9.14: Maurice Ravel

Like Debussy, Ravel is considered one of the leading composers of impressionist music, though, like Debussy, he disliked that label. Unlike Debussy, at least in my opinion, there are numerous pieces by Ravel that clearly do not follow impressionistic practice. However, his ballet Daphnis and Chloe is a clear example of impressionist style so we will disregard the artist's preference and study him as part of our consideration of the impressionist movement.

Introduction
Joseph-Maurice Ravel (7 March 1875–28 December 1937) was a French composer, pianist and conductor. He is often associated with impressionism along with his elder contemporary Claude Debussy, although both composers rejected the term. In the 1920s and '30s Ravel was internationally regarded as France’s greatest living composer.

Born to a music-loving family, Ravel attended France’s premier music college, the Paris Conservatoire; he was not well regarded by its conservative establishment, whose biased treatment of him caused a scandal. After leaving the conservatoire Ravel found his own way as a composer, developing a style of great clarity, incorporating elements of baroque, neoclassicism and, in his later works, jazz. He liked to experiment with musical form, as in his best-known work, *Boléro* (1928), in which repetition takes the place of development. He made some orchestral arrangements of other composers’ music, of which his 1922 version of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* is the best known.

As a slow and painstaking worker, Ravel composed fewer pieces than many of his contemporaries. Among his works to enter the repertoire are pieces for piano, chamber music, two piano concertos, ballet music, two operas, and eight song cycles; he wrote no symphonies or religious works. Many of his works exist in two versions: a first, piano score and a later orchestration. Some of his piano music, such as *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), is exceptionally difficult to play, and his complex orchestral works such as *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912) require skilful balance in performance.

Ravel was among the first composers to recognise the potential of recording to bring their music to a wider public. From the 1920s, despite limited technique as a pianist or conductor, he took part in recordings of several of his works; others were made under his supervision.

**Ravel and Debussy**

Around 1900 Ravel and a number of innovative young artists, poets, critics, and musicians joined together in an informal group; they came to be known as Les Apaches (“The Hooligans”), a name coined by Viñes to represent their status as “artistic outcasts.” They met regularly until the beginning of the First World War, and members stimulated one other with intellectual argument and performances of their works. The membership of the group was fluid, and at various times included Igor Stravinsky and Manuel de Falla as well as their French friends.

Among the enthusiasms of the Apaches was the music of Debussy. Ravel, twelve years his junior, had known Debussy slightly since the 1890s, and their friendship, though never close, continued for more than ten years. In 1902 André Messager conducted the premiere of Debussy’s opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique. It divided musical opinion. Dubois unavailingly forbade Conservatoire students to attend, and the conductor’s friend and former teacher Camille Saint-Saëns was prominent among those who detested the piece. The Apaches were loud in their support. The first run of the opera consisted of fourteen performances: Ravel attended all of them.

Debussy was widely held to be an impressionist composer—a label he intensely disliked. Many music lovers began to apply the same term to Ravel, and the works of the two composers were frequently taken as part of a single genre. Ravel thought that Debussy was indeed an impressionist but that he himself was not. Orenstein comments that Debussy was more spontaneous and casual in his composing while Ravel was more attentive to form and craftsmanship. Ravel wrote that Debussy’s “genius was obviously one of great individuality, creating its own laws, constantly in evolution, expressing itself freely, yet always faithful to French tradition. For Debussy, the musician and the...
man, I have had profound admiration, but by nature I am different from Debussy . . . I think I have always personally followed a direction opposed to that of [his] symbolism.” During the first years of the new century Ravel’s new works included the piano piece Jeux d’eau (1901), the String Quartet and the orchestral song cycle Shéhérazade (both 1903). Commentators have noted some Debussian touches in some parts of these works. Nichols calls the quartet “at once homage to and exorcism of Debussy’s influence.”

The two composers ceased to be on friendly terms in the middle of the 1900s, for musical and possibly personal reasons. Their admirers began to form factions, with adherents of one composer denigrating the other. Disputes arose about the chronology of the composers’ works and who influenced whom. Prominent in the anti-Ravel camp was Lalo, who wrote, “Where M. Debussy is all sensitivity, M. Ravel is all insensitivity, borrowing without hesitation not only technique but the sensitivity of other people.” The public tension led to personal estrangement. Ravel said, “It’s probably better for us, after all, to be on frigid terms for illogical reasons.” Nichols suggests an additional reason for the rift. In 1904 Debussy left his wife and went to live with the singer Emma Bardac. Ravel, together with his close friend and confidante Misia Edwards and the opera star Lucienne Bréval, contributed to a modest regular income for the deserted Lilly Debussy, a fact that Nichols suggests may have rankled with her husband.

Daphnis et Chloé

Daphnis et Chloé was commissioned in or about 1909 by the impresario Sergei Diaghilev for his company, the Ballets Russes. Ravel began work with Diaghilev’s choreographer, Michel Fokine, and designer, Léon Bakst. Fokine had a reputation for his modern approach to dance, with individual numbers replaced by continuous music. This appealed to Ravel, and after discussing the action in great detail with Fokine, Ravel began composing the music. There were frequent disagreements between the collaborators, and the premiere was under-rehearsed because of the late completion of the work. It had an unenthusiastic reception and was quickly withdrawn, although it was revived successfully a year later in Monte Carlo and London. The effort to complete the ballet took its toll on Ravel’s health; neurasthenia obliged him to rest for several months after the premiere.

Ravel composed little during 1913. He collaborated with Stravinsky on a performing version of Mussorgsky’s unfinished opera Khovanshchina, and his own works were the Trois poèmes de Mallarmé for soprano and chamber ensemble, and two short piano pieces, À la manière de Borodine and À la manière de Chabrier. In 1913, together with Debussy, Ravel was among the musicians present at the dress rehearsal of The Rite of Spring. Stravinsky later said that Ravel was the only person who immediately understood the music. Ravel predicted that the premiere of the Rite would be seen as an event of historic importance equal to that of Pelléas et Mélisande.

Music

Marcel Marnat’s catalogue of Ravel’s complete works lists eighty-five works, including many incomplete or abandoned. Though that total is small in comparison with the output of his major contemporaries, it is nevertheless inflated by Ravel’s frequent practice of writing works for piano and later rewriting them as independent pieces for orchestra. The performable body of works numbers about sixty; slightly more than half are instrumental. Ravel’s music includes pieces for piano, chamber music, two piano concerti, ballet music, opera, and song cycles. He wrote no symphonies or religious works.
Ravel drew on many generations of French composers from Couperin and Rameau to Fauré and the more recent innovations of Satie and Debussy. Foreign influences include Mozart, Schubert, Liszt and Chopin. He considered himself in many ways a classicist, often using traditional structures and forms, such as the ternary, to present his new melodic and rhythmic content and innovative harmonies. The influence of jazz on his later music is heard within conventional classical structures in the Piano Concerto and the Violin Sonata.

Whatever sauce you put around the melody is a matter of taste. What is important is the melodic line.

—Ravel to Vaughan Williams

Ravel placed high importance on melody, telling Vaughan Williams that there is "an implied melodic outline in all vital music." His themes are frequently modal instead of using the familiar major or minor scales. As a result, there are few leading notes in his output. Chords of the ninth and eleventh and unresolved appoggiaturas, such as those in the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, are characteristic of Ravel’s harmonic language.

Dance forms appealed to Ravel, most famously the bolero and pavane, but also the minuet, forlane, rigaudon, waltz, czardas, habanera and passacaglia. National and regional consciousness was important to him, and although a planned concerto on Basque themes never materialised, his works include allusions to Hebraic, Greek, Hungarian and gypsy themes. He wrote several short pieces paying tribute to composers he admired—Borodin, Chabrier, Fauré and Haydn, interpreting their characteristics in a Ravellian style. Another important influence was literary rather than musical: Ravel said that he learnt from Poe that “true art is a perfect balance between pure intellect and emotion,” with the corollary that a piece of music should be a perfectly balanced entity with no irrelevant material allowed to intrude.

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