

MAURICE RAVEL, 1927

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THERE is a visual phenomenon familiar to those who have traveled in mountainous country where a soaring peak will appear, be hidden by the intervening forests and hills, only to emerge again through unexpected vistas, disappear and reappear in splendor long after the smaller hills are lost in distance. Similar to this runs the aesthetic history of Maurice Ravel, the tonal necromancer of Mortfort-l'Amaury. Once one of the radicals, he has been so frequently obscured by the passing fads of musical fashion that it comes somewhat as a surprise that one whom the hasty might consign to a previous decade, returns at intervals, regardless of mode and manner, contemporary in feeling and thoroughly himself in style.

Unlike Stravinsky's capricious course, Ravel's is an even and gradual evolution. It is only genius that enables the composer of the *Sacre* to adopt the dress of each new season and cut it into a pattern peculiarly his own. The dizzy plunge from the romanticism of the *Firebird* through the scintillating, mordant realism of *Petrouchka* and the primitive immensity of the *Sacre*, to the classic severity of the *Octuor* and the Handelian simplicity of *Oedipus*, would long since have wrecked the less endowed and even Stravinsky has won, from the superficial observer, a reputation for writing with his tongue in his cheek.

Ravel's development has been along a straighter line. His is hardly a career to be divided into the usual "periods" of youth, growth and maturity. His early compositions contained a remarkable degree of sophistication, while the work of maturer years retains much youthful freshness. There has been far less stylistic difference between the *Quartet in F*, the *Jeux d'Eau*, the *Shéhérazade* suite for voice and orchestra and *Daphnis et Chloé* or *La Valse* than between, for example, *Lohengrin* and the

Ring, the Debussy of the *Arabesques* and the Debussy of *Iberia* or *La Mer*. The evolution that has taken place has been of so subtle a nature as hardly to seem evolution, yet anyone even lightly tracing the path of his creation from the graceful *Sonatine*, the charmingly naive *Mother Goose* suite to the shimmering *Daphnis* and the brilliant *Tzigane*, is bound to observe an ever growing mastery of craft and an increasing surety and subtlety.

Against the even background of this growth there has shifted a constant procession of strange shadows, first the meteoric burst of Stravinsky the realist, and then the ironic simplicity of the literary Satie, the war and a fresh code of aesthetics, polytonality, atonality, a complete freedom sometimes regardless of musical results, Schönberg, theory music and now a new classicism. A host of minor faddists have thrown their shadows across his lustre, but Ravel emerges always undimmed.

Perhaps two of the strongest influences in molding the contours of the present day musical countenance were the war and Eric Satie. Considering these in chronological sequence, we find that an ultimate simplicity of style had long been a goal of the Professor of Arceuil—music reduced to essentials merely. In order to add headway to his campaign, Satie involved himself in an endless series of musico-political intrigues and machinations. Ravel, impossible to lure into the maze of theory and contention, remained alone outside the group of younger men, a target for disapproval. The war having demonstrated the futility of intricacy, likewise stripped art to the bare bone of necessity. Against the almost primitive products of a generation whose youth, often bereft of the usual years of schooling, aimed at a degree of directness hitherto un contemplated, the painstaking finesse of Ravel appeared an outworn over-elaboration. But as, even in the case of Satie, the creative gift was often so sparse that argument was called to the aid of invention, the conciseness of the “new” music soon declined into a pretentious simplicity. Ravel, however, retained his clarity and craftsmanship, defying fashion.

Among the epithets hurled upon him by his antagonists is that of plagiarist—Debussyist. There is a type of musical critic who, either through laziness, intolerance or incapacity to discriminate

always turns with a sigh of easy relief, to the subterfuge of "influence."

While there is unquestionably a similarity, there is also a difference, easy to define, between the two composers. Debussy, always an impressionist at heart, chose a structure of composition derived from the music itself, and found, with few exceptions, the stricter forms incompatible with his natural fluidity. Ravel, on the other hand, a classicist, has written with greatest ease and invention in sonata form. Practically all his works present an easily recognizable outline. While with Debussy the melodic course was largely generated from the harmony, with Ravel it is, as a rule, of primary importance and his harmonic resources have been called upon more to give point to than to create melody. Again, the familiar whole-tone passages, their consequent augmented triads and the much imitated ninth chord progressions inherent to the Debussy modes, are almost entirely absent from Ravel, while the tangy major sevenths so frequent in his music seem an integral factor of his own harmonic scheme.

Orchestrally Ravel is generally given to larger design, his scoring is usually more highly colored—although the kaleidoscopic fantasy of *Ma Mere l'Oye* boasts an economy of instrumentation worthy the great Impressionist. Pianistically as well, Ravel's textures are somewhat more complex than those of Debussy, an unfortunate result of which is their frequent omission from the recitalist's program. One often longs in vain for the tricky but brilliant *Alborada del gracioso*, the ominous *Gibet*, the frenetic *Scarbo* or the exquisite *Tombeau de Couperin*.

Le style, c'est l'homme, but to any sensitive creator *l'époque, c'est le style* is an almost inescapable corollary. Ravel was influenced by Debussy as Debussy in turn was influenced by Moussorgsky—in pages of *Pelléas*, by Satie, as Wagner by Weber, Beethoven by Haydn, all the Russian "Five" by each other and so back into the darkness of history. He is the product of his time, to which Debussy was a contributor. Ravel is the perfector rather than the creator of a style, yet, upon analysis, he appears thoroughly in his own idiom, a distinct musical personality.

He is paradoxically at once eighteenth century and twentieth century. His preference for the classic, the delicate fragrance

of antiquity, so often permeating his pages, his ever present mantle of magnificence ally him obviously to more spacious times, but his keen, sardonic humor, his electric vitality, his conciseness and his trenchant clarity are all attributes of the present day. He is in music much what he is in life, a man of immense refinement, broadly cultured, observantly witty and aloof. If he writes a *pavane*, he does so with the full consciousness of the twentieth century mind and calls upon all the technique at the disposal of the modern composers; if he tells a tale, maliciously delightful, of libidinous adventure in the Spain of the seventeen hundreds, it is with the verisimilitude and directness of the modern commentator—at once *morceau d'antiquité* and present-day irony.

Concerning Ravel as an influence less can be foretold. The very subtlety of his style renders him far from easy to imitate. But it is certain that as time lends better perspective, it will be clearer to see him as a whole, as an entity untrammelled by the decaying vestiges of impressionism. Long after those who have too strenuously sought the *dernier-cri* are packed away with our musical whalebones and hobble skirts, Ravel will remain a high representative of what is best in the music of today.

