National Central University Journal of Humanities
Vol. 61, June 2016, pp. 231-268
College of Liberal Arts, National Central University

Reflections on Maurice Ravel's Creativity

Arbie Orenstein

ABSTRACT

This article, "Reflections on Maurice Ravel's Creativity," focuses on two important aspects of the composer's career: his musical aesthetics and his creative process. Set against the vibrant Parisian musical scene from the 1890s to the1930s, we note the important lessons that Ravel absorbed at the Conservatoire--where his only formal education took place--and his personal amalgam of some aesthetic reflections of Mozart, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Poe. We are told that composers should learn their craft like painters, by imitating good models, and the composer's objective should be a lifelong pursuit of "technical perfection. I can strive unceasingly to this end," Ravel observes, "since I am certain of never being able to attain it. The important thing is to get nearer to it all the time."

An examination of Ravel's creative process reveals that the path toward technical perfection was fraught with difficulties at every stage. His initial sketches consisted of melody and figured bass--reflecting his strict academic training at the Conservatoire--and reproductions of manuscripts and sketches in the article highlight some melodic, harmonic and rhythmic problems that he encountered.

The concluding section of this article surveys Ravel's growing international reputation and his legacy as one of France's most frequently performed and recorded composers. Perhaps the key to his success is the striking ability of his music to speak to laymen as well as scholars, much like

his musical idol Mozart. Ravel's home at Montfort l'Amaury is a national museum which receives many visitors from around the world. It is now some 140 years since his birth, and looking to the future, an important goal of researchers should be a scholarly edition of his complete works, similar to the one in progress for his distinguished compatriot Claude Debussy.

Keywords:
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), French Composer, Musical Aesthetics, Creative Process, Legacy and Future Research Goals

中央大學人文學報　第六十一期
2016 年 6 月　　頁 231-269
中央大學人文學院

反思拉威爾的創造性

Arbie Orenstein *

摘要

本論文《反思拉威爾的創造性》主要探討作曲家創作生涯的兩個重要面向：音樂美學與創造過程。在 1890 年與 1930 年間活躍的巴黎音樂舞台，我們看到拉威爾的音樂教育養成主要歸功於他在巴黎音樂院的學習與他對莫札特、波特萊爾、馬拉美與可倫坡等人美學上的反思。對於拉威爾而言，作曲家應該學習技巧，就像畫家一樣，擬摹大作，作曲家的目標應是終身追求「技巧的完美」，並以此為職志，即使無法達到，也應該時時近乎完美。

檢視拉威爾的創作過程，發現朝向「技巧的完美」這個路程，在每個階段是困難重重。他最初的草稿包含了旋律與數字低音 —反應出他在巴黎音樂院嚴格的學院訓練— 再次謄寫稿子，之後在初稿上注明了他在旋律、和聲、節奏上所遭遇到的問題。

本文最後將探討拉威爾走向國際聲望之路與其音樂遺產。他的成功之鑰也許在於他的音樂老少皆宜，就如同莫札特的音樂。拉威爾位於 Montfort l'Amaury 的房子，目前成為一座國立博物館，接待來自世界各地的遊客。今年是拉威爾誕生一百四十年，對於未來的研究目標，應是編輯一套嚴謹且完整的作品目錄集，就如同正在進行的德布西全集。

關鍵字：拉威爾 (1875-1937)，法國作曲家，音樂美學，創造過程，遺產與未來研究目標

Professor of Music, Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College (arbieo@aol.com)
投稿日期：2015.08.05；接受刊登日期：2016.02.24；最後修訂日期：2016.05.15

Reflections on Maurice Ravel's Creativity

Arbie Orenstein

I'm not among those who compose quickly. I mistrust facility. I place a somewhat scientific stubbornness on constructing with solidity, seeking the purest material, and consolidating it well.

Maurice Ravel

This article focuses on several aspects of Ravel's career, beginning with an overview of his oeuvre and his musical aesthetics, followed by an examination of his creative process. The concluding section looks at Ravel's legacy today, some 140 years since his birth, highlighting the status of recent research and some thoughts about future goals.

****

Shortly after Ravel's death on 28 December 1937 at age 62, a young American composer, Elliott Carter, perceptively summarized the importance of his art as follows:

> **"Maurice Ravel was an exponent of that careful, precise workmanship, elegance, and grace he so admired in the music of Mozart, of whom he was not an unworthy descendant. The type seems to grow rarer as this troubled century progresses. His work, however, was a monument to the dignity and precision that even now all worthy musicians should strive for and that French music has at its best always captured. Combined with an**

> **extraordinary sense of style and infallible ear was a refinement of taste and a unique inspiration that made every work he wrote right and final in its own category. All his life he shunned cheapness and facility, yet his style and manner of orchestration have already left their mark on all music, from the simplest jazz to the most elaborate works of Stravinsky. His music will always be a great glory to the art he practiced so long and so well."** [1]

A survey of Ravel's art indicates a small body of music written over a creative period of four decades, from the 1890s to the 1930s. There are approximately 60 compositions, of which slightly more than half are instrumental: fifteen pieces and suites for the piano, eight chamber works, six orchestral works, several ballets, and two piano concerti. The vocal music consists of some twenty songs and song cycles with accompaniment for piano, chamber ensemble, or orchestra, several settings of folk melodies, one work for unaccompanied mixed chorus, and two operas. It would be misleading to divide this music into periods of apprenticeship and maturity, for Ravel's earliest compositions were on the whole remarkably characteristic. The "Habanera" (for two pianos) and the *Menuet antique* (piano solo) were written by a twenty-year-old student, and with the completion of *Jeux d'eau*, his first unqualified masterpiece, this twenty-six-year-old student's style was firmly set. These early works indicate some of the trends he would pursue: a predilection for dance rhythms, the music of Spain, archaic pastiche and contemporary impressionistic techniques. Thus, from the outset, Ravel's approach to composition might be called metamorphic—that is, in each new undertaking he would cover fresh ground, placing his personal stamp upon widely differing techniques and idioms. Other compositions indicate his interest in Basque music, oriental

[1] "Homage to Ravel, " in *Modern Music,* Vol.15, No. 2 (January-February, 1938): 96.

exoticism, classical forms and American jazz. Ravel's observation that as a child he was sensitive "to every kind of music" offers an important clue to the striking diversity found in his art. Behind all of the multifarious threads lies the composer's personal manipulation of his material.

At the Conservatoire, where Ravel studied fitfully over a period of sixteen years, André Gédalge taught his pupils that melody is the essence of music. "Whatever sauce you put around the melody is a matter of taste," he would say. "What is important is the melodic line, and this doesn't vary." [2] Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of the Ravelian melody is its mixture of tonality and modality. Found in the work of Emmanuel Chabrier, Erik Satie, and the Russian school, the combination of tonality and modality was in the air in the latter nineteenth century, adding a fresh dimension to the major-minor system. The Dorian mode is frequently used (*Ballade de la Reine morte d'aimer*, or the beginning of the Sonata for Violin and Cello), while the Phrygian mode is characteristic of Spanish music (*Rapsodie espagnole, L'Heure espagnole*). Ravel's adaptation of other scales, among them the whole-tone, pentatonic and octatonic, reflects the spiritual influence of the cornucopia of Oriental and European music performed at the 1889 International Exposition in Paris (Overture to *Shéhérazade, Tzigane*, or the scherzo in the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand). The melody is generally diatonic, and proceeds by sequential treatment or repetition, indicating the spiritual influence of the Russian school, rather than by Beethovenian motivic workmanship. The intervals of the second, fourth and fifth are often favored, and the composer's predilection for joining themes which are first presented individually is a feature of his workmanship which may be observed from the *Menuet antique* (1895) to the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand (1930). Roland-Manuel has perceptively

---

[2] See *La Revue musicale* (1 March 1926), 257.

described Ravel's melody as "supple, but extremely pure, with contours which strongly indicate something Italian, in the sense of the Italianism of Mozart, Schubert, even of Weber, or of Chopin."[3]

Although it is clear that Ravel's harmonic language was considered novel, indeed revolutionary during his lifetime, it now appears to be a logical outgrowth of the far-reaching expansion of chromatic harmony which followed the decisive opening measures of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.[4] Together with his contemporaries, Ravel exploited unresolved chords of the seventh, ninth, eleventh and thirteenth, complex harmonies over pedal points, and sonorities based upon the intervals of the second and the fourth. His adventurous harmonic language is solidly rooted in tonality with many modal inflections, some exploitation of bitonality, and even rare atonal passages. In the prewar compositions, one generally observes a richer texture and harmonic palette, coupled with homophonic writing which bespeaks a close interrelationship between melody and harmony *(Daphnis et Chloé)*, while some of the postwar compositions indicate a more austere harmonic style, coupled with increasing interest in linear motion (Sonata for Violin and Cello). The minor and major seventh (or the diminished octave) are the hallmark of Ravel's harmonic language, appearing from the earliest works through *Jeux d'eau* (E, G#, B, D #), *Shéhérazade* (Eb, Gb, Bb, Db), *Miroirs* (G#, B, D, G½), and later on in the quasi-Schoenbergian suspensions of tonality in the *Chansons madécasses*. Finally, the lowered seventh step, the "blue" note, will appear frequently in the postwar adaptations of jazz

---

[3] Quoted in Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (Dover Publications, Mineola, New York, 1991), 32.

[4] At the Conservatoire, where Ravel's only formal education took place, he mastered the traditional aspects of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century harmony found in Henri Reber's *Traité d'harmonie* (1862), and the supplement to this work by Théodore Dubois (1889).

(the second movement of the Sonata for Violin and Piano and both piano concerti).

Ravel's views on the nature and meaning of art were primarily based upon his formative years at the Conservatoire, his reading of Baudelaire and Poe, and, of course, his personal amalgam of these and other elements. Thanks to the foresight of Roland-Manuel[5], who acted on occasion as the composer's amanuensis, we possess the following important statement:

> **"Some reflections on music."**
>
> **"I have never felt the need to formulate, either for the benefit of others or for myself, the principles of my aesthetic. If I were called upon to do so, I would ask to be allowed to identify myself with the simple pronouncements made by Mozart on this subject. He confined himself to saying that there is nothing that music can not undertake to do, or dare, or portray, provided it continues to charm and always remains music. I am sometimes credited with opinions which appear very paradoxical concerning the falsity of art and the dangers of sincerity. The fact is I refuse simply and absolutely to confound the *conscience* of an artist, which is one thing, with his *sincerity*, which is another. Sincerity is of no value unless one's conscience helps to make it apparent. This conscience compels us to turn ourselves into good craftsmen. My objective, therefore, is technical perfection. I can strive unceasingly to this end since I am certain of never being able to attain it. The important thing is to get nearer to it all the time. Art, no doubt, has other *effects*, but the artist, in my opinion, should have no other aim."** [6]

These remarks are unmistakably French in orientation. Music must "charm" and remain "music"—that is, it need not be philosophy or

---

[5] The pen name of Alexis Manuel Lévi (1891-1966), French musicologist, composer, and critic. He was Ravel's first biographer and one of his closest colleagues for some twenty-five years. A conversation with Roland-Manuel that I recorded in Paris on 1 February 1966 has been transferred to compact disc and is housed in the Music Division of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

[6] Roland-Manuel, "Lettres de Maurice Ravel et documents inédits," *Revue de musicologie,* 38 (June, 1956), 53.

metaphysics. Ravel thus viewed his role as that of a craftsman arranging tones, rather than a philosopher thinking with tones. Regarding the objective of "technical perfection," the poet Léon-Paul Fargue made the following observation:

> **"One of the most striking traits of this curious Pyrenean was his passion for perfection. This man, who was profoundly intelligent, versatile, precise, extremely well-informed, and who did everything with a facility which was proverbial, had the character and qualities of an artisan. And he like nothing better than to be compared to one. He liked doing things and doing things well. . . . His passion was to offer the public works which were "finished," polished to the ultimate degree."** [7]

How was one to approach the objective of technical perfection? According to Ravel, one submitted to a thorough and rigorous academic training. At the Conservatoire, he methodically analyzed the standard masterworks of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods, and performed a wide variety of nineteenth-century piano music. In later years the following advice was often given to young composers:

"If you have nothing to say, you can not do better, until you decide to give up composing for good, than say again what has already been well said. If you have something to say that something will never emerge more distinctly than when you are being unwittingly unfaithful to your model."[8]

Ravel was convinced that composers should learn their craft like painters—by imitating good models. He did not merely pay lip service to this notion, but throughout his career he diligently studied the scores of Bach, Mozart, Debussy, Richard Strauss, Chopin, Liszt, Saint-Saëns, and the Russian composers, particularly Mussorgsky. In explaining his own

---

[7] Léon-Paul Fargue, "Autour de Ravel" in Fargue *et al., Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers* (Paris: Éditions du Tambourinaire, 1939), 159-160.

[8] Roland-Manuel, "Des Valses à 'La Valse' (1911-1921)," *Ibid.,* 145.

compositions, Ravel attempted to make them appear as simple as possible: this passage is pure Saint-Saëns, he would say, or this harmony was used by Chopin. Indeed, the derivative titles *Jeux d'eau* (from Liszt), *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Schubert), or *La Valse* (Johann Strauss) indicate the spiritual origin of the music. Yet, as Jean Cocteau pointed out in *Le Coq et l'arlequin*, "an original artist *can not* copy. Thus, he has only to copy in order to be original." In explaining what he looked for in a composition, Ravel stressed the importance of "musical sensitivity," and insisted that "a composer must have something to say."[9] The critic Michel D. Calvocoressi pointed out that he was particularly attracted to "points of originality in idiom and texture. When calling attention to some beautiful thing, he would often wind up with: 'Et puis, vous savez, on n'avait jamais fait ça!' [And then, you know, that hasn't been done before!] Questions of form seemed to preoccupy him far less. The one and only test of good form, he used to say, is continuity of interest. I do not remember his ever praising a work on account of its form. But, on the other hand, he was very sensitive to what he considered to be defective form."[10]

Ravel's views on composition were further clarified in the lessons he gave to Maurice Delage, Ralph Vaughan-Williams, Roland-Manuel, and Manuel Rosenthal. He taught mostly by means of conversation and then illustrated his comments at the piano. Pupils were frequently told to model their exercises on Mozart's works. However, when teaching Roland-Manuel, who particularly admired Debussy's art, Ravel would pose the following question: in this passage, in an analogous musical context, what would Debussy

---

[9] Written in a letter to his friend and publisher Jacques Durand dated 9 February 1919.

[10] Michel D. Calvocoressi, *Musicians Gallery: Music and Ballet in Paris and London* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), 52.

have done? In teaching counterpoint and fugue, Ravel was punctilious and extremely demanding. The rules had to be rigorously observed, and he would painstakingly ferret out and condemn parallel fifths and octaves, as well as other infractions of contrapuntal law. In teaching orchestration, Strauss's tone poems were stressed as excellent models for imitation and study. Manuel Rosenthal recalled that Ravel's personal copies of these scores had thoroughly blackened page corners, resulting from his frequent study of them. Like his teacher Gabriel Fauré, Ravel avoided panacea-like formulas. When looking at some of Roland-Manuel's orchestrations, for example, he might suggest that a particular passage could effectively be orchestrated in precisely the opposite manner. When the new assignment was carried out, he would frequently reconsider, and note that the passage was more convincing in its original version! [11] What he desired, above all, was to have the student think for himself and develop along his own path.

In addition to the axioms of imitation as the gateway to mastering one's craft, and the objective of technical perfection, Ravel was convinced that a work of art is the product of a composer's individual consciousness, which is

[11] In my recorded conversation with Roland-Manuel referred to in note 5, he recalled being with Ravel when he orchestrated Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* in the summer of 1922: "He would occasionally show me Mussorgsky's score and say: 'What instrument would you use here?' 'Perhaps,' I ventured on one occasion, 'a clarinet.' 'A clarinet?' he replied, 'that would intrude!' Very well, it would intrude. He thereupon returned to his work, and later said, 'Come look.' It wasn't a clarinet, it was a saxophone! I saw—this was a great privilege—how he orchestrated. Of course it wasn't his own music, but it was nevertheless very interesting. He attentively examined the passage he was working on; he wrote, distributing the instruments like any other orchestrator. Then, very often, he went to the piano and isolated an instrumental group. He needed, he said, to hear what one group was doing in relation to the others. For example, he looked at what the strings were doing and played their parts on the piano. He said that he used the piano far more when orchestrating than when composing the first drafts of his own works."

inextricably bound to his national heritage:

> **" In musical treatises there are no such laws as would be of any avail in judging a contemporary musical work of art. Apparently the uselessness of all such arguments must come from the fact that such would-be laws are dealing only with the obvious and superficial part of the work of art without ever reaching those infinitely minute roots of the artist's sensitiveness and personal reaction. The elusive roots, or sources, are often sensed as two in character: one might be called the national consciousness, its territory being rather extensive; while the other, the individual consciousness, seems to be the product of an egocentric process. Both defy classification and analysis as well, yet every sensitive artist perceives the value of their influence in the creation of a real work of art. The manifestation of these two types of consciousness in music may break or satisfy all the academic rules, but such circumstance is of insignificant importance compared with the real aim, namely, fullness and sincerity of expression." [12]**

It is apparent that Ravel's "fullness and sincerity of expression" are solidly within French tradition. He told Vaughan Williams that the "heavy contrapuntal Teutonic manner" was not necessary, and that his own motto was "complex but not complicated." Calvocoressi noted that Ravel's preference for writing shorter compositions was due to a "deliberate, carefully thought-out aesthetic choice," and this terseness is characteristic of French art. One also observes emotional reserve rather than expansiveness, elegance and preciosity,[13]humor and tenderness, all of which is underpinned by a marked

---

[12] Maurice Ravel's lecture entitled "Contemporary Music," was delivered (in French) at the Rice Institute in Houston, Texas, on 7 April 1928. It is printed in an English translation in Arbie Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader* (Dover Publications, Mineola, New York, 2003), 40-49. (The above quotation appears on p. 41.) The original French version has yet to be found. Roland-Manuel assisted in preparing the lecture, which was a onetime event in Ravel's career.

[13] Wallace Fowlie's commentary with regard to the preciosity found in Stéphane Mallarmé's work is partially applicable to Ravel: "A poem must, by necessity, impinge upon something. Hence, the impure origin of every poem. The poet is defeated before he begins. He must

sensuousness. There is also a less common but distinct thread of drama extending from *Un Grand Sommeil noir, Si morne!*, and *Gaspard de la nuit*, through *La Valse*, the *Chansons madécasses*, and the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand.

As a creative artist, Ravel was keenly aware of his weaknesses and strengths. Like Debussy, he avoided the symphony, hus large orchestral works underpinned by dance rhythms or based upon poetic or visual imagery. Ravel never turned to the theme and variations, and wrote neither for the organ nor for the church. A complete accounting of the elements in his art would run a gamut from Gregorian chant to Gershwin, passing through the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, and Romantic eras. He managed to keep his personal touch in a style which varied from the striking simplicity of *Ma Mère l'Oye* to the transcendental virtuosity of *Gaspard de la nuit*, from the luxuriant, caressing sonority of *Daphnis et Chloé* to the austere violence of the *Chansons madécasses*, and from Renaissance pastiche to adaptations of jazz. His achievement is neither eclectic, nor can it be summed up in one all-encompassing label. It is thoroughly French in orientation, and is solidly based upon traditional practice. Like Chopin, Ravel found his personal path at an early age, and devoted his years to perfecting a small number of works. To some extent his music illustrates Paul Valéry's curious notion that "art should be the pastiche of what doesn't exist." In the last analysis, like any other significant artist, Ravel fashioned his own laws and created his own universe.

****

Throughout his career Ravel destroyed hundreds of sketches, which

---

deceive himself with preciosity, with the exterior and final beauty which conceals a troubled creation." *Mallarmé* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), 19.

he probably considered to be of little importance to anyone. He apparently enjoyed giving the impression that his music was created effortlessly, magically, as if out of thin air. In reality, nothing could have been further from the truth. His surviving sketches and autographs bear witness to a relentless inner drive towards technical perfection. Rather than correct some minuscule details, Ravel would occasionally recopy an entire autograph. Thus, there exist five autographs of *Sites auriculaires* and two complete orchestral holographs of the overture to *Shéhérazade*. Following all of this labor, both works were first published posthumously. Ravel's battles against all sorts of errors were incessant, and he continued to make corrections in his scores even after they were published.[14] It should be pointed out that he was capable of writing with considerable speed and facility. The accompaniments for five Greek folk melodies were written in some thirty-six hours, *L'Heure espagnole*, his first opera, was completed in about six months, and the orchestration of *Valses nobles et sentimentales* required but two weeks. However, the vast majority of his works were thought out at a leisurely pace, notated rather quickly, and then painstakingly refined and polished, as he explained:

> **"In my own work of composition I find a long period of conscious gestation, in general, necessary. During this interval, I come gradually to see, and with growing precision, the form and evolution which the subsequent work should have as a whole. I may thus be occupied for years without writing a single note of the work—after which the writing goes relatively rapidly; but there is still much time to be spent in eliminating everything that might be regarded as superfluous, in order to realize as completely as possible the longed-for final clarity. Then comes the time when new conceptions have to be formulated for further composition,**

[14] In a letter dated 31 March 1923 written to his close friend Lucien Garban, Durand's chief proofreader, Ravel observed that *La Valse* and *Ma Mère l'Oye* contained quite a few errors and he was taking careful note of them. (The full text of this letter is printed in *Cahiers Maurice Ravel,* No. 8 (2004): 44.)

> **but these cannot be forced artificially, for they come only of their own free will, and often originate in some very remote perception, without manifesting themselves until long years after. When the first stroke of a work has been written, and the process of elimination begun, the severe effort toward perfection proceeds by means almost intangible, seemingly directed by currents of inner forces, so intimate and intricate in character as to defy all analysis. Real art, I repeat, is not to be recognized by definitions, or revealed by analysis: we sense its manifestations and we feel its presence: it is apprehended in no other way."** [15]

Thus, in the last analysis, the logician and craftsman par excellence candidly acknowledged the ineffable and mysterious nature of art and of musical creation.

Many of Ravel's sketches are similar or even identical to their printed version. The sketches for an unfinished opera, *La Cloche engloutie*, form a striking contrast, in that they appear to depict the genesis of the composer's creative process. What is particularly striking is that several of these sketches consist of a melody and figured bass. We are not dealing with Baroque harmonies, of course, but it is difficult to imagine a highly polished and sophisticated art emanating from such a bare sketch. Manuel Rosenthal was similarly struck when he saw the initial sketches of a projected ballet, *Morgiane*; they consisted of about ten pages of melody and figured bass. We may follow the gradual evolution of Ravel's method of working on the basis of two versions of the opening six bars of *La Cloche engloutie*. The earlier sketch is written in light pencil and contains one indication for figured bass ($\frac{9}{4}$ in the opening bar). The vocal part appears at times without the text, and one can imagine Ravel with A. Ferdinand Hérold's translation of Gerhart Hauptmann's play before him setting the text phrase by phrase,

---

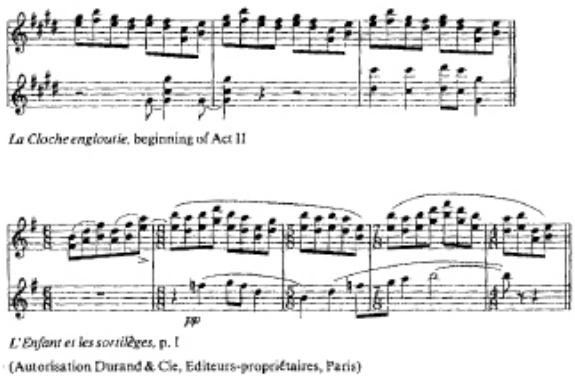
15 "Contemporary Music" in *A Ravel Reader, loc. cit.,* 46-47.

without bothering to copy the complete text. The second sketch, which is more developed, is written in ink. It too is for voice and piano, but now some suggestions for orchestral instrumentation are noted in the piano part. In addition, the figured bass disappears.[16] Thus, the composer's rigorous academic training seems to have rubbed off to some extent on the initial sketches of his own compositions. While at the Conservatoire, he analyzed the opening of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony: he examined its structure, copied out the melody and bass and interpreted some of the harmonies in terms of figured bass.[17] Although dealing with different plots, the libretti of *La Cloche engloutie* and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* unfold within the realm of sheer fantasy and enchantment, and it is indeed a brief distance from the forest and dancing elves of Hauptmann's play to the garden and dancing animals of Colette's libretto. Moreover, it is clear that the beginning of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* was adapted from the opening of the second act of *La Cloche engloutie* (see Example 1). Note the similar use of parallel fourths (upper staves) and the similar melodic contours (lower staves). Thus, *La Cloche engloutie* was not totally abandoned, and it proved to be one of the most important of Ravel's many incomplete projects.

---

[16] The two versions are printed in *Ravel: Man and Musician, loc. cit.,* Plate 26.

[17] Printed in my article, "Maurice Ravel's Creative Process," in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. LIII, No. 4 (October, 1967), Plate II, following p. 478.



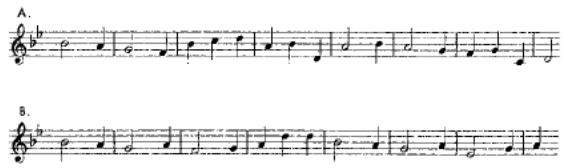
La Cloche engloutie, beginning of Act II

L'Enfant et les sortilèges, p. 1

(Autorisation Durand & Cie, Editeurs-propriétaires, Paris)

EXAMPLE 1: *La Cloche engloutie*, beginning of act II, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, p. 1

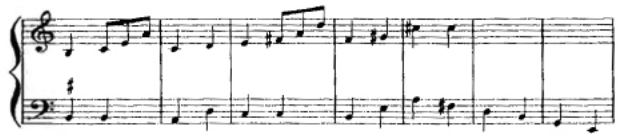
Ravel's sketches clearly indicate that the path toward technical perfection was fraught with difficulties at every stage. Thus, the apparently melodic simplicity of the Musette in the "Menuet" from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* was by no means easily achieved. Sketch B is somewhat weaker, but sketch A differs from the printed score in one note only (see Example 2).



EXAMPLE 2: Two sketches for the Musette in the "Menuet" from Le Tombeau de Couperin

A primitive jotting from the "Prélude" of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (probably corresponding to 5/5/3) [18] appears to concretize Ravel's notion (told to Vaughan Williams) of "an implied melodic outline in all vital music." In this particular sketch Ravel wrote his melodic outline first and later filled in the remaining notes. In addition to some missing accidentals, note the

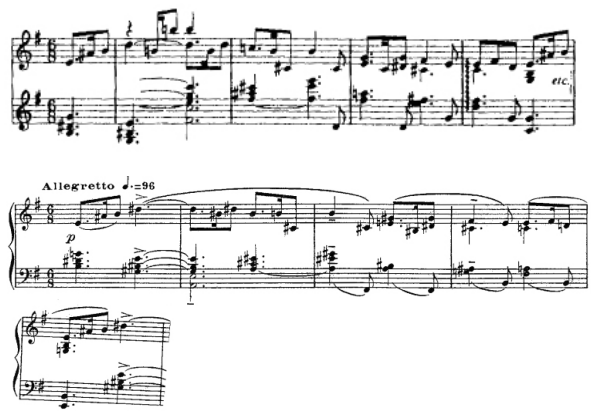
[18] Referring to the Durand score, page 5, brace 5, bar 3.



EXAMPLE 3: A sketch for the "Prélude" from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

figured bass indication (#) in the first bar (see Example 3).

A relatively developed sketch of the opening of the "Forlane" from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* highlights several problems (see Examples 4a and 4b). Ravel was apparently undecided whether to begin the piece on the first or the fourth beat, and whether or not to dot various eighth notes. Furthermore, the

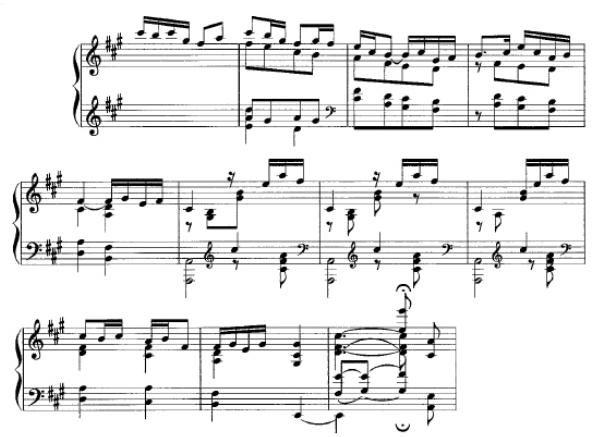


EXAMPLES 4A and 4B: Sketch (4a) and printed version (4b) of the opening of the "Forlane" from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

octave leap in the second bar of the sketch was removed and inserted later (cf. 10/1/1 and 10/2/5; obvious errors in the sketch are uncorrected).

Sketches of the first movement of the Sonatine have been preserved and

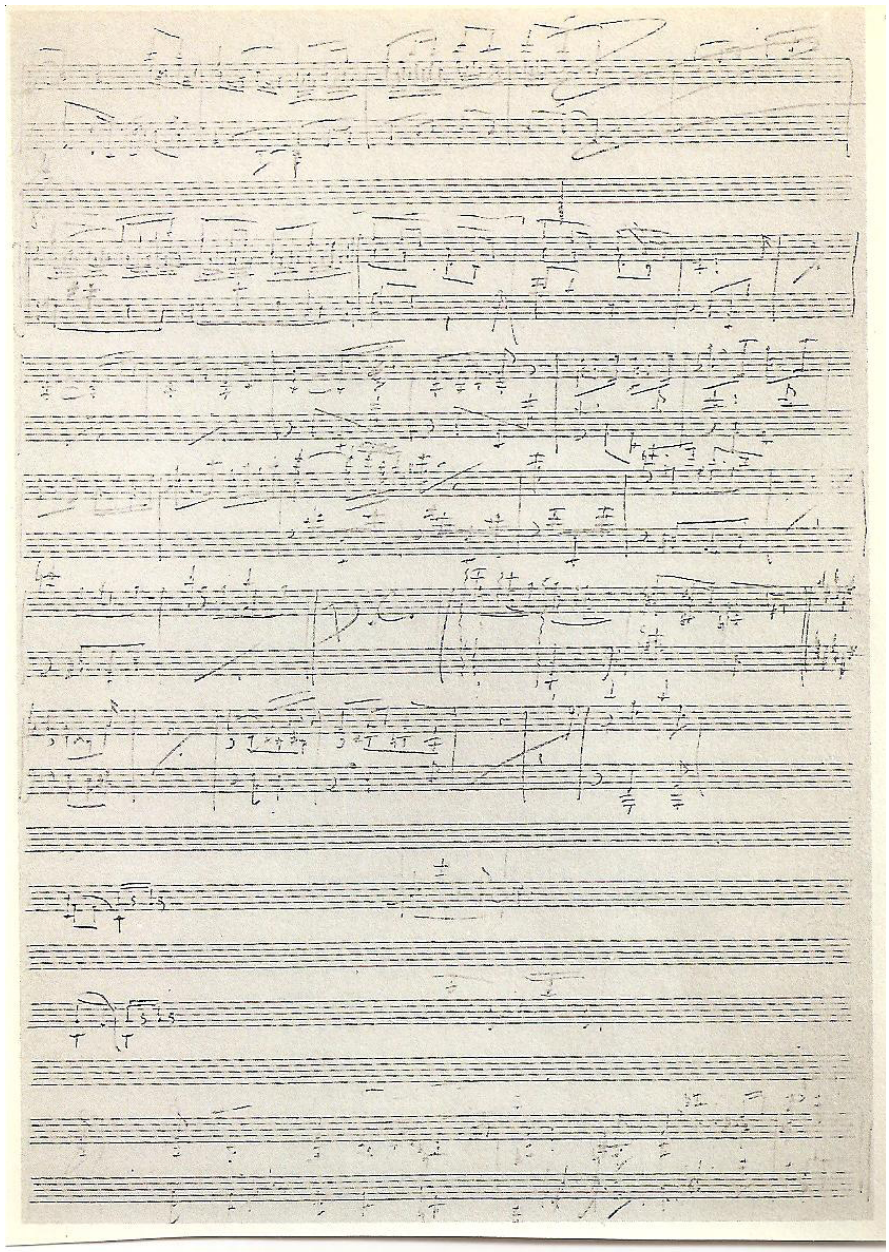
they are of particular interest.[19] It is apparent that Ravel's failure to repeat his original key signature on each new brace led to innumerable slips in notating accidentals. In addition, he was somewhat careless about clef changes, and, as a result, a great deal of time was spent correcting sketches. The most important difference between the sketches and the printed score was the deletion of eleven bars in the passage leading to the second theme. These uncharacteristic bars ramble rather aimlessly, and they were wisely excised in toto (see Example 5).



EXAMPLE 5: A rejected sketch for the first movement of the Sonatine, bars 11-21.

The recapitulation in the first movement was originally intended to be identical to the opening bar (note the indication D. C. [da capo] in pencil). Only later was the G# added to the melody (in ink), a subtle and effective emendation (see Example 6).

[19] They are reproduced in *Ravel: Man and Musician, loc. cit.,* Plates 27 and 28.



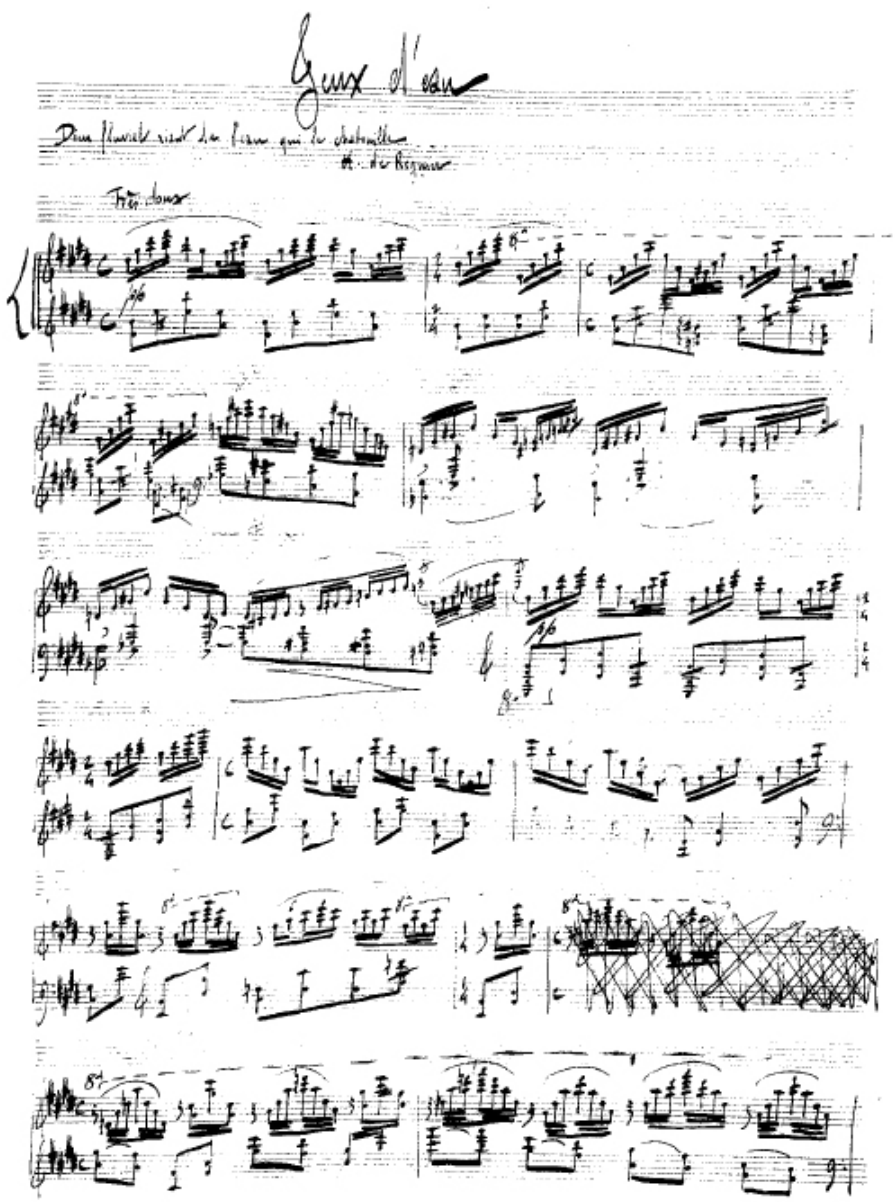
EXAMPLE 6: A sketch for the first movement of the Sonatine

Ravel observed that Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, which he called absolutely perfect, contained an outstanding example of the art of masking a classical structure. Pointing to the conclusion of the cadenza in the first movement, he noted how the violin's rapid arpeggios continued unabated, lulling the ear, as it were, and thereby masking the recapitulation. An analogous melodic masking occurs in the Sonatine, while in the Trio, the recapitulation in the first movement is merely intimated. Ravel attached great importance to such details, as every aspect of his craft was given his undivided attention.

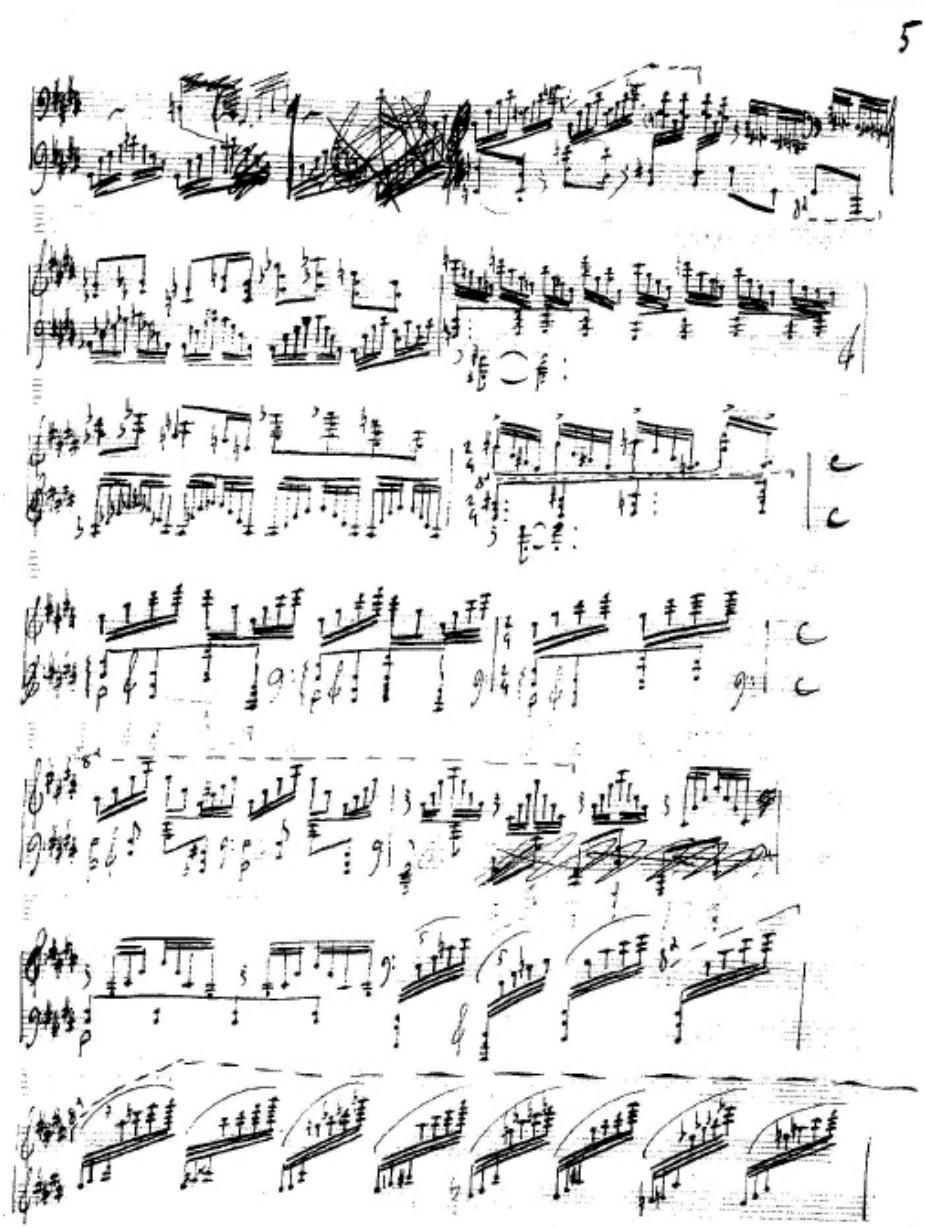
An important manuscript of *Jeux d'eau*, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale,[20] is notated in ink, with many corrections in pencil and a handful of sketches on several of the verso folios. The numerous modifications are most often refinements of texture and deletions of extraneous material. For example, a chord containing three notes in the manuscript (bar 1) is reduced to two notes in the printed score, and an awkwardly disposed chord in the left hand (bar 7) will be adjusted (see Example 7).

The four bars preceding the recapitulation and the recapitulation itself are of particular interest. The manuscript contains extraneous material and overly complex spelling, using numerous flats in a key signature of four sharps (braces 2 and 3). Furthermore, the bar in 2/4 is rhythmically static and

[20] Manuscript 15198. The manuscript contains seven pages of music and a cover page inscribed "à Jean-Aubry, cordialement, Maurice Ravel, 23/12/[19]14." Georges Jean-Aubry was a friend of the composer and a noted critic. Probably given to his colleague as a Christmas gift, the manuscript was purchased at a public auction by the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1966. The cover page also contains Ravel's epigraph for *Jeux d'eau* inscribed by its author, Henri de Régnier: "Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille" (A river god laughing at the water which titillates him). This verse is taken from the poem "Fête d'eau" in de Régnier's collection, *La Cité des eaux*. It evokes an image of joyful sensuousness, which is omnipresent in the music.



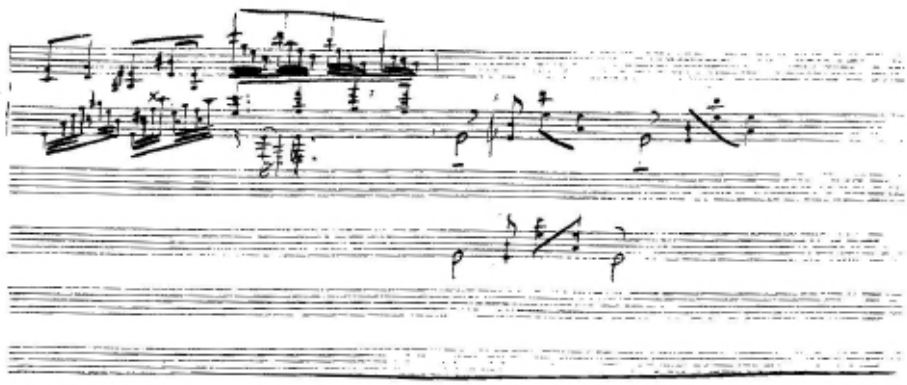
EXAMPLE 7: The manuscript of *Jeux d'eau*, p. 1



EXAMPLE 8: The manuscript of *Jeux d'eau*, p. 5

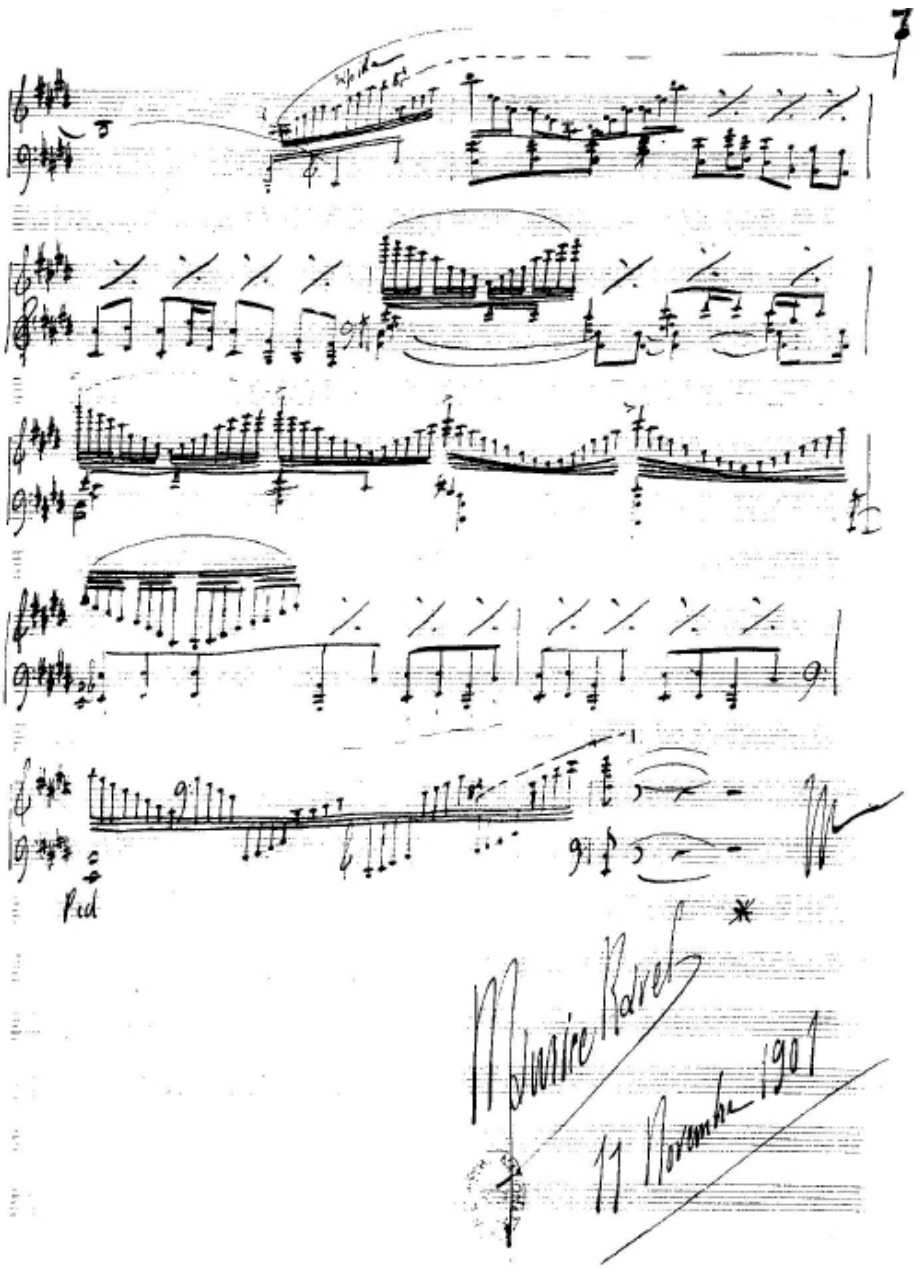
inaccurately notated, and the recapitulation (brace 4) contains many chords in the left hand which were later refined (see Example 8).

A sketch on the verso folio of page three contains several changes: improved spelling, considerable condensation of material, improved rhythmic continuity (in the 2/4 bar) and marked improvement in the disposition of the left hand (see Example 9).



EXAMPLE 9: *Jeux d'eau*, a sketch on the verso folio of page 3; the key signature is 4 sharps

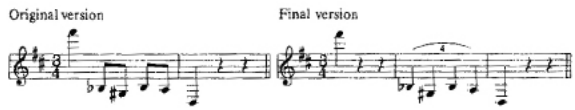
In the closing bars of *Jeux d'eau*, three staves are used to clarify the part writing, but the manuscript contains only two. This striving for clarity of notation is characteristic, and it should be emphasized that all of Ravel's numerous adjustments were improvements, however minute. Nuances of phrasing, tempo, and related matters were frequently added during rehearsals with interpreters, and it was probably Ricardo Viñes who suggested holding the damper pedal for the last four bars of the piece, rather than the last two, as in the manuscript. In the penultimate bar, we see four notes which were deleted from the final sweeping arpeggio (notes 9, 10, 11 and 12), resulting in greater



EXAMPLE 10: The manuscript of *Jeux d'eau*, p. 7

rhythmic propulsion toward the concluding chord of the major seventh[21] (see Example 10).

Before surrendering the autograph of *La Valse* for publication, Ravel asked Ernest Ansermet to conduct the work in private audition. Two modifications were apparently made at this time: chromatic scales for the double basses were altered to glissandi (at rehearsal number 5) and the final two bars of the piece were extended to three (see Example 11). Although the earlier versions of *La Valse* for solo piano and two pianos have the two bar ending, as do the orchestral autographs, Ravel now realized that the orchestral sonority, unlike the keyboard versions, sounded muddy. Moreover, the final orchestral version dramatically severs the rhythmic propulsion, thereby highlighting the frenzied conclusion of the piece.



EXAMPLE 11: Two different endings of *La Valse*

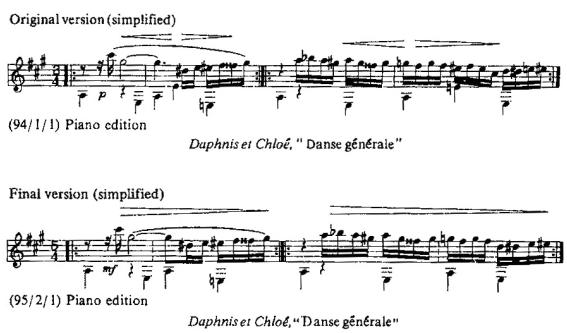
With regard to *Daphnis et Chloé,* several points may be made regarding the complete reworking and expansion of the "Danse générale."[22] Not only

---

[21] Several errors appeared in the first edition of *Jeux d'eau*, which was published by Demets in 1902. They have been corrected in subsequent editions of the piece. Rather surprisingly, Demets misspelled the title on the first page of the score *(Jeux d'eaux)*.

[22] See Jacques Chailley, "Une Première Version inconnue de 'Daphnis et Chloé' de Maurice Ravel," in *Mélanges Raymond Lebègue,* 371-75. Apparently a small number of uncorrected proofs were inadvertently sold, and the original version of *Daphnis et Chloé* was thus preserved. Copies of this rare piano score are found in the Music Division of the Bibliothèque Nationale and in the Library of Congress. The score, which has 102 pages (rather than 114), is analyzed in detail by Chailley. In the original version, one finds the names Darion and Lyceia rather than Dorcon and Lyceion, while Bryaxis is referred to as "the chief of the pirates." The "Danse générale" consists of nine pages (93-102), whereas in the final version

was this section ultimately doubled in length, but the concluding 5/4 meter originally appeared entirely in 3/4 or 9/8 (see Example 12). One may also observe the modifications in dynamics resulting from the change in meter. In the shorter original version, the theme of Daphnis and Chloé does not reappear, and the ballet concludes with the chorus participating only in the final six bars.[23] In sum, the reworking of the "Danse générale" constitutes a striking improvement in rhythmic subtlety and offers a peroration of considerably greater sweep and emotional tension.[24]



EXAMPLE 12: *Daphnis et Chloé*

A new urtext edition of *Ma Mère l'Oye* (published by Eulenburg in 2013) highlights many of the problems that arose when transferring Ravel's manuscripts to printed scores[25]. After the first page of a composition, he

---

it extends over twenty pages (94-114).

23 Printed in *Ravel: Man and Musician, op. cit.,* Plate 32.

24 In a letter to Jacques Durand dated 23 March 1922 Ravel corrected a number of errors in the Sonata for Violin and Cello and in the piano and orchestral scores of *Daphnis et Chloé*. He concluded his remarks about *Daphnis et Chloé* as follows: "One day, I must reexamine this unfortunate score from beginning to end." (The complete text of the letter is printed in *A Ravel Reader, op. cit.,* 217-18.) It should be pointed out that Ravel himself made all of the errors in his manuscripts.

25 In recent years Ernst Eulenburg Ltd has published new urtext editions of Ravel's orchestral

usually omitted the names of instruments as well as clefs and key signatures, and this led to a multitude of problems. Thus, in the manuscript, a bassoon passage of four bars in the opening "Pavane" was somehow completely overlooked,[26] and was first performed by the New York Philharmonic conducted by Alan Gilbert on 4 January 2012, some 100 years after Ravel's score was published by Durand! One can only sympathize with the anonymous individual[27] who wrote "quel instrument?" (which instrument?) in the manuscript of "Laideronnette". The instrument turns out to be the timpani (at rehearsal number 13), notated however without a clef and lacking the required sharps!

No discussion of Ravel's creativity would be complete without acknowledging the decisive importance of Edgar Allan Poe's essays. Poe's marked influence on modern French literature has often been observed, and, among others, Baudelaire and Mallarmé translated his works, which proved to be a revelation for Ravel. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, which he read in Baudelaire's translation, *La Genèse d'un poème*, Poe made the following observations:

> **" I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would—that is to say, who could—detail, step by step,**

works, edited by this writer. Each score contains a preface in English, French, and German, as well as textual notes based on the composition's manuscript, first edition, and other pertinent sources. Among the scores published thus far are *Ma Mère l'Oye, Tzigane, Boléro*, the Piano Concerto in G Major, and the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand.

[26] This page of the manuscript is reproduced in the Eulenburg edition (No. 8072). In the Durand score the bassoon part is printed on each of the three pages of the "Pavane," with full bar rests throughout. This would suggest that some music was intended for the bassoon.

[27] Probably Lucien Garban. See his important correspondence with Ravel in the *Cahiers Maurice Ravel*, No. 7 (2000), pp. 19-68, and No. 8 (2004), pp. 9-89. In No. 8, we may observe Ravel's important corrections of his proofs: *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (p. 64), *Boléro* (p. 77), and the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand (pp. 81-84).

> **the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. . . .Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought-- . . . .at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations. . . . It will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the modus operandi by which some one of my own works was put together. I select The Raven as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.** [28]

Ravel saw in this striking defense of objectivity a brilliant balance between the poet's intellect and his emotion, between his craftsmanship and his inspiration.[29] Like his author, Ravel was well aware of the unique and irreplaceable role of inspiration, but almost invariably found it more suitable to discuss technical matters with others, rather than his inner visions, which he felt to be his own private matter. A revealing exception is found in a letter to Roland-Manuel dated 7 October 1913 regarding the *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé:*

> **" When I received your last letter, I was finishing my 3 poems. Indeed, 'Placet futile' was completed, but I retouched it. I fully realize the great audacity of having attempted to interpret this sonnet in music. It was**

---

[28] Edward H. O'Neill, ed., *The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), Vol. II, 979.

[29] With regard to the vexing problem of inspiration, Ravel often quoted Baudelaire's aphorism found in *L'Art romantique:* "Inspiration is decidedly the sister of daily work." There was, of course, no simple solution to this question, as he observed in a letter to Jacques Durand written in June, 1918: "I went through some terrible moments, convinced that I was drained, and that neither inspiration nor even the desire to work would ever return. And then, a few days ago, it reappeared."

> **necessary that the melodic contour, the modulations, and the rhythms be as precious, as properly contoured as the sentiment and the images of the text.**
>
> **Nevertheless, it was necessary to maintain the elegant deportment of the poem. Above all, it was necessary to maintain the profound and exquisite tenderness which suffuses all of this.**
>
> **Now that it's done, I'm a bit nervous about it."** [30]

Ravel's concern to maintain the "profound and exquisite tenderness" of the sonnet is of considerable interest, particularly in view of the fact that he was often maligned as a cerebral contriver of effects—as was Stéphane Mallarmé.

Above all, it is in Poe's *Poetic Principle* that one finds the closest approximation of Ravel's artistic aims:

> **"*That* pleasure which is at once the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense, is derived, I maintain, from the contemplation of the Beautiful. In the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation or excitement of the soul, which we recognize as the Poetic Sentiment, and which is so easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the heart."**[31]

Ravel's art strove neither for passion nor for truth, but rather for the "contemplation of the Beautiful," through the satisfaction of the mind by means of the ear's pleasure. Thus, a final paradox was perfectly stated by Keats, who already knew that by creating his own beauty, Ravel would thereby create his own truth. In addition, with his striving for clarity, balance, and good taste, the composer of *Daphnis et Chloé* created an art which embodies the timeless values of the French nation.

---

[30] The full letter is printed in *A Ravel Reader*, *loc. cit*., 142-43.

[31] *The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe, op. cit.,* 1027.

****

Reflecting on Ravel's legacy at this point, some 140 years since his birth, it appears that his art is securely ensconced in the annals of twentieth-century music. In 1975, the centenary celebrations of his birth included many special concerts, recordings, and exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic. Highlights included a Ravel Festival presented by the New York City Ballet, and special expositions in New York (Lincoln Center Library), Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale), London (Royal Festival Hall), and Milan (La Scala). In his review of a centenary program presented at Queens College, Royal S. Brown wrote the following in *Musical America*: "Of the many activities planned to celebrate the Ravel centenary this year, none will top, in terms of sheer importance, the concert given February 23rd in the Colden Auditorium of the City University of New York's Queens College." This concert, recorded live by the Musical Heritage Society (MHS 3581), featured six world premieres of Ravel's music.[32] Writing in the *New York Post*, Robert Kimball concluded his critique as follows: "not one of the works premiered last night showed anything less than the assured hand of a master craftsman and a unique creator."

In 1985, a new scholarly journal was inaugurated, *Cahiers Maurice Ravel*. Building upon the firm foundation laid by Roland-Manuel and his contemporaries, it is gratifying to observe a new generation of authors who are writing in this journal and elsewhere, seeking further insight into Ravel's art. (Some representative works are listed in the bibliography.)

[32] The six compositions were the *Sérénade grotesque* (for piano, c. 1893), four songs (for voice and piano): *Ballade de la Reine morte d'aimer* (c. 1893, poem by Roland de Marès), *Chanson du rouet* (1898, poem by Leconte de Lisle), *Si morne!* (1898, poem by Émile Verhaeren), and *Chanson écossaise* (1910, poem by Robert Burns). A posthumous Sonata for Violin and Piano (1897) was also introduced. These compositions were edited by this writer and published by Salabert in 1975.

Is there a secret underlying Ravel's brilliant success as one of the most frequently performed composers in the history of French music? The secret—if indeed there is one—may perhaps be gleaned from a letter that Mozart wrote to his father on 28 December 1782 regarding his three recently completed piano concertos, K413, K414 and K415:

> **"These concertos steer a mid-course between being too hard and too easy, they're very brilliant, pleasing to the ear and natural, without seeming vapid; there are also passages here and there from which connoisseurs alone can derive any satisfaction—but they are written in such a way that non-connoisseurs, too, are bound to be pleased, even if they don't know why."** [33]

After much controversy and criticism during his lifetime, Ravel's works now appear to satisfy non-connoisseurs as well as connoisseurs. *La Valse*, for example, is one of his most widely recorded and frequently performed works, yet conductors and musicologists will need to ponder the composer's description of this choreographic poem as "a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, mingled with, in my mind, the impression of a fantastic and fatal whirling."[34] Indeed, at the present time, Ravel's oeuvre, like that of his beloved Mozart, appears to be deeply satisfying to scholars and to audiences around the world. An extraordinary comment made to Vaughan Williams in 1909 now appears to be valid: my music, Ravel observed, is "quite simple, nothing but Mozart."[35]

Reviewing the past, we may assert that Ravel's art has been well served

---

[33] Cf. Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart*, translated by Stewart Spencer, Edited by Cliff Eisen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 870.

[34] See Roland-Manuel, "An Autobiographical Sketch by Maurice Ravel," in *A Ravel Reader, op. cit.* 29-37. (The above quotation is on p. 32.)

[35] Cf. Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W., A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 79-80.

by his colleagues and a younger generation of scholars. At the present time, the *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* is continuing its important work, and Ravel's villa in Montfort l'Amaury, a national museum, receives visitors from around the world. From the balcony of Le Belvédère (The Beautiful View) one sees a sumptuous view of the flowing countryside of the Île-de-France. Ravel's Erard piano, his desk, his library and many other features of the well-preserved villa shed much light on the personality of the master of the house.

Looking to the future, an edition of Ravel's complete correspondence would be desirable, it being understood that unknown letters appear continually, and undoubtedly will continue to do so following the publication of such a volume. Above all, an edition of the complete works of Ravel based upon the manuscripts, first editions, and other pertinent sources should be undertaken, similar to the one presently being carried out for the music of Claude Debussy.

A perceptive impression of Ravel at the apex of his career is found in Olin Downes's review of the composer's recital in New York on 15 January 1928:

> **"Nothing could have been more typical of the precision, economy and refinement of this music than the slight, aristocratic, gray-haired and self-contained gentleman who bore himself with such simplicity on the platform; presenting his music with a characteristic reticence and modesty; well content, as it were, to give an accounting of what he had done, and to leave his listeners to their own conclusions. And, indeed, his achievement speaks for itself.**
>
> **Never to have composed in undue haste; never to have offered the public a piece of unfinished work; to have experienced life as an observant and keenly interested beholder, and to have fashioned certain of its elements into exquisite shapes of art that embody the essence of certain French traditions, is a goal worth the gaining. Mr. Ravel has pursued his way as an artist quietly and very well. He has disdained superficial**

or meretricious success. He has been his own most unsparing critic. The audience was appreciative of the opportunity to welcome the man and the composer." [36]

Ravel's physical presence is no longer with us, but his spirit will continue to live in the noble sonorities that he bequeathed to the world.

[36] See *The New York Times*, 16 January 1928, and cf. *A Ravel Reader, op. cit.,* 289-90.

Works Cited

Cahiers Maurice Ravel. No. 1,1985---No. 17, 2014-2015.

Calvocoressi, Michel D. Musicians Gallery: *Music and Ballet in Paris* and London. London: Faber & Faber, 1933.

Catalogue de l'œuvre de Maurice Ravel. Paris: Fondation Maurice Ravel, 1954.

Durand, Jacques. Quelques, *souvenirs d'un éditeur de musique.* Paris: Durand, 1924.

Gubisch, Nina. 'Le Journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes.' *Revue internationale de musique française* (June 1980), I (2): 154-248.

Howat, Roy. *The Art of French Piano Music.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Jourdan-Morhange, Hélène. *Ravel et nous.* Geneva: Éditions du Milieu du Monde, 1945.

Kaminsky, Peter, ed. *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music.* University of Rochester Press, 2011.

Lesure, François and Jean-Michel Nectoux. *Maurice Ravel,* 1875-1975. Paris: S.A.C.E.M., 1975. [A selection of contemporary writings and iconography honoring the centenary of Ravel's birth.]

----. *Maurice Ravel.* Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1975. [A catalogue of the Ravel exhibition (367 items) held at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1975.]

Long, Marguerite. *Au piano avec Maurice Ravel.* Paris: Julliard, 1971 (Eng. trans., 1973).

Marnat, Marcel. *Maurice Ravel.* Paris: Fayard, 1986, rev. 1995.

Nichols, Roger. *Ravel.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Orenstein, Arbie. *Ravel: Man and Musician.* New York, Columbia University Press, 1975. German translation: *Maurice Ravel: Leben und Werk*

(Stuttgart: Reclam, 1978.) Japanese translation (Tokyo: Ongaku-No Tomo-Sha, 2005). Rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991).

----. 'Maurice Ravel's Creative Process.' *Musical Quarterly* (October 1967), 53: 467-481.

----. 'Some Unpublished Music and Letters by Maurice Ravel.' *Music Forum* (1973), 3: 291-334.

----. *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, Écrits, Entretiens.* Paris: Flammarion, 1989. English translation, *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. Rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003.) Italian translation in two volumes: *Ravel: Scritti e interviste* (E.D.T., Edizioni di Torino, 1995); *Ravel: Lettere* (E.D.T., Edizioni di Torino, 1998).

Puri, Michael J. *Ravel the Decadent.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Perlemuter, Vlado, and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel.* Lausanne: Éditions du Cervin, 1957 (Eng. trans. *Ravel according to Ravel,* 1990).

Maurice Ravel. La Revue Musicale, April 1925 and December 1938 [2 special issues].

Roland-Manuel. *Maurice Ravel et son œuvre.* Paris: Durand, 1914.

----. *Ravel.* Paris: Gallimard, 1948.

----. 'Réflexions sur Ravel'. *La Grande Revue* (April 1938), 42: 40-44.

----. 'Lettres de Maurice Ravel et documents inédits.' *Revue de musicologie,* 38 (July 1956), 49-53.

Rorem, Ned. 'Historic Houses: Maurice Ravel at Le Belvédère.' *Architectural Digest* (September 1986), 43(9): 182-88 and 212.

Vaughan Williams, Ursula. R.V.W.: *A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Vuillermoz, Emile et al. *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers*. Paris: Éditions du Tambourinaire, 1939.

Zank, Stephen. *Maurice Ravel: A Guide to Research*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

----. *Irony and Sound*. University of Rochester Press, 2009.