LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN

by

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I hereby recommend that this document prepared under my direction by Ralph Nichols entitled Le Tombeau de Couperin be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

While serving as a truck driver in the French Air Force during World War I, Maurice Ravel commented in a letter that he intended to write a "Suite francaise" for piano: "...no, it's not what you think — the Marseillaise doesn't come into it at all, but there'll be a forlane and a jig; not a tango, though...."¹ It was to be a tribute not only to Couperin but to eighteenth century French music in general. He prepared for the task by transcribing a forlane from Couperin's group of chamber works entitled *Concerts royaux*.

Ravel had always evidenced an interest in the eighteenth century. Musically this took the form of pastiche in his own work, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* being a prime example, and an interest in dance forms.

"The dance," wrote M. Andrés Sarés, "influences all Ravel's music, just as it does that of the Spaniards and the clavecinists...Minuets, pavanes, passacaglias, the forlane, the rigaudon, every variety of waltz, czarda, habanera, boléro, fox-trot and 'blues': Ravel delighted

to borrow their steps and multiply them in his work, but he never forgot the symphony, the sonata, and the various forms of chamber music were the perverted daughters of the suite, which, to use the significant word of the old clavecinists, is itself an 'Order' of dances."\(^2\)

In creating his orchestral masterpiece, *Daphnis et Chloe*, he had stated that his intention was to create a vast musical fresco less faithful to ancient Greece than to his vision of it as depicted by French artists of the late eighteenth century. In his attitude toward other composers Ravel also showed his classical leanings. He had serious reservations about many composers of the nineteenth century, specifically Beethoven, Berlioz, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Franck and d'Indy whose expansive architecture and metaphysical aspirations were antithetical to Ravel's artistic priorities. Bach's monumentality was realized, but Mozart was revered above all composers, much as Chopin had revered him. Chopin and Ravel shared other similarities, as well.

"If the thread from Beethoven through d'Indy was problematic, the line from Mozart through Schubert, Mendelssohn, Bizet, Massenet, Gounod, Chabrier, Saint-Saëns, Satie and Faure' was closer to Ravel's aesthetic orientation."\(^3\)


He employed a light, brilliant, classical idiom for the Piano Concerto in G. And perhaps the most remarkable thing about the work is the extreme simplicity of the slow movement: a long-drawn but simple melody over a gently rocking bass — Mozartean in its simplicity. When Marguerite Long, for whom the concerto was written, praised the free development of the melody, Ravel replied that he had written it "two bars at a time, with frequent recourse to Mozart's Clarinet Quintet." Perhaps only Stravinsky, among major composers of the twentieth century, exerted so much energy in evoking the past in modern garb.

The coexistent romantic nature of Ravel's music is, of course, obvious. This emphasis on the classical element in his style is simply to underline the appropriateness of his selection of Couperin as a recipient of a musical hommage. Debussy's "Hommage a Rameau," from Book I of Images, while a nod in the direction of paying a tribute to one of the great French composers of the early Baroque, certainly is not of the scope of Le Tombeau, nor of the classical texture and essence of it. As a general statement in regard to his art, perhaps Ravel's music could be considered an efficacious blend of that great expressive polarity in all art, romanticism and classicism.

4Roland-Manuel, op. cit., p. 102.
Many of the qualities of Ravel's music embody, quite naturally, the French tradition in music: This tradition was transmitted directly to him through his teacher Faure, whose teacher was Saint-Saëns:

The specifically French tradition is something essentially Classical: it rests on a conception of music as sonorous form, in contrast to the Romantic conception of music as expression. Order and restraint are fundamental. Emotion and depiction are conveyed only as they have been entirely transmuted into music. That music may be anything from the simplest melody to the most subtle pattern of tones, rhythms, and colors; but it tends always to be lyric or dancelike rather than epic or dramatic, economical rather than profuse, simple rather than complex, reserved rather than grandiloquent; above all, it is not concerned with delivering a message, whether about the fate of the cosmos or the state of the composer's soul. A listener will fail to comprehend such music unless he is sensible to quiet statement, nuance, and exquisite detail, able to distinguish calmness from dullness, wit from jollity, gravity from portentousness, lucidity from emptiness. This kind of music was written by two French composers as remote in time and temperament as Couperin and Gounod. Berlioz did not write such music; and Berlioz was not a success in France.5

A discussion of Ravel's style or analysis of one of his works, is perhaps illuminated by a comparison with Debussy's style. As the two great proponents of musical impressionism, comparisons are inevitable and

can be instructive. It is a mistake to think of Ravel as merely Debussy's follower. It is true that Debussy was the originator: *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was published in 1894 and the *Nocturnes* in 1899. Two piano suites, the *Suite bergamasque* and *Pour le piano* were published in 1893 and 1901, respectively, but were not really full-fledged impressionistic piano pieces yet. However, Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* was published in 1901 and is about as impressionistic a piano pieces as one is likely to find. True, he had learned from Debussy, but in this instance Ravel was the originator. It is also a mistake to think of Ravel as a pale imitation of Debussy; they were quite dissimilar composers. Despite certain similarities they can be represented as opposite poles of the same phenomenon — Impressionism. By its very nature Impressionism is Romantic, but in their roles as polar opposites Debussy is Romantic — Romantic and Ravel is Classical — Romantic. And as a general proposition, both men hit upon the same idea at the same time, an idea whose time had come.

Debussy must be considered the progenitor of the harmonic innovations inherent in impressionism. This included the use of seventh and ninth chords, often in non-functional arrangements, and whole-tone, pentatonic and altered scales. Ravel presaged both Debussy and Stravinsky, though, in some harmonic innovations — most notably the simultaneous sounding of C major and F# major
triads in "Jeux d'eau." This was one of Stravinsky's more audacious tricks, later, in Petrushka. Ravel came closer to outright atonality than Debussy, particularly in his song cycle Chansons madécasses, but always with all due respect paid to tonality. They both derived from Lisztian impressionism, orchestrated after the manner of Berlioz instead of Beethoven or Wagner, and looked back for renewed clarity to Couperin and Rameau.

Generally, it could be said that Ravel's melody is purer and more direct than Debussy's, the latter's often being elliptical, indirect and more motivic in nature. Ravel had told Vaughan-Williams that in his opinion there was an implied melodic outline in all vital music. Roland-Manuel has described Ravel's lyricism 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." 6

Ravel must be considered a classicist in regard to form: romantic content within classical form. Despite his great admiration for Debussy it was his opinion that Debussy had shown a negligence of form. Both men, however, shared the French preference for sensuous sound. Ravel made the revealing comment to Cocteau that he didn't understand music "which was not

6 Orenstein, op. cit., p. 131.
bathed in any sonorous fluid." This was similar to Debussy's observation that one must blend the tone.

Characteristic of Ravelian melody is its mixture of tonality and modality. Frequent use was made of the Dorian mode, and in his Spanish music, the Phrygian mode, typical of Spanish music. Roland-Manuel believed that Ravel's use of the modes was quite unconscious. Another trait of his melody is the falling interval of a fourth. Early on he had eschewed over-use of the whole-tone scale, commenting that he had used it so much in his overture "Schéhérazade" he swore off it for life.

Ravel's harmonic originality is unquestioned, but avant-garde extremism, in this regard, was not his inclination:

In discussing with Stravinsky, around the time of Le Sacre, the possible arrangements of the major/minor chord Ravel gave as his opinion that '...such a chord is perfectly feasible, provided the minor third is placed above and the major third below.' 'If this arrangement is possible,' commented Stravinsky, 'I don't see why the contrary shouldn't be possible too: and if I want it, I can write it.' Ravel's instinct was to defend the natural order of harmonics against the onslaught of the enfant terrible. A debatable point, but one that has been pointed out, is that Debussy's harmony is distinguished by chords of the major ninth, and Ravel's be secondary ninths.8

7 Orenstein, op. cit., p. 129.

Ravel had begun the composing of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* during his tour of duty for the Air Force in World War I. In 1917 he was temporarily discharged from military duty and in June was a guest at the home of Monsieur and Madame Ferdnand Dreyfus at Lyons-la-Fôret, northwest of Paris. He completed *Le Tombeau* there. It was first performed April 11, 1919, by Marguerite Long and was encored. Critical review was very favorable. An orchestral transcription was completed in June. Later, the Swedish Ballet produced a stage version. So successful was this work that Ravel himself conducted the hundredth performance on June 15, 1921. But *Le Tombeau de Couperin* was to be the last large work for piano solo that he would write. Interestingly, he drew the funerary urn that appears on the cover.
CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS OF LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN

Before beginning the composition of Le Tombeau, Ravel must surely have given serious thought to Couperin's style and to his place in music history. There was a direct lineage from the French lutenists of the late seventeenth century to the French clavecinists. Couperin, as others, carried over the lute style into his harpsichord pieces, a style that was characterized by free-voiced texture, intricate ornaments, the broken style brise, and fanciful titles. Couperin's overall style was a felicitous blend of the then current trends in French and Italian music, as represented by Lully and Corelli. His Italianisms are evident everywhere, as revealed by symmetrical periods and the recall of themes or patterns at regular intervals through the use of imitation and sequences.

Ornaments, or the agrements, were as integral to the nature of Couperin's harpsichord style — as, indeed, they were to the other clavecinists — as were harmony and rhythm. One has only to play one of his pieces without the ornaments to realize their expressive purpose. They are not merely ornamental. He presented a table at
the end of Volume I of *Pièces de Clavecin*; there are 23 examples in this, and in the third book he introduced a new sign, the "virgule," to indicate the separation of different parts of the phrase. That sign has remained in musical notation. There has always existed a tendency to think of the use of these ornaments as merely a device to overcome the inability of the lute and harpsichord to sustain tone:

It is necessary to correct an erroneous opinion in regard to *agrement*. One imagines, in seeing the abundance of ornaments in music for lute or harpsichord, that their employment is necessary because of the inability of these instruments to sustain tones. However, it is in the song that they've used the most and those that are used in instrumental pieces are in large part an imitation of the vocal. In reality the ornaments are essentially the ornaments of the song.9

*Le Tombeau* represents the thinner texture of Ravel's style of the postwar years. Quite naturally the suite is classical in style, emulating as it does the clavecinists of the eighteenth century. Perhaps Ravel actually caught the spirit of the sort of work they might have written, given the piano and the harmonic resources of the twentieth century. Not only was Ravel's philosophical intent general in creating this work, but also his musical intent: there is no slavish recreation

of the tombeau form as it existed in the early Baroque. Nor is there an attempt to use many of the agréments. Only the mordent (pincé-simple), the trill (pincé continu) and the appoggiatura are used. In the early Baroque the suite could take almost any combination of dances. Later, the French order of the suite became the predominate one: prelude, allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue. Other dances were optionally sandwiched in between these basic ones. Certainly, Ravel made no attempt at following the order of the suite as it finally evolved, and the inclusion of a fugue was wholly anachronistic in relation to the early Baroque, the fugue not taking final form until the late Baroque.

The tombeau was the creation of the renowned seventeenth century French lutenist, Denis Gaultier. It was "...a gentle miniature composed in memory of noble persons, relatives, or friends."\textsuperscript{10} The dance dominated French music to such an extent that the tombeau, despite its grave character, was based on the pattern of the allemande, a stately but rather quick dance.

The prelude was one of the first idiomatic forms for keyboard and lute, being essentially rhapsodic and improvisatory in nature. This prelude is a perpetual motion piece, triplets in sixteenth notes rippling along.

![Figure 1. Prelude, measures 1-3.](image)

It falls into an overall A B form, the B section a sort of development section consisting mainly of parading the motive through various tonalities. The basic key is E minor with excursions into the mixolydian and lydian modes. Characteristic seventh and ninth chords are present. The mood is subdued and refined. A final arpeggio sweeps up the keyboard, utilizing every note of the six note motive (e,g,a,b, and d).
The fugue originated from two contrapuntal instrumental forms of the early Baroque, the ricercar and the canzona, which in turn had originated from two Renaissance vocal contrapuntal forms, the motet and the French chanson. In the late Baroque the ricercar and the canzona finally merged into what we call the fugue today.

The fugue is generally considered the weak member of the set. It is an unfair assumption. There is an archaic charm, a pensive nostalgia to it. Narrow in range, it is a three-part fugue making use of all stretto and inversion devices (measures 39-43 and measures 54-57). The subject is derived from the prelude motive, the first two notes being the same.

![Allegro moderato](image)

Figure 2. Fugue, measures 1-4.

The basis of this fugue is rhythmic, not melodic or harmonic: a persistent accented two-note figure and a descending triplet. More characteristic of the Renaissance than the Baroque period is the final open fifth.

The forlane, or forlana, was a dance that
originated in northern Italy. In Baroque music it had evolved into a lively dance in triple meter with dotted rhythms, similar to the gigue. It appeared often in the ballets of Campra, L'Europe galante (1697), for instance.

The forlane is harmonically the boldest of the set. "The charming little opening theme almost hurts by its sharpness."11

Figure 3. Forlane, measures 1-4.

This sharpness is caused, in part, by the clash of melody notes a half-step away (by interval, not range) from notes in the augmented chords in the bass. An indescribably piquant effect is achieved in the coda by the juxtaposition of a seventh chord in the right hand built on minor and augmented triads, and one in the left hand built on major and diminished triads — thus assuring the clash of minor ninth and major seventh intervals.

Figure 4. Forlane, measures 138-141 (measures 140-141)

But harmonic analyses cannot convey the quintessential Ravelian bittersweet quality that pervades this little masterpiece. Because of that, a tempo somewhat slower than is usual for the forlane could be taken.

The rigaudon, or rigadoon, was a Provencal dance of the seventeenth century, appearing in the operatic ballets of Campra and Rameau. It became one of the optional pieces of the late Baroque suite and had been one of the new dance types that grew up in the French court of Versailles under the beneficent auspices of Louis XIII. The meter is a bold and forthright two.

The rigaudon is the most popular piece of the group. Its bouncy diatonicism is immediately approachable. The crossing of the hands at the beginning is reminiscent of the clavecinists style.

Figure 5. Rigaudon, measures 1-5 (measures 3-5)
Characteristic Ravelian parallelism of common chords occurs.

Figure 6. Rigaudon, measures 11-15
The middle section, or musette, takes its saucy, but wistful, tune through a variety of keys. The whole section breathes a charm that can only be labeled French. A literal repeat of the A section — save for putting the dominant in minor — brings the proceedings to an emphatic close.

The menuet was introduced at the court of Louis XIV about 1650 and was soon adopted as the official court dance. Its popularity spread all over Europe. Originally a graceful dance in 3/4 meter, it took on a livelier character in the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, destined to evolve into the Beethoven scherzo.

The menuet of this suite brings to a culmination Ravel's menuets for piano — the three earlier examples being "Menuet antique," "Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn" and the menuet from the "Sonatine." The harmony has been pared down to the simplest diatonicism; the proportions are perfect. The middle section is similar to the musette of the rigaudon in its contrasting minor mode. The common chord parallelism, against a gently rocking bass, creates an archaic atmosphere.

![Musette](image)

Figure 7. Menuet, measures 33-40
The return of the theme of the A section is combined with the theme of the B section in the left hand and in the major mode — a deft touch.

![Musical notation]

**Figure 8. Menuet, measures 73-78**

A sudden modulation to E flat minor lends variety to the presentation of the same material that had appeared in B minor in the A section. The rocking bass that had only been suggested in the middle section, is given full sway in the coda. Harp-like arpeggios in the left hand waft the theme up to the high treble on a bed of A minor sevenths. The descent is made on the tonic. The final resolution is reserved for the dominant minor ninth — a hallmark chord of Ravel's — and we are left in a state of suspension on the fluttering tonic major ninth.

The toccata, or "touch" piece, was a keyboard form stemming from the late Renaissance. Originally toccatas were not particularly virtuosic, being rather stately and grandiose. Always of a freer character than other forms, in the Baroque it became more rhapsodic, characterized by sections with sustained chords, rambling scale passages, and broken figuration over powerful pedal points which
abruptly alternated with fugal sections. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the toccata largely became an arena for virtuosity, its contrapuntal aspect largely dropped, often of a "perpetuum mobile" type, of which the Ravel is an example.

The toccata despite its virtuosity, is clearly melodically based. This is in keeping with Ravel's dictum that all significant music, however complex, is melodically based. About the work, Ravel comments "C'est du Saint-Saëns."12 It is in sonata form, a sustained melody in Eb minor taking the place of a development section. This theme is frequently juxtaposed with the opening theme.

![Figure 9. Toccata, measures 6-10](image)

At the climax the actual second theme is trumpeted forth first, followed by the same treatment of the first theme, in Bb major, functioning as a tritone cadence to E major—the tritone cadence being a frequent device of twentieth century composers. Ravel has called forth the full

12 Nichols, op. cit., p. 102.
richness of his harmony here. The texture is percussive, but not the brutal percussiveness of the Prokofieff Toccata and other twentieth century toccatas; this is French lyricism. Repeated notes and close interlocking work between the hands, typical of Ravel, are the chief technical difficulties. Also, balancing forces, not spending oneself too soon before the final denoument, is necessary. The manner in which Ravel delays the final resolution is instructive. The dominant is pounded out on the next to last page but at the cadence full resolution is avoided by the incursion of secondary dominant implications into the tonic chord. The key of A (dominant of E), however, is not the destination. We arrive at Bb major, the furthest tonality from E, so that when the tonic is reached this time, there's nothing more to do than to state it unadorned, which is what Ravel does for six measures. As a stubborn final flourish, though, the augmented tonic breaks through and then is laid to rest.
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