

## MAURICE RAVEL BETWEEN IMPRESSIONISM, SYMBOLISM AND NEOCLASSICISM

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**SUMMARY.** Maurice Ravel together with Claude Debussy are considered the two great impressionist composers of the twentieth century, however both of them refused this appellation. The truth, as usual, is somewhere in the middle: although Ravel's music through his harmonies belongs to Impressionism, through the thematism of his works belongs to Symbolism and through the use of traditional forms belongs to Neoclassicism, each association can be only partially correct. This study tries to demonstrate this affirmation through a short overview of the composer's art.

**Keywords:** Ravel, Impressionism, Symbolism, Neoclassicism, Skills

*Copy, and if while copying, you remain yourself, that's because you have something to say*<sup>2</sup>. This famous quotation of Ravel recalls the whole art of the twentieth century, synthesizes the layers of the previous periods, differentiates the artistic movements by reflecting the essence of composing: being original despite the inevitable influence of the precursors or contemporaries.

We often find certain composers that are considered less important or even unjustly forgotten. The phenomenon occurs in all the nuances of the problem and it is our duty to approach the theme in such a way that no important aspect will remain without consideration. The composers - such as Georg Friedrich Händel in the shadow of Johann Sebastian Bach, Franz Schubert (who, although representing another musical period, are contemporary with the genius of classicism, with Ludwig van Beethoven) or even Maurice Ravel (by mistake considered impressionist, living in the shadow of Claude Debussy) - are not only representing extremely important values, but they are the mirror, the basic source of inspiration of their contemporaries.

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy, Bricard, Ravel – "Le Tombeau de Couperin", An Alfred Masterwork Edition, New York, 2003.

Maurice Ravel was born in 1875 in *Ciburne* - a basque town near the French border. The Ravel family moved to Paris, when Maurice was only three months old. Being a family of intellectuals and music lovers, they quickly discovered their son's talent, taking the only six years old Ravel to piano and composition lessons. The years spent at the Paris Conservatory and the diversity of the *Paris Exposition 1900* influenced and shaped Ravel in a unique way. He meets *Modest Mussorgsky*, *Nikolay Rimski-Korsakov*, *Alexander Borodin*, and their particular harmonic-musical language, which remains a source of inspiration throughout his life. He also became acquainted with French artists, along with them in the early 1900s, forming a group of intellectuals called *Les Apaches*. They met each Saturday afternoon in the house of the painter *Paul Sordes*, where everyone had the opportunity to present his newly created works. During the years of study, he tries five times consecutive without success to win the prestigious *Prix de Rome* contest, but failure does not destroy his morale of work. He composes continuously, his works are sparkling of the new ideas and his compositional genius is reflected by the orchestration of his own compositions, one of the most beloved orchestration techniques being the separation of voices by grouping the instruments with similar timbre. His musical language is unique and his harmonies often contains basic jazz elements, the overlapped tonalities evokes polytonality, through which his music obtains freshness and virtue. The *Great War* leaves persistent traces both on the composer's physique and soul. He finishes the work *Le Tombeau de Couperin* dedicating each part to a friend deceased in the war. His crystallized style is reflected on his famous composition *Bolero*, made up of two repetitive themes on an *ostinato* bass. Madeleine Goss, in her book *Bolero: The Life of Maurice Ravel*<sup>3</sup>, ascertains that the material used in *Bolero* contains a tragic intensity, putting the piece in parallel with the life of the composer. She considers the *Bolero* a musical image of suffering: the obsession of the rhythm, the hallucinating insistence of the theme and the heaviness of the accents creates the atmosphere of a *Dance Macabre*, a nightmare of the dark pain in the composer's soul.

Maurice Ravel on the one hand did not compose loads of works, but on the other hand his works are very varied, which reflects the composer's desire, always to find something new and unique. Therefore, we can meet several musical genres, as instrumental works (most of them being written for solo piano), chamber music works, instrumental concerts, symphonic works, songs, ballets, cantatas and operas. There are several theories about his

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<sup>3</sup> Madeleine, Goss, "*Bolero: The Life of Maurice Ravel*", Tudor Publishing Company, New York, 1945.

compositional periods, but the Great war represents an irrefutable and obvious change in the composer's life. However, the pre-war period can be divided into two subdivisions: the years of youth in which Ravel evolves and composes under the guidance of his professors at the Paris Conservatory and the years after faculty in which Ravel - still young but already independent - enjoys his freedom in creation.

In the first period between 1875-1905, Ravel takes advantage of the instructions of his teachers, both before and after his admission to the prestigious Music Conservatory in Paris. The period includes masterpieces like the *F-major String quartet* composed in 1902, *Introduction and Allegro* for Harp, Flute, Clarinet and String Quartet (1905), the song cycle *Shéhérazade* for Soprano and Orchestra (1903), *Habanera* for two pianos (1895) and numerous solo piano pieces like the *Ancient Menuet* (1895), *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (1899), *Jeux d'eau* (1901), *Fugue in e-minor* (1903), *Menuet in c sharp minor* (1904) or the *Fugue in C-major* (1905). The title of his piano works, like *Ancient Menuet*, *Pavane*, or *Fugue* represents the composer's interest and passion over the genres of earlier periods, which manifests itself by avoiding the leading tones of the minor tonalities or applying the rules of the classical forms.

The second period begins with the great scandal around the *Prix de Rome* contest. Although Ravel tries five times unsuccessfully to win the competition, his work-morale remains on the top. His genius is reflected by the works of the second period, like in the *Trio in a-minor* (1914), the songs with accompaniment *Noël des jouets* (1906), the song cycle *Histoires naturelles* (1906), the Opera *L'Heure espagnole* (1907), the *Spanish Rhapsody* (1907), the ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912), the four-hand cycle *Ma Mère l'Oye* (1910, orchestrated in 1911) and his solo piano works: *Sonatina* (1905), the suite *Miroirs* (*Nocturnelles*, *Oiseaux tristes*, *Une barque sur l'océan*, *Alborada del gracioso*, *La vallée des cloches* – 1906), the suite *Gaspard la nuit* (*Ondine*, *Le Gibet*, *Scarbo* - 1908), *Menuet sur le nom de Haydn* (1909) and *Valses Nobles et sentimentales* - eight waltzes in Chopin's manner, composed in 1911.

The last compositional period between 1918-1937 differs greatly from the first two. His friend and disciple, Alexis Roland-Manuel, testifies to the popularity of the master during the post-war period. In his biography<sup>4</sup>, these late works of Ravel are characterized by classical forms, distinctive and clear melodies, by polytonality and by "l'art dépouillé" (the naked art). Along with the aspects described above, the period also carries a basic drama created by the First World War. The representative works of this

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<sup>4</sup> Alexis, Roland-Manuel, "*Maurice Ravel*", Dover Publications, New York, 1947.

period are the *Sonata for violin and cello* (1922), the *Rhapsody* called *Tzigane* for violin and piano or orchestra (1924), *Sonata for violin and piano* (1927), the Symphonic Poem *La Valse* (1920), *Bolero* (1928), the song cycle *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* for Baritone and Orchestra (1933), the piano suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (*Prélude, Fugue, Forlane, Rigaudon, Menuet, Toccata* finished in 1918 and transcribed for orchestra in 1919) and the two *Piano Concerts* (the first one in D major, written for the left hand in 1930, the second one in G major composed one year later in 1931). Roland-Manuel, in his biography<sup>5</sup>, draws our attention to the contrast between Ravel's harmonic and melodic language. He calls the composer a *sensual logician*, argued by the magic of his harmonical combinations. In addition to appealing to classical forms, Ravel was always looking for new sonorities and timbres. The most obvious example is his piano work called *Jeux d'eau* (1901), which anticipates the sonorities of Claude Debussy, used in his piano works *Jardins sous la pluie* (1903) and *Reflets dans l'eau* (1905). On one hand, according to Ravel, the individual works born from original ideas and themes, the counterpoint and harmony represents only the superficial part of composing. The sensitivity together with the personal reaction of the composer is much more important – notices Barbara L. Kelly in her article on Ravel<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the composer writes with great pleasure about the technical part of composing, which from his point of view can be taught, however the originality can only be noticed.

Vladimir Jankélévitch declares that Maurice Ravel's skills could be divided into several categories<sup>7</sup>:

1. **Challenge:** Ravel's audacity is expressed on the one hand by the technical difficulty of his pieces, on the other hand by his artificial spirit. He taught, beautiful things are difficult, however he didn't trust in the romantic conflict between vocation and destiny. So Ravel invented his own language, based on his own rules by which he tries to overcome his limits.
2. **Artifice** is one of Ravel's most surprising feature. For him music is a parallel magical world, that never appears in the dimension of ordinary life, but it represents the secret oasis of the composer. Through cynicism and frivolity, he rejects romanticism, he considers music to be a luxury entertainment. He was not obsessed with work and his mental, physical or emotional state did not leave any trace on the final result.

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<sup>5</sup> Idem.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara, L. Kelly: *Re-presenting Ravel: Artificiality and the Aesthetic of Imposture* from Peter Kaminsky, "Unmasking Ravel", University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir, Jankélévitch, "Ravel", Grove Press, New York, 1959.

3. **Virtuosity:** although he was not considered an extremely gifted pianist, technique becomes a device in Ravel's hands by which the public is amazed and enchanted. The idea of virtuosity hails from Franz Liszt, whom Ravel admired in a special way. Most likely, without the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* there would never been *Tzigane* or *Scarbo* without *Mephisto Waltz*, *Jeux d'eau* without *Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Esté*. Passion for speed means to Ravel lucidity and inspiration.
4. **Rhythm** in Ravel's works becomes complete together with harmony and counterpoint. Being obsessed with the classical dance forms, he used with a great pleasure the form and the rhythm of these. The asymmetric measure together with syncopations represent the basic elements of Ravel's rhythm. Accuracy compels him to respect the rules of old dances, by altering the time and the measure, he gets extremely long and complicated phrases. Polyrhythm is present by irregular accentuation of notes or by subdivision of the measure in different ways, such as 6/8 used alternately by 3/4. The use of metronome is recommended in any case, by Ravel even the cadences are measured by an extreme precision.
5. **Harmony** by Ravel means a continuous search for the most special and rare acoustic combinations. Typical intervals, such as seventh or second, are the basics for the chords often decorated with appoggiaturas or other ornaments. Most of Ravel's piano works begin or end with a second or seventh, the most obvious example being the six parts of the *Le Tombeau de Couperin* suite. While in Debussy's works the second represents the cry of pain, by Ravel means the smallest possible interval, the sign of modesty<sup>8</sup>.
6. **Modes:** by rehabilitating the Gregorian modes, the tonal-functional system loses its predominant value. The close relationship between minor tones and its major parallels together with the avoidance of the leading tone in a consecutive manner creates a modal atmosphere.
7. **Counterpoint:** although in his youth Ravel shows great interest in horizontal composition (composing several fugues), Ravel is the master of harmonies and of vertical composing. However, alongside the fugue from the *Le Tombeau de Couperin* suite, it is worth mentioning the *Menuet Antique*, where the reappearance of the menuet is counterpointed by the middle section, respectively the *Menuet* in the *Le Tombeau de Couperin* suite, where the reappearance of the Menuet is combined with the theme of the *Musette* part.

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<sup>8</sup> Vladimir, Jankélévitch, "Ravel", Grove Press, New York, 1959.

The famous music critic, Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, often draws our attention to the artificiality of the composer, however Ravel refuses this trait by considering his artificiality natural, conceived from his own personality. From the point of view of his harmonical language, Ravel's music is full and bright, optimistic and radiant. Antiquity represents a great source of inspiration: he uses diatonic and plagal modes, neoclassical principles in his clear and optimistic vision. Applies the symbolism of the tonalities, however C-major means light and clarity, G-major represents the pastoral character, thirds evoke the chirping of the birds and descendent arpeggios represent the waterfall.

Sviatoslav Richter, the great pianist of the twentieth century, considers Ravel's music too dynamic to be considered impressionist, but too colorful not to be considered.<sup>9</sup> The truth is somewhere in the middle: although Ravel's music through his harmonies belongs to **Impressionism**, through the thematism of his works belongs to **Symbolism** and through the use of traditional forms belongs to **Neoclassicism**, each association can be only partially correct.

*Translated by Oláh Boglárka*

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<sup>9</sup>Oleksii, Ivanchenko, "*Characteristics of Maurice Ravel's Compositional Language as Seen Through the Texture of his Selected Piano Works and the Piano Suite "Gaspard de la Nuit"*", Electronic Theses and Dissertations, Coral Gables, Florida, 2015.

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