MAURICE RAVEL: 1875-1937

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FRANCE has cause to mourn the passing of her beloved Maurice Ravel, and the whole world may well pause in tribute to this remarkable genius of twentieth-century music.

How appropriate, in the light of his subsequent contribution, that Ravel should first attract attention, scandalizing the *Conservatoire,* by taking the stupid cantata text at the *Prix de Rome* competition and setting it as a series of waltzes! And how appropriate that in the same year (1901), he should produce the extraordinary *Jeux d'eau* which struck a new and high level in piano writing. It was Ravel's destiny to astonish and delight the musical world, by his wit and humor no less than by his remarkable dexterity in the manipulation of novel sonorities. "Amusing and yet artistically upright" is Paul Rosenfeld's apt characterization of Ravel.

It is difficult to make generalizations concerning this complex musical personality. But clues to an appreciation of Ravel lie in his sophistication and mastery, his affiliation with the France of Claude le Jeune or Rameau, and his deeply rooted devotion to the dance. *"La danse est pour moi presqu'aussi douce qu'un baiser"* says Evariste Parny in the *Chansons madécasses,* which Ravel set so effectively for voice, flute, violoncello and piano.

One is misguided in searching for a great "spiritual message" in this music; those who seek the grandiose, the eloquent and the profound are disappointed. It was not a primary aim of Ravel to record subjective emotion. Music is to be enjoyed and the skill of the composer must serve this end. If Ravel's skill supersedes his expressiveness in the later works, there remains the enjoyment of virtuosity for itself. The incredible *Boléro* must be regarded from this point of view. In identifying himself with the traditions of French classicism Ravel did not neglect the less

sober elements; so complete was his virtuosity that the greater the formal restrictions, the more unbridled his freedom and the more Dionysian its manifestation. Nor did the classic qualities of his style destroy its strongly personal flavor. Each page bears the unmistakable signature, whether from the *String Quartet* or from exotica such as *Laideronnette,* the Greek or the Hebrew songs.

With sharp tools Maurice Ravel carved his niche in that particular *salon d'immortalité* which is frequented by those who admire conciseness, taste, sureness of style and the charm of sonority elaborated for its own sake. Ravel's glitter, his mannerisms and "innovations" are now the common property of his imitators but those superficial attractions, in becoming commonplaces, have laid bare the more enduring qualities of craftsmanship and refinement of spirit and taste. Although *Daphnis et Chloé* has ceased to amaze, its secure position in the affection of audiences is a tribute to its imperishable value as a work of art.

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Ravel enjoyed the claim that he was the artistic descendant of Couperin. The relationship embraces more than the gracious and touching compliment paid to his "ancestor" in *Le Tombeau de Couperin.* Like the harpsichord player to Louis XIV, Ravel displayed a consuming interest in the dance—a charming weakness for "the ever new and delightful pleasures of useless occupation." Indeed, the bulk of Ravel's work concerns the dance; a list of his compositions would represent a veritable anthology of choreographic forms—one might add, an historical review of that art. The *Menuet antique,* significantly enough, was one of the earliest works of Ravel. Between that modest composition for piano and *Boléro,* which exploits the resources of an augmented orchestra, Ravel occupied himself with the pavane, forlane, tambourin, gigue, rigaudon, ronde, habañera, malagueña, waltz, tango, and fox-trot! The songs, piano works, chamber music, orchestral works, operas—all abound in dances. Two works were conceived expressly as ballets (*Daphnis; Boléro*) and several others were adapted as such (*Ma Mère l'oye; Adélaïde ou le langage des fleurs* taken from *Valses nobles et sentimentales;* and *La Valse*).

For Ravel, the dance was not motion so much as mood. The sparkling first and last movements of the *Sonatine* are separated by a *Menuet.* In its delicacy and grace it is not a "slow movement" so much as an evocation of a tender and beautiful image of the past. How reverent Ravel's remembrance of things past, and how mordant his comment on the new! Opposed to the solemn moods of the pavanes (*Pour une infante défunte; La Belle au bois dormant*) is *La Valse,* an apotheosis, a commentary on the waltz in general. It is a commentary, however, couched in such bitter-sweet language that one hovers between submitting to its powerful rhythms and turning away from its caustic irony. The commentaries on jazz are witty and no less ironical: the Blues of the *Violin Sonata,* or the "popular tunes" of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* combined, as they are, in none-too-discreet polytonality. Ravel displayed a certain malice in selecting the text for his *Chansons madécasses.* In 1926, mildly amused at the suddenness of the vogue for Negro art, he produced Evariste Parny (adaptator of Madagascan poetry) as evidence that Negro lore was appreciated as early as the eighteenth century! No matter whether the mood were old or new, tender or satirical, Ravel's style evinced a skill and masterful sureness that it is vain to challenge.

Nowhere is this mastery shown to greater advantage than in his scoring. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent Ravel was inspired by the scoring of Berlioz, Rimsky-Korsakov, or Debussy. It is certain, however, that their orchestral virtuosity, imagination, and subtlety have been equalled, if not surpassed, by Ravel. The influence of *Daphnis et Chloé* on the score of other composers demonstrates the powerful appeal of a gorgeous and extravagant masterpiece. The orchestral version of *Ma Mère l'oye* represents equally fine orchestration although here a maximum effect is produced with the utmost economy of resources.

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Like so many of his contemporaries, Ravel found inspiration in the exotic, especially in the colors and rhythms of Spain. The *Habañera* of Ravel's youth presaged the appearance of *Alborada del gracioso* (*Miroirs*), *Rhapsodie espagnole,* and *L'Heure espagnole.* The *Rhapsodie* seems to have found a permanent place

in symphonic repertory; the orchestrated version of the radiant *Alborada del gracioso* has increased the number of its admirers; but *L'Heure espagnole* remains, outside of France, a neglected masterpiece. It has been charged that this provocative *opéra bouffe* is too essentially French. Obviously it does not represent the idealized, romantic Spain of legend and convention. Can it be that its coarse humor offends? There are scenes in Mozart that are equally sophisticated. Reflected in *L'Heure espagnole* is the earthy humor of Sancho Panza or the *fabulas,* combined with a charm which is comparable only to Mozart.

It seems probable that Ravel, in his struggle for perfection, felt limited in the range of his expression, or perhaps he felt obliged to fight against manifesting vulgarity. There is evidence, in his music that the vulgar fascinated him, although his genius permitted him to cloak its expression with elegant raiment. What might have been banal "effects" in the hands of less gifted composers were transformed, by his efforts, into fresh and sensitive textures. On the other hand, there are many instances of passages snatched from the brink of sentimentality by a sharp, conscious use of mockery. In the *Piano Concerto,* for example, before the second theme has half disclosed its sweetness, it is interrupted by bitter, scoffing chords—suggesting a man whose sense of delicacy forbids an open declaration of sentiment, with the result that his speech is sprinkled with profanity. In any case, the "attainment of the impossible" proved a lengthy, as well as conscientious, task. Questioned concerning his progress on this long-awaited concerto, Ravel is reported to have said, "It's all finished save putting down the notes!" The composer's lecture at the Rice Institute, in 1928, bears out the significance of the anecdote: "In my own work of composition I find a long period of conscious gestation, in general, necessary. . . . 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."

Light and color never ceased to attract Ravel. If he seemed to turn away from the impressionistic style of his earlier works, he

nevertheless continued to use a rich and luminous palette. It was used, however, to enhance an ever-quickening sensibility toward the precise, the clearly-etched, the epigrammatic, the symmetrical—attributes which Ravel admired in the works of his classic predecessors. The familiar major seventh chords, the modal harmonies, the progressions in parallel, characterize Ravel's style no less than that of Debussy. What distinguishes Ravel's music—even more than his rich harmonic vocabulary, his rhythmic intricacies (displayed to such advantage in the *Trio*), or his precise forms—is his great gift of melody. Varied and fresh, the ever-present lyricism persuades rather than intrudes; its nostalgic and aristocratic grace serve to recall that Ravel was the devoted pupil of Fauré. If this important element in Ravel's art has been reserved for final consideration, it is because the enchantment of the rhythms and the lustre of the timbres tend to obscure an appreciation of the fineness and purity of his melodic line. It is probably the least striking yet the most genuine aspect of his work.

To make only passing mention of *Gaspard de la nuit, Shéhérazade,* and the *Septet* (with harp), is not to imply their lack of worth. Throughout, Ravel's work maintains a consistent, high standard of excellence; not even the least of his compositions are lacking in artistry. Perhaps it was his misfortune to live in an age when musical fashions and ideals changed with perplexing rapidity. If, at times, his music submitted to certain vogues, his finest work is stamped with the mark of greatness. We are consoled in his passing by what he has left us. He was, in Gautier's phrase, the supreme *"gardien du contour pur."*