

MAURICE RAVEL: *LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN* – PART I. THE REMINISCENCE OF BAROQUE COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES

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SUMMARY. According to Alfred Cortot, the suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin* could be divided into two main units: the first part presented below represents the structural arch of the suite. Each analyzed part represents a specific compositional technique of the Baroque era. The fusion between the elements of the French baroque keyboard music and the characteristics of the modern piano music transforms this piece into a real and unique masterpiece. By analyzing the Prelude, the Fugue and the Toccata we have the opportunity to understand the vision about the French baroque music created by the artists of the 20th century.

Keywords: Ravel, Suite, Baroque, Compositional techniques, Piano, Prelude, Fugue, Toccata

“Copy, and if while copying, you remain yourself, that’s because you have something to say.”² – affirmed Ravel countless times, and we often confront with his opinion, studying or just listening to the compositions of the great French composer. Ravel admired Couperin, and the idea of being inspired by him creates the homage to French baroque music.

It was the summer of 1914 when Maurice Ravel first came up with the idea of composing a French suite: “I am still writing music ... this time, I think, I finish *Wien* (Vienna), a symphonic poem. While I’m waiting for a chance to pick up the threads of my old task of *Maeterlinck’s Intérieur* – a touching consequence of the alliance – I’m beginning two series of piano pieces: first, a French Suite – no, it’s not what you think – the Marseillaise

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² Nancy Bricard, *Ravel – Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Alfred Masterwork Edition, New York, 2003, p. 9.

doesn't come into it at all, but there'll be a forlane and a jig; not a tango, though...".³ The composer spent a lot of time in St. Jean de Luz (a small town near Cibourne) composing most of his masterpieces there. In 1914 he worked even more intensely: he wanted to finish his symphonic poem, the suite and the piano trio before joining the French army. None of the works mentioned above was completed before the war, although the composer confessed to his friend Lucien Garban as follows: "In five weeks I have done the work of five months... I wanted to finish my trio before joining up!"⁴

The word *Tombeau* first appeared in French literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, on the model of Greek epitaphs, being a short funeral inscription, in which the deceased is commemorated in several verses. Its musical equivalent appears only in the middle of the seventeenth century. The first works were written by Ennemond Gaultier, Jacques Gallot, Charles Mouton and John Dowland. Later the genre appears in the harpsichord repertoire thanks to Louis Couperin, Johann Froberger and François Couperin. Although the genre was very popular in the Baroque era, it completely disappears in the Classical era, being rediscovered only in the 20th century by the representative composers of the Neoclassicism. There are countless masterpieces such as the collection *Le Tombeau de Claude Debussy* of Henri Prunieres, *Le Tombeau de Rameau* by François Durand, *Tombeau de Messiaen* by Jonathan Harvey and *Le Tombeau de Ravel* by Arthur Benjamin.

The suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is not only a tribute paid to François Couperin but also to the music of the eighteenth century: the tradition of François Couperin, Jean Philippe Rameau, and Louis-Claude Daquin.⁵ Although the title does not refer to the character of the suite, Ravel was repeatedly criticized for it: the dances are too lively, and the sounds are too light and clear to be part of a funeral composition. The connection between the character of the genre and Ravel's piano suite is the most correctly explained by the violinist Héléne Jourdan-Morhange: "Ravel offered his music to his friends in the same spirit that the Juggler of Notre Dame offered his juggling to the Virgin Mary – by giving himself completely"⁶ and by Roy Howat: "The posthumous tribute does not have to be sad."⁷

³ Chih-Yi Chen, *Synthesis of tradition and innovation: A study of Ravel's Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Jacobs School of Music, Indiana, 2013, p. 2.

⁴ Paul Roberts, *Reflections, The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel*, Amadeus Press, USA - Milwaukee, 2012, p. 108.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

⁶ Vlado Perlemutter, Héléne Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, Kahn & Averil, London, 2005, p. 65.

⁷ Roy Howat, *Op.cit.*, p. 88.

Le Tombeau de Couperin possesses at the same time the genre of the *Tombeau* and the genre of the *Suite*, which, after the Baroque era loses its popularity, being rediscovered only in the twentieth century by the representatives of neoclassicism, corresponding to the original characteristics of the baroque suite. The tradition of baroque music is appropriately combined with the use of the color potential of the modern instrument.

The form of the suite is cyclical. Following the suggestion of Alfred Cortot⁸, the six movements can be grouped as follows: the first unit would be represented by the Prelude, the Fugue, and the Toccata, using some typical compositional techniques of the Baroque era, forming together a structural arc. The second unit would contain the three contrasting dances, the Forlane, the Rigaudon, and the Menuet.

The work was first performed in 1919 by Marguerite Long, a celebrated pianist in the twentieth century. The suite performed in the hall of the Independent Music Society was so successful that it had to be played once more.

Prélude

The term *Prelude* comes from the Latin word *praeludere*, meaning a short-improvised piece, which anticipates a broader musical work. The prelude achieves great success in the Baroque era, and after the Classicism, it becomes an independent genre, being rediscovered and metamorphosed by the great romantic composers. In the twentieth century, according to the model of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*, appears masterpieces like the 24 preludes of Claude Debussy or the 24 preludes and fugues of Dmitri Shostakovich.

The prelude of Ravel's suite respects the French Baroque model, applying at the same time some modern elements such as chromatic ranges, parallel sequences, the used register or the tempo and the meter (12/16 with the indication *Vif*).

The whole part is made up of only three musical motifs: The first one (E.g. 1) appears in the first two measures of the piece. Although it contains only six notes: la-sol-re-mi-sol-si, it represents the core of the part, being present in each motif of the prelude. The fast-repetitive motion of the sixteenth notes is decorated by a mordent, which, according to the French Baroque rule, must be played on the beat. The motif repeated immediately after the first appearance with a perfect fifth below appears in different shapes and tones throughout the piece.

⁸ Alfred Cortot, *La musique française de piano (The French piano music)*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1944, p. 48.

E.g. 1

The second motive, presented in measures 5-6, is based on the same material used before. The composer adds three ascendant sixteenth notes, through which the gradual progression becomes sequential. (E.g. 2)

E.g. 2

This motif undergoes some changes, being accompanied by a descending chromatic scale. (E.g. 3)

E.g. 3

The structure of the third motive is the longest and the most complicated of the three. First, it takes six measures instead of the two measures used earlier, made up of dotted and ornamented quarter notes, accompanied by sixteenth notes in the bass (E.g. 4). Secondly, it contains each component, used before. Vlado Perlemutter recalls Ravel's indication:

“The unpedalled sound evokes the woodwinds of the orchestra ... here Ravel told me to imitate the sound of the oboe”.⁹

E.g. 4



The harmonic palette is very rich. Although the piece is in e minor, the constant avoidance of the leading tone creates an ancient atmosphere. The cadences are well-positioned and highlighted, whereby the musical material modulates in different tones as in G major, D major and A flat major in measures 30, 48 and 67. The whole piece obtains an ancient flavor by using specific baroque ornaments, avoiding the leading tone and by using an improvisational character.

The tradition of non-measured preludes from the Renaissance era defines the evolution of the genre over the centuries. It is one of the most representative musical miniatures, which has retained its original-improvisational appearance, transforming itself according to the stylistic characteristics of the artistic currents.

Ravel's prelude, like most of the improvisational pieces, contains only a few musical motifs, which are repeated and developed throughout the part. The three motifs presented before are related by their rhythmic structure: a repetitive rapid movement of the sixteenth notes, accompanied by a descending chromatic scale. The repeat sign in the middle of the part represents the characteristics of the baroque sonata form.

⁹ Vlado Perlemutter, H  l  ne Jourdan-Morhange, *Op.cit.*, p. 68.

Fugue

The *Fugue* represents both a genre and a musical form as well as a compositional technique invented in the Middle Age, designating a work in canonical style. During the Renaissance, the Italian master Giovanni Gabrieli extends the base of the polyphonic genre. The *chromatic fantasy* of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck and the fugues of Girolamo Frescobaldi are notable examples of the early Baroque. The form crystallizes in the works of Johann Jakob Froberger, Dietrich Buxtehude, Johann Pachelbel, Georg Muffat, later in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. Ravel's fugue contains each component of the baroque form and genre, being himself one of the greatest fugue-composers of the twentieth century.

By its character and by the use of the identical tonality, together with the first four notes of the subject, the fugue is strictly related to the prelude (E.g. 5). The rhythmic aspect is extremely interesting through the accents, which falls against the natural pulse of the measure.

E.g. 5



The subject of the fugue is first presented in the soprano, being followed by a real response in the alto with a perfect fourth below and immediately after the first two, a third occurrence appears in the bass, one octave lower. The price of the real answer is the avoidance of the leading tone. The counter-subject is based on a smooth melodic line, decorated by some triplets, which highlights the musical material. The first three thematic entries are followed by two additional entries presented in the alto and the soprano.

The development of the fugue represents the body of the work, between measures 15 and 53. The theme always appears accompanied by its counter-subject. In measures 15, 17, 44 and 48 the theme appears in G major, D major, E major in B major. In measures 22 and 24, the theme is reversed in G Major, then in C Major (E.g. 6).

E.g. 6

Starting with measures 35, and 39, the subject appears in *stretto*, building the culmination of the part, which explodes in measures 50-53. The material of the counter-subject appears superimposed on all the voices thus preparing the final part in measure 54. The subject appears in the soprano also accompanied by thematic entries superimposed in alto and the bass. In the last four measures, the tempo gradually narrows, the nuances become extremely pale and the final chord contains only a perfect fifth - which reminds us of the ancient purity of the chords without the third (E.g. 7).

E.g. 7

Toccata

The word *Toccata* comes from the Italian verb *to touch* and designates both a compositional technique and a musical genre, written for keyboard instruments to show the performer's virtuosity and dexterity. Although it appears already in the Renaissance era, the genre reaches its peak in the late Baroque, through the creations of Johann Sebastian Bach (*Toccata and Fugue in d minor* BWV 565, *Seven toccatas for clavichord* BWV 910-916) and Domenico Scarlatti (*555 Sonate per clavicembalo*). The toccata is present

also in Classicism through the final parts of the *Sonatas* op. 26 and 54 of Ludwig van Beethoven, in Romanticism through individual works like the *Toccata in C major* op.7 by Robert Schumann or the *Toccata* of Franz Liszt. In the 20th century appears through masterpieces like the *Toccata* from the suite *Pour le Piano* by Claude Debussy, the *Toccata* of Sergei Prokofiev or the *Toccata* from the suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by Maurice Ravel.¹⁰

Isn't at all surprising the use of such a spectacular genre at the end of the suite. First, through its glittering virtuosity, the suite achieves a brilliant ending. Secondly, this *Toccata* is an improvisational piece, forming together with the *Prelude* a structural arc. In addition to the common character and tonal center, both sides being written in sonata form (the prelude, in baroque sonata form).

The main theme of the exposition is based on five types of perpetual movements (repetition of a sound by alternating hands in the first two measures, chords, and intervals grouped two by two in measures 3-4, rhythmic play through the unequal grouping of the sixteen notes in measures 5-7, alternating the chords with a single common sound in measure 8, a single chord followed by a repeated sound in measures 9-10), which represents the nucleus of *Toccata* (E.g. 8).

E.g. 8

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece, likely a toccata, in 2/4 time. The score is written for two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The tempo is marked 'Vivace' and the dynamics are 'PIANO' and 'pp staccato'. The score is divided into two systems. The first system consists of two measures, and the second system consists of four measures. Red boxes highlight specific rhythmic and melodic patterns in both staves, illustrating the 'nucleus of Toccata' mentioned in the text. The patterns include alternating hands, chords, intervals, and rhythmic play through unequal groupings of notes.

¹⁰ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Op.cit., Vol. 25., p. 537.*

The second theme appears in measure 57, modulating to the dominant tonality with an avoided leading tone. By the tempo *Un peu moins vif*, together with the lyrical melodic line in the soprano, it becomes even more evident (E.g. 9). After the exhaustive processing of the five motifs, combining them in all possible ways and modulating in countless tonalities, the development ends with the reappearance of the fragments of the first and second themes in measures 173, 191 and 222. (E.g. 10)

E.g. 9



E.g. 10



From measure 217 there is an elaborated coda, full of chords and octaves in *forte-fortissimo*. In the last eight measures, the musical material contains arpeggios in E major, loaded with octaves and chords. Although the use of the Picardy third has a pre-classical taste, through the writing and especially through the mass of the nuances, the end of the *Toccata* represents rather the legacy of Franz Liszt or as Ravel confessed: “it’s pure Saint-Saëns”.¹¹

Danis Matthews considers the *Toccata* the apotheosis of Maurice Ravel’s piano writing: “From its first tingling repeated notes to its final flurry of alternating chords, forms a magnificent apotheosis of Ravel’s piano writing.”¹²

¹¹ Vlado Perlemutter, H el ene Jourdan-Morhange, *Op.cit.*, p. 78.

¹² Chih-Yi Chen, *Op.cit.*, p. 38.

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