

RAVEL ON (HIS) IMPRESSIONISM

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SUMMARY. Though Ravel usually avoided to include himself into aesthetic trends, his statements regarding musical works, composers or schools of the past and also of his time demonstrate that he had a quite clear view of the contemporary art. In respect of impressionism, he distanced himself systematically from it, while his arguments reflect a deep knowledge of its main aesthetic and style features. Being a consecrated admirer of impressionist painting, his observations on this trend were not against it, but the expression of his neutral position regarding any trend. As a result, his creative universe, however varied, appears to be rather a closed one. Though Ravel's oeuvre is original, especially regarding the piano and orchestral compositions set up before the World War I, it vibrates in a subtle manner with the major trends of his time: symbolism, impressionism, expressionism, neoclassicism and even futurism. This paper analyses his connections with impressionism through his words.

Keywords: Ravel, impressionism, aesthetic trend, style.

The fact that Ravel distanced himself explicit from impressionism in his statements is due to several factors. Among them the controversies regarding his so-called epigonism related to Debussy's style, and the problem of linking painting with music.

Similarly, to his contemporaries, Ravel identified musical impressionism with the work of his colleague, declaring that „the impressionists [...] had already found their master in Debussy”.² In a lecture held in the United States in 1928, entitled *Contemporary Music* he analysed the national and individual consciousness in composition, including the connections of style and aesthetic of modern composers.

Speaking about Debussy, Ravel interestingly uses the term of symbolism as a synonym of impressionism: „...in the symbolism of Debussy, his so-called impressionism, at variance with the Gallic spirit?”³ The

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² Arbie Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York · Oxford, 1990, p. 424

³ *idem*, p. 45

ambiguousness regarding the interferences of kindred arts (music and painting, music and poetry) as a basic aspect in the definition of a musical trend led to a confusion in the use of these terms. But the confusion is apparent. However, their work is full of lieder and other works of symbolist inspiration in a style that we could define as being impressionist. Meanwhile, Ravel admits that Debussy's (and also his) impressionism is not opposite of the French tradition, but on the contrary, is deeply rooted in its spirit, as a very important feature of their music: „...beneath the fine and delicate lacework of atmospheric surface, one may easily discover a refined precision of design, characteristically French.”⁴

Even though he expressed his profound admiration for Mallarmé's poetry, Ravel declared: „...I believe that I myself have always followed a direction opposite to that of Debussy's symbolism.”⁵ He certainly was aware of the differences between their music. Meanwhile, this fragment bears the impact of the critic Pierre Lalo's hostile campaign against his music two decades before, that launched the long-term Debussy-Ravel debate.

Concerning the analogies between painting and music, Ravel shared Debussy's view: „If you ask me if we have an impressionist school of music I must admit that I never associated the term with music. Painting, *ah ça c'est autre chose!* Monet and his school were impressionists. But in the kindred art there is no counterpart of this.”⁶

His observations were not directed against the kindred arts, since he was its pioneer all his life. On the contrary, it was much more a critique of transposing certain principles of painting into music: „For me, there are not several arts, but only one: music, painting [...] As for me, I was certainly born a musician; but if I do not write, it's because of a lack of training: I realize, for example that I read in a thoroughly professional painting as an amateur, rather than a painter. This may stem from the fact that as a child, I was gifted in many areas...”⁷

Referring to the young generation of French composers, Ravel identifies the temporal limits and also certain aesthetic features of musical impressionism: “When speaking of today's »young people«, one must distinguish between two generations, whose paths are beginning to take divergent directions. There are the post-war »young people« [...] They felt an instinctive need to break violently with the traditions of their elders. They found themselves in social and intellectual conditions so different from those which existed before 1914, that they were led, almost automatically, to adopt the attitudes, methods, and the style of iconoclasts. [...] They had publicly

⁴ *ibidem*

⁵ *idem*, pp. 45-46

⁶ *idem*, p. 391

⁷ *idem*, p. 393

broken with the luxurious art of pre-war impressionism, and had attempted to guide contemporary sensibility towards a harsher, more rugged, more robust ideal. They openly repudiated sensibility and tenderness.”⁸

We notice that he limits the impressionism to the period before the World War I, that also applies in our view to his oeuvre. Meanwhile, he emphasizes some of its fundamental features: sensibility, tenderness, luxurious art. His statements reflect a profound knowledge in matters of style and aesthetics of impressionism, including its compositional premises. In a concert chronicle about Russian composers, Ravel wrote the followings: „...The Russian school [...] contributed significantly to the blossoming of our generation’s musical sensibility [...] Borodin’s *In the Steppes of Central Asia* [is] an ingenuous work, whose musicality and *impressionism* are so penetrating...”⁹

The most significant article that reflects his view on musical impressionism was written on a piece of a lesser-known composer, entitled *Symphonic Scenes by Monsieur Fanelli*. The concert provoked debates in contemporary critique regarding the use of style elements and other musical devices prior to the impressionism, close to Debussy’s work. Ravel, sticking up for his colleague made in this context a couple of explicit references on musical impressionism. Firstly, he identifies two types of it. According to his view, M. Fanelli’s impressionism is different to that of his contemporaries because it shows rather the influence of Berlioz’s music: “In his youth, M. Fanelli was probably unaware of certain works by Liszt, and was surely unacquainted with the works of Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Musorgsky, and Borodin, which inspired the younger French school.”¹⁰

This list summarizes correctly and quasi-exhaustively not only the most significant composers having a basic influence on musical impressionism (the second type of it), but also the majority of his compositional preferences (including here also Chabrier and Satie). Knowing his admiration for these composers, in the former quote Ravel admitted – though indirectly – a certain connection of his music with musical impressionism.

Hereinafter he enumerates some of the basic features of this style and aesthetics through his remarks on M. Fanelli’s work: the evocation of musical atmospheres, nature, distance, orientalism, water, picturesque orchestration etc.¹¹

Perhaps the most interesting – though indirect – allusion to his connection with the impressionist aesthetic appears in another brief article entitled *Memories of a Lazy Child*, especially regarding Emmanuel Chabrier’s influence on his music. In his words: „...of course, I was influenced above all by a musician: Chabrier, who moreover still does not have the recognition he

⁸ *idem*, pp. 401-402

⁹ *idem*, p. 346

¹⁰ *idem*, p. 349-350

¹¹ Cf. *ibidem*

deserves, for all contemporary French music stems from his work.”¹² Even though he slightly overrates Chabrier’s influence, this statement appears to be significant by comparing him to Manet, one of the spiritual leaders of impressionist painting. Thus, Ravel indirectly found Chabrier as being a mentor of musical impressionism, and also of his music: “His role was as important as that of Manet in painting. Incidentally, it was Chabrier who owned the most beautiful Manets, like *Le Bar des Folies-Bergère*, for example”.¹³

Finally, Ravel recalls from a personal perspective the profound aesthetic analogies discovered in their work: “To return to the connection which, in my view, exists between Chabrier and Manet, it is not restricted to the influence which they exercised on their respective arts. This connection strikes me as more profound: I discovered the same impression created by Chabrier’s music in Manet’s *Olympia*, which gave me one of the most beautiful emotions of my adolescence, and which I still regard as a wonderful painting. In *Olympia* I always had the feeling of rediscovering the essence of Chabrier’s *Mélancolie*, simply transferred to another medium.”¹⁴

One of the main factors that – according to the scholars – makes Ravel’s music incompatible with the impressionist aesthetic is the fundamental role of the craft and intellectual work in his music. Indeed, such an aesthetic attitude appears to be contrary to the instinct, sensitivity and mystical *correspondances* (Baudelaire) characteristic to the creative process of an impressionist artist. It is well-known his admiration for E. A. Poe’s aesthetic, considering him as being his „greatest teacher in composition”¹⁵ due to the almost scientific attitude in conceiving and developing his famous poem, „The Raven”. Meanwhile Ravel was often characterized, especially for his works created after the First World War as a composer with classical inclinations. Thus, even the most initiated connoisseurs of his music were confused by his statements regarding the importance of instinct and sensitivity in his work.

Though many authors doubted its authenticity, we quote the following passage that surprisingly express a view apparently opposed to those of Poe or Mallarmé: „I think and feel in music [...] There is an instinctive, sentimental music, like mine – naturally you must learn your craft first – and intellectual music, like d’Indy’s.”¹⁶ The instinct doesn’t mean the lack of craft and construction, but subordinating the intellectual parameters to the composer’s sensitivity and spontaneity. This mean was expressed in the already mentioned interview:

¹² *idem*, p. 394

¹³ *ibidem*

¹⁴ *ibidem*

¹⁵ *idem*, p. 454

¹⁶ This passage is from Jules Renard’s *Journal*, the author of *Histoires naturelles*, text used by Ravel in his work with the same title. In: Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and musician*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1975, p. 51.

“Modern composers must steer a middle course between emotion and intellect if they are to create significant and lasting music. »Poe proved that art must strike a balance between these two extremes, for the first leads only to formlessness and the second to the dry and abstract. «¹⁷

One of Ravel's basic complaints about Debussy's music has been just the lack of form, but in his case this was the manifestation of a quasi-improvised and spontaneous ideal of composition. For Ravel form is essential, however the sense of spontaneity and improvised character is present in his impressionist compositions.

In a critique about a symphonic work published in *Revue Musicale de la S.I.M.*¹⁸, Ravel exposed his view about the relation between intellectual work and inspiration: “Mister Witkowski¹⁹ ably uses a brilliant palette in his Second Symphony, but the colors seem artificial. This is because he appears to have been guided by will alone in this composition. [...] The three elements of music [melody, harmony, rhythm], whose conception should be simultaneous and above all instinctive, are elaborated separately, and are linked, one might say, by purely intellectual workmanship.”²⁰ Shortly after, he published a new article about the *Lamoureux Orchestra Concerts*²¹ that continues his train of thoughts on craft and inspiration: „An artist's will should only be attentive servant [...] in art, *craft*, in the absolute sense of the word, cannot exist. In the harmonious proportion of a work, and in the elegance of its flow, the role of inspiration is virtually unlimited.”²²

Finally, we quote some passages from Ravel's correspondence about his travels, written around 1905-1906, marking the outset of a significant period in his life and work: his final break with the *Conservatoire* and the beginning of a series of impressionist compositions (with the exception of *Jeux d'Eau* written in 1901).

In his letter to Madame René de Saint-Marceaux²³ dated 23 august 1905 he wrote: „... I told you about the beginning of a magnificent voyage through Belgium, Holland, and banks of the Rhine up to Frankfurt, through rivers, canals and seas [...] I saw unforgettable things in this marvellous situation. During all of this time, I didn't compose two measures, but I was storing up a host of impressions, and I expect this winter to be extraordinary productive.”²⁴

¹⁷ Arbie Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, ed. cit., p. 454

¹⁸ February 15, 1912

¹⁹ Georges-Martin Witkowski (1867-1943), pupil of Vincent d'Indy.

²⁰ *idem*, p. 341

²¹ March, 1912

²² *idem*, p. 344

²³ She ran a music salon, where Fauré took his composition class, including Ravel.

²⁴ *idem*, pp. 74-75

There are dozens of references regarding his visual impressions, forms, colours, or particular topics like the water. In the following letter (august 27, 1905), Ravel wrote to Madame Jean Cruppi²⁵ from England: „It is delightful to come back to unusual regions, pleasurably revisiting those districts which are so varied, with desolate landscapes of such subtle coloration, dramatic boulders, and, above all, the sea!”²⁶

Besides his references about visual impressions, Ravel also made suggestions of aural ones. Reporting about his experiences during the Prix de Rome he attended for the second time in 1901, he wrote to his friend, Lucien Garban from a building situated on a busy street, Boulevard Pereire, with railroad tracks: „...the atmosphere is charming, and I am writing to you lulled by the whistling of locomotives. I already perceive a forthcoming *Sites auriculaires*”²⁷ ²⁸

As follower of dandyism, Ravel has adopted still as a young composer a distanced, cold and ironic attitude both as a creative attitude, both as a social masque, in order to protect his sensitive nature. Thus, his thoughts exposed in several ways have to be handled with precaution. Meanwhile, his controversial statements seem to be the manifestation of an organic thought on life and art that applies to his music as well.

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²⁵ A singer with significant political relations through his husband, who was an influential minister in the French government.

²⁶ *idem*, p. 75

²⁷ An early composition for two pianos consisting of two pieces: *Habanera* and *Entre cloches* (Among Bells). The title suggesting synesthesia literally means: “places which can be sensed by the ear.”

²⁸ *idem*, p. 59