

MAURICE RAVEL : *LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN* – PART II. THE REMINISCENCE OF BAROQUE DANCE FORMS

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SUMMARY. According to Alfred Cortot, the suite *Le tombeau de Couperin* could be divided into two main units. The first part presented in the previous volume of this journal, analyses the structural arch of the suite: the first two and the last part, which uses specific compositional technics of the Baroque era. This second part presents the middle section of the suite, the reminiscence of baroque dance forms, through the three contrasting dances: *Forlane*, *Rigaudon*, and *Menuet*. The fusion between the elements of the French baroque keyboard music and the characteristics of the modern piano music transforms this suite into a real and unique masterpiece. By analyzing the *Forlane*, the *Rigaudon*, and the *Menuet* of the suite we can understand the view of twentieth-century artists on the music of the Baroque era.

Keywords: Ravel, Suite, Baroque, Reminiscence, Baroque dance forms, Piano, Forlane, Rigaudon, Menuet

The suite *Le tombeau de Couperin* represents the most fascinating reaction to the dreadful memories of the First World War: written between 1914 and 1917, recalls the old dance forms of the eighteenth century, "being a bridge over troubled water",² dedicating each part to a friend who died in the war (the *Prelude* to Jacques Charlot, the *Fugue* to Jean Cruppi, the *Forlane* to Gabriel Deluc, the *Rigaudon* to Pascal Gaudin, the *Menuet* to Jean Dreyfus and the *Toccata* to Captain Joseph de Marliave).

„The form of the suite is cyclical. Following the suggestion of Alfred Cortot³ the six movements can be grouped as follows: the first unit would be

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² Anne Morris, art. „A Bridge over Troubled Water: Le Tombeau de Couperin” in *Musical Offerings of Cedarville University*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Article 1, Ohio, 2013, p. 43.

³ Alfred Cortot, *La musique française de piano* (The French piano music), Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1944, p. 48.

represented by the *Prelude*, the *Fugue*, and the *Toccata*, using some typical compositional techniques of the Baroque era, forming together a structural arch (discussed in the previous article about *Le tombeau de Couperin*). The second unit would contain the three contrasting dances, the *Forlane*, the *Rigaudon*, and the *Menuet*. Ravel admired Couperin, and the idea of being inspired by him creates the homage to French baroque music."⁴

In 1888 appears the first complete edition of the works of François Couperin, arranged by Johannes Brahms and Friedrich Chrysander.⁵ Therefore, the *27 Ordres* of Couperin become the main source of the composers of modern suites. Ravel's passion for old dance forms is not at all unusual: *Le tombeau de Couperin* was anticipated by the *Menuet Antique* and the *Menuet sur le nom Haydn*. Before composing *Le tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel transcribed François Couperin's *Forlane* from the fourth Royal Concert, classifying the ornaments according to the pattern found in Couperin's table. But the suite *Le tombeau de Couperin* is not only a tribute paid to François Couperin but also the music of the eighteenth century: the tradition of François Couperin, Jean Philippe Rameau, and Louis-Claude Daquin.⁶

The work was first performed in 1919 by Marguerite Long, the celebrated pianist of the twentieth century, the widow of Captain Joseph de Marliave, to whom *Toccata* is dedicated. The suite performed in the hall of the Independent Music Society was so successful that it had to be replayed.⁷

Forlane

Forlana is an Italian folk dance, danced by the Slavic minority established in the Nordic region of the country, called *Friuli-Venezia Giulia*. The word *forlane* - which can also be found as *forlane*, *forlana* or *friulana* - most likely comes from the name of the town in northern Italy. It is a dance in 6/8, often called the "dance of conquest". Nancy Bricard shares the thoughts of the choreographer Carlo de Blasis: "It is a dance that tries to picture love and pleasure. Every moment, every gesture is made with languishing grace. Inspired by the accompaniment of the mandolins, the tambourines, and the castanets, the dancing lady tries to arouse the passion of her partner by her liveliness and graceful swiftness. The two partners join,

⁴ Boglárka Eszter Oláh, art. "*Maurice Ravel: Le tombeau de Couperin - part I. The reminiscence of Baroque compositional techniques*" in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Musica*, LXV 1/2020, pp. 183-184.

⁵ Sarah Louise Stranger, *Capturing the Spirit of the French Clavecin School*, University of Queensland, 2016, p. 30.

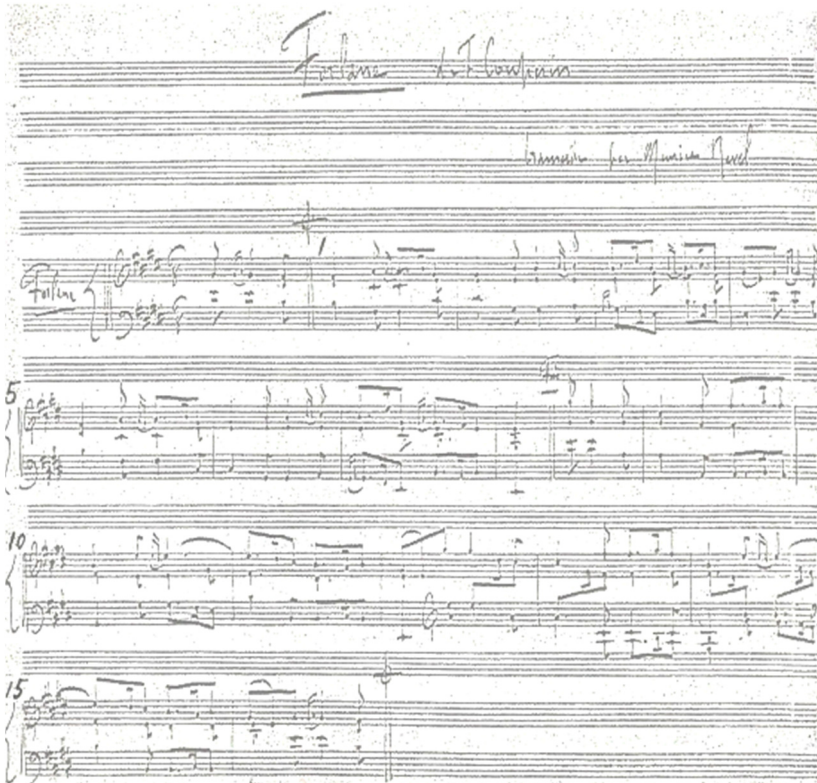
⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

⁷ Boglárka Eszter Oláh, *Op.cit.*, p. 185.

then separate, and every one of their movements tries to imitate the gestures of love, of archness, and of coquetry.”⁸

As I mentioned in the introduction, Ravel paid close attention to this part. First transcribes François Couperin's *Forlane* from the *Fourth Royal Concert*:

E. g. 1



François Couperin: *Forlane* (transcribed by Maurice Ravel)

The transcription is the primary source, which about Ravel confesses in his letter to his close friend, Cipa Godebski in the spring of 1914 as follows: “I am transcribing a *Forlane* by Couperin. I will see about getting it danced at the Vatican by Mistinguett and Colett Willy”.⁹ Another possible influence on Ravel’s *Forlane* could be the transcription and harmonization of Couperin’s

⁸ Nancy Bricard, *Ravel – Le tombeau de Couperin*, An Alfred Masterwork Edition, New York, 2003, p. 11.

⁹ Barbara L. Kelly, art. „Re-presenting Ravel: Artificiality and the Aesthetic of Imposture” in *Unmasking Ravel*, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 2011, p. 7.

Forlane, realized by the French composer Albert Bertelin, accompanied by an article written by the musicologist Jules Ecorcheville in the newspaper *La Revue Musicale* of the *Independent Musical Society*, April 1914.¹⁰ The similarities between Couperin's (E.g. 2) and Ravel's (E.g. 3) *Forlane* can be discovered even in the first measures: both are composed in 6/8, based on a common tonality, constructed in a very elegant way, achieved by the punctuated rhythm and by separating the sounds.

E. g. 2



François Couperin: *Fourth Royal Concert: Forlane*, m. 1-5.

E. g. 3



Maurice Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin: Forlane*, m. 121-125.

Another common aspect between the two dances is the use of the *rondo-couplet* alternation, the characteristic musical form of the Baroque era. The combination of ancient and modern traditions is concretely reflected using the form of rondo, barely crystallized in the Classical era. Both songs towards their end contain an episode, which omits the punctuated rhythm, using equal eight notes. In the interview of Vlado Perlemutter written by H el ene Jourdan-Morhange there are many indications about the interpretation. First, the tempo is especially important. Jourdan-Morhange remembers Ravel singing the theme in a tempo, that evokes a melancholy character. "Ravel asked me not to play the last quaver of the group too heavily, it makes only a tiny break before the second beat."¹¹ - confessed Perlemutter. The harmonies take on an archaic color by avoiding the leading tone. Perlemutter compares them to the sounds of a magical music box.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹¹ Vlado Perlemutter, H el ene Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel, Kahn&Averil*, London, 2005, p. 71.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 72.

Rigaudon

This characteristic French folkdance was a famous instrumental form and a court dance in the 17th and 18th century, used in an equal manner by the French and English masters. The term *rigaudon* refers to a wide variety of folk dances from several regions. “Like the bourrée, with which it was often compared (Mattheson, Quantz, Rousseau), the *rigaudon* was a ‘gay’ duple-metre dance in two or more strains, characterized by four-bar phrases, usually with an upbeat. Apparently, more than one type of rigaudon was known in England as several rigadoons in 6/8 metre appeared in George Bickham’s *An Easy Introduction to Dancing* (1738). The duple rigaudon was used widely in French ballets and operas, and occasionally somewhat stylized rigaudons were included in instrumental suites, usually after the sarabande movement, along with one or more other ‘popular’ dances.”¹³

Ravel’s *Rigaudon* is one of the two movements of the suite *Le tombeau de Couperin*, based on a different tonality. The C major is close to the E minor, being the subdominant of its major relative. Based on a ternary form, the **A** fragment contains 36 measures, divided in two by the repetition sign, located after the first eight measures. This fragment, by its dancing rhythm and by the indication *Assez Vif*, has a lively character:

E. g. 4



Maurice Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin: Rigaudon*, m. 1-8.

After both repeated sections follow the fragment **B**. The contrast between the two sections is achieved not only by changing the tonality but also by using a slower tempo, indicated by Ravel with the French term *Moins vif*. The brilliant *fortissimo*-color used before is replaced too, this new section being colored by smooth nuances like *piano* and *pianissimo*, sometimes even with *sourdine*. This fragment has a much simpler writing, created by a melodic line, accompanied by some chords in the bass (E. g. 5). The second

¹³ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Op.cit., Vol. 21., pp. 378-380.

half of this section represents a real harmonic adventure, modulating through several tonalities: measure 84 - F# major, measure 85 - F# minor, measure 86 - B major and measure 87 - E minor (E. g. 6).

E. g. 5

Maurice Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin: Rigaudon*, m. 37-50.

E. g. 6

Maurice Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin: Rigaudon*, m. 84-92.

The returning **A** fragment is almost identical to the first, except that this time the composer avoids the use of the repetition sign. The bars 122-126, which should be identical to 32-36, modulates to F major (E. g. 7), instead of G major (E. g. 8) used at the first appearance.

E.g. 7



Maurice Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin: Rigaudon*, m. 122-126.

E. g. 8



Maurice Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin: Rigaudon*, m. 32-36.

Nancy Bricard considers it especially important to keep a constant tempo inside the sections because any tiny fluctuation could destroy the continuity of the piece. Even Marguerite Long remarks it as a general mistake of most performers: “Ravel complained that the middle section of the Rigaudon was always too fast, while the two outer sections needed to be played with very marked rhythm.”¹⁴

Vlado Perlemutter performs the first two bars as an elegant and triumphant opening gesture before the dance. In his opinion, the bass plays an extremely important role in maintaining the continuous rhythm of the dance, instead, the sounds must be quite varied. So he follows Ravel's instructions by imitating the sounds of brass blowers, as it appears in the orchestral version. The pedal has the role of highlighting the rhythmic and harmonic aspects. The melancholic melodic line must be interpreted without shading – says Perlemutter.¹⁵

Menuet

The French term *Menuet* refers to the tiny steps of the dance. One of the favorites of the French aristocracy was danced mostly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the court of King Louis XIV. This ternary form in moderate tempo and triple meter became an optional part of baroque suites, later of classical sonatas, quartets, and symphonies.

¹⁴ Cecilia Dunoyer, *Marguerite Long, A Life in French Music*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993, p. 82.

¹⁵ Vlado Perlemutter, H el ene Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel, Kahn&Averil*, London, 2005, p. 75.

The use of the *Menuet* is not a completely new idea in Ravel's works. Over the years, Ravel tried to compose several individual works in this genre, like the *Menuet antique* - 1895, *Menuet in C# minor* - 1904, *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn* - 1909 or *Mouvement de Menuet* from *Sonatina* - 1905.

The form of Ravel's *Menuet* consists of fragment **A** (which is the *Menuet* itself) fragment **B** (contrasting part called *Musette* - melody and pastoral dance on a continuous bass) and the reappearance of fragment **A**. The term *Musette* designates not only a genre, but also a musical instrument, a kind of small and elegant bagpipe, which was fashionable at the French royal court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The ternary form of the *Menuet* respects the standards of the baroque dance form. The **A** fragment contains four sentences of eight measures each. The segments thus obtained are well delimited by some hemiolic cadences (E. g. 9): the first ends on a B major chord, the next two segments reach the key of D minor (in measure 24), and the final one returns to the main tonality, having in the measure 32 a perfect G major authentic cadence. The rhythm together with the nuances, which barely reach *mp*, creates the atmosphere of a lullaby.

E. g. 9



Maurice Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin: Menuet*, m. 1-4.

The **B** fragment - *Musette* - modulates in D minor. The alternation of the half and quarter notes creates a smooth character. Over the long notes of the bass, there are some chords once in minor, then in major. Like the first fragment, the *Musette* consists of eight-measure phrases. The smooth nuances are changing, having a large *crescendo* in measures 49-56, which rises to the *fortissimo* (m. 57-58) and then decreases reaching back to *pianissimo* (m. 59-65).

The reappearance of the **A** fragment undergoes few changes, the chords of the middle part being superimposed on the theme of the *Menuet* - this time presented with an octave above. After the three fragments, the *Menuet* ends with a rather voluminous code, being made up of three segments of eight measures each, containing the thematic elements of the previous fragments. The *Menuet* disappears by the *diminuendo* and the *ralentando* used in the last 16 measures (E. g. 10).

The image shows a page of musical notation for Maurice Ravel's 'Le tombeau de Couperin: Menuet, m. 113-128'. It features three systems of piano music. The first system begins with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The second system includes a piano (pp) dynamic and a section marked 'Ralentir beaucoup' (slow down a lot) leading to 'Très lent' (very slow). The final system ends with the instruction 'sans faire vibrer' (without vibrato).

Maurice Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin: Menuet*, m. 113-128.

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