly d'Arányi, great-niece of Joseph Joachim. Ravel had been working on his violin sonata and she was due to give the first performance, but he was having trouble with it. So, writing a very different piece for her may have appealed to him. She gave the first performance of Tzigane in 1924 in London, with the Luthéal attachment added to the piano. The piece was a success, and in the same year Ravel arranged it for violin and orchestra. But the Luthéal soon faded, and only the first edition of Tzigane has its additional markings in the score. The 10-minute piece is a fine continuation of the Romantic tradition of show pieces for violin virtuosi and, in its whole-hearted gypsy style, gives us a glance at a less familiar side of Ravel.