

MINUET - THE REMINISCENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL DANCE FORM IN MAURICE RAVEL'S PIANO WORKS

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SUMMARY. The minuet is one of the most representative dance forms of the Baroque era. Thanks to its popularity, it becomes part of stage works like operas and ballets, instrumental suites, later (in the Classical and Romantic era) movements of symphonies, sonatas, string quartets, and trios. Ravel had a special interest in old dance forms. Among his musical works there are several dance-movements like *Pavane*, *Rigaudon*, *Forlane*, or *Menuet*. The use of these in individual works is limited, having only three minuets written for piano solo: the *Menuet antique* (1895), the *Menuet in C sharp minor* (1904), and the *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn* (1909).

Keywords: Ravel, Baroque, Reminiscence, Baroque dance forms, Piano, Minuet, Neoclassicism.

“Minuet is a French dance in a moderate or slow triple meter. It was one of the most popular social dances in aristocratic society from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, used as an optional movement in Baroque suites, and frequently appeared in movements of late 18th-century multi-movement forms such as the sonata, the string quartet, and the symphony, where it was usually paired with a Trio.”²

One of the most miraculous survivors of the decades, the Minuet always seemed to me a great mystery. Regarded to musicologist Julia Sutton, this “elegant phoenix”³ is the only Baroque dance incorporated in

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² The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, vol. 16, p. 740.

³ Julia, Sutton, art. “The Minuet: An Elegant Phoenix” in Dance Chronicle, vol. 8, no. 3/4, Taylor&Francis, 1985, pp. 119-152.

later instrumental works as sonatas, symphonies, quartets, and neo-classical suites. Having around endless entertainment opportunities, is quite difficult to imagine the central role of the dance in eighteenth-century European life. Actually, it was more than just an entertainment, having several other functions like: social manner, courtship, daily tension-release and celebration.⁴

It is hard to say which came first: the chicken or the egg – cause the music and the choreography has belonged inseparable together during the decades, inspiring and having a great influence on each-other. Surely the classical music phrase-structure developed into his characteristic form thanks to choreography. Similarly, triple time dances like minuet, waltz, polonaise, courante or sarabande are deeply characterized by the given rhythm and meter.

From the other hand the minuet is not only a dance, but simultaneously a “dance, a series of dance steps, a genre of music, a tempo indication, a valuation of rhythmic emphasis, and a performance space for dance, cultural norm, custom, and sexuality.”⁵

The origin of the minuet is not so well documented. Between the sources are many folk versions, however the tempo of the dance varies between a slow/moderate pulse and a fast/lively character. This misunderstanding could come from the difference between the triple meter character of the music and the unit of six steps of the choreography (like the *pas de menuet*, one of the principal step-unit of the dance). However, Sébastien de Brossard characterizes the minuet as a very gay and fast dance,⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau considers the character of the minuet noble, with an elegant simplicity. He affirms, the movement of the dance is more like moderate than fast.⁷

The dance itself is a descendent of the *branle de Poitou*⁸ – a popular French, serpent-like figure from the 16th century – danced by couples in a circle or a row. The name of the dance could refer to the small steps of the dance (*menu* in French means small) or to the group of the dances it takes part from (*branle à mener*), popular in the beginning of the 17th century. With his entrance to the French court, it becomes the most popular dance of the French Baroque era. The choreography of the minuet is described in

⁴ Erik, McKee, art. “Influences of the Early Eighteenth-Century Social Minuet on the Minuets from J. S. Bach's French Suites, BWV 812-817”, at Music Analysis, vol. 18, no. 2, 1999, pp. 235-260.

⁵ Brad, Fugate, *May I Have This Dance? The Minuet as Formal Dance, Instrumental Genre, and "danse démodé"*.

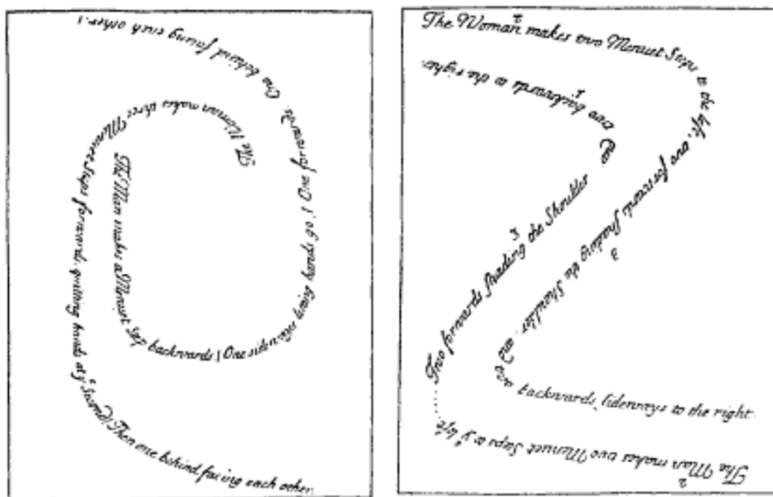
⁶ Dictionnaire de musique, Christophe Ballard, Paris, 1703, p. 45.

⁷ Jean-Jacques, Rousseau, *Encyclopédie*, vol. 21, Diderot et d'Alembert, Paris, 1765, p. 518.

⁸ The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Op. cit., vol. 16, p. 740.

several sources of the 18th century: Gottfried Taubert in his book *Rechtschaffener Tanzmeister*, published in 1717 in Leipzig, describes the original step-unit (*Hauptfigur*) of the dance.⁹ Pierre Rameau in his theoretical work *Le maître à danser*, published in 1725, describes several floor patterns exemplified with detailed drawings (Figure 1).

Figure 1



P. Rameau: *Le maître à danser*, floor patterns

The main figure – the *pas de minuet* – contains four changes of weight, always beginning on the right foot. The dance patterns contain groups of four steps in six – which requires two bars of the musical minuet. This aspect causes the symmetry of the dance, later one of the most important compositional unit of the early Classical era. Most of these dances has binary form, and an entry musical minuet normally contains two dance figures. However, the standard dance contains at least six figures, musicians were required to play with repetitions/*da capo* or several minuets in a row. The popularity of the minuet consists of the variety of steps, which can be combined in several ways during the pattern.¹⁰

First written musical examples appears in Kassel Manuscript, in Philidor Collection,¹¹ and in Manuscript Bauyn.¹² These small instrumental

⁹ Julia, Sutton, Op. cit., p. 131.

¹⁰ The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Op. cit., vol. 16, p. 740.

¹¹ *Idem*.

¹² Julia, Sutton, Op. cit., p. 138.

pieces were composed to be danced. Jacques de Chambonnières – the head of the French lute and harpsichord school – introduces into the keyboard repertoire, so it becomes well known in the whole West-Europe. Jean Baptiste Lully composes more than 100 minuets incorporated in his operas, adding the most common middle-part – the trio – to enlarge the music for a longer dance part. Georg Muffat, Johann Pachelbel, Henry Purcell, later Bach and Händel composes several movements of minuet, like the French version.

After the baroque era, the minuet remains one of the most popular dances of the European aristocracy, having a great influence in the develop of the stylized triple-meter musical forms, like polonaise or waltz. It continues to take part of operas (Mozart's *Don Giovanni*); however, it takes part of symphonies and sonatas too. The contrast between the themes, the repetition of the first section together with the modulations and re-modulations proves the connection between the minuet and sonata form, often used in Mozart's and Haydn's works. Another developed form is the rondo-like minuet or a set of variations on a minuet-theme, used as a final movement of a sonata or concerto. At the end of the 18th century the standard form of the minuet was replaced by a similar movement, called *scherzo*. Several piano sonatas, string quartets and symphonies uses *tempo di minuetto* as the title and character of a slow third movement.

Even there are several examples (Johannes Brahms' Serenade no.1, Franz Schubert's minuets D89, Frédéric Chopin's piano sonata no.1, 2nd movement), in the Romanticism composers were less interested in minuet. Later, at the end of the 19th- beginning of the 20th century, thanks to the Neoclassicism, composers had a great interest in freshly rediscovered early dance forms. There are several examples of minuets in the 20th century, mostly from French authors: Gabriel Fauré's *Masques et bergamasques* (1919), Claude Debussy's *Suite bergamasque* (1890), Maurice Ravel's *Sonatine* (1905), *Menuet in C sharp minor* (1905), *Menuet antique* (1895), *Le tombeau de Couperin* (1914-1917) and *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn* (1909).

Menuet antique

This extravagant miniature seems today more like a little pearl, than a brave try of a young genius, however the *Menuet antique* was composed in 1895, during Ravel's study years in the *Conservatoire de Paris*. Ravel had a great interest in old musical forms – during his early period he composed several fugues and dance movements like: *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (1899), *Fugue in E minor* (1903), *Menuet in C sharp minor* (1904) or *Fugue in C major* (1905).

Ravel's minuets are deeply influenced by the choreography of the dance: they are written in triple meter, moderate tempo, using upbeat and articulation which sustains the steps of the figures. This early work suggests a special interest of the composer in old music, the Baroque era being recent discovered at the end of the 19th century. These dance-movements shows a detailed image about the vision of Ravel's contemporaries about this period.

The moderate tempo associated with the French term *Majestueusement* (majestically) could be associated with the chordal density of the texture, the tension and release of the harmonies and with the large specter of the dynamics. The main structure is best characterized by a great mirror symmetry (Table 1):

Table 1

Minuet	Trio	Minuet da Capo
A – B – A 8+29+8 bars	C – D – C 8+16+8 bars	A – B – A 8+29+8 bars

The structure of the *Menuet antique*

The first minuet section begins with an unusual short upbeat on a strange harmony: on a diminished VII⁴⁻³ and II⁷ released on I. These chords are underlined with accents, high intensity colors (*forte*) and by the indication *très marqué*. The accent on weak beats evokes a tension, which accumulates till the end of the first **A** section, modulating from the main tonality (F sharp minor) to its dominant major (C sharp major). The continuous omission of the leading tone represents the sign of antiques. Regarded to musicologist Valentina V. Bass,¹³ the motifs of the first eight bars contains several dance figures, like the cascading melody of **B** pattern (second half of the first bar) – *pas de chasse*, the undulating **C** motif (second half of the second – first half of the fifth bar) – *balancé*, the spiral ascendant **D** motif (second half of the fifth – first half of the seventh bar) – *pas de bourrée*.¹⁴ (E.g. 1)

¹³ Valentina, V. Bass, art. "The genre of the Minuet in the works of Maurice Ravel", in Journal of Siberian Federal University, Humanities&Social Science vol. 1, 2016, pp. 41-54.

¹⁴ *Idem*, pp. 46-47.

Majestueusement ♩ = 76

B

f

très marqué

C

p

D

ff

Maurice Ravel: *Menuet antique*, bars 1-7

The second **B** unit begins in a strange register. Using both lines in the octave 2 and 3, anticipates the way of thinking and coloring of a young master in orchestration, however the transcription of the minuet appears barely in 1929. This section is characterized by long sequences and *fugatos*, developing the main motifs of the first **A** section. The modal ascendent octave-scale in the bas (36-38 bars) represents a spectacular return to the first section. The reappearance is almost identical, having minor differences like using a natural instead of a sharp in bars 37-39, staying in the main tonality with a major third in the final chord.

The trio section of the minuet is well-delimited. The tempo changes: currently, it becomes a little bit faster with the indication *doux* (*dolce*). The major third of the cadence leads us to the parallel tonality (F sharp major). The rhythm becomes simple: the short, often dotted notes are changed to simple eight notes. The *ostinato* in the middle voice offers stability. These all aspects evoke a calm, bright and transparent character.

MINUET - THE REMINISCENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL DANCE FORM...

The articulation of the first eight bars (C section) creates an unstable sensation, moving the heavy beats on the second beat (E.g. 2):

E.g. 2

Maurice Ravel: *Menuet antique*, bars 46-53

This middle section can be characterised by *plastic polyphony*,¹⁵ the homophonic texture being polyphonized by several horizontal melodic lines, like the main motif in bars 70-71 (E.g. 3). The reappearance of the minuet (*Minuet da capo*) is identical with the first minuet section, which underlines one of the most characteristic aspect of the dance: the minuet-trio-minuet da capo form.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 50.

The image shows two systems of a musical score for Maurice Ravel's *Menuet antique*. The first system is in C# minor, 3/4 time, and begins with the instruction "à peine alenti" and a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. A red box highlights a passage in the second system marked "marqué". The second system continues the piece with a red box highlighting a passage in the first system.

Maurice Ravel: *Menuet antique*, bars 68-73

Menuet in C# minor

Even it was composed almost ten years later (1904), the *Menuet in C sharp minor* belongs to the same life period as the *Menuet antique*: study years in the *Conservatoire de Paris*. This tiny miniature (three short phrases of 8+8+7 bars) looks like a compositional sketch, an exercise in ancient form and genre. This draft-like appearance is even more highlighted by the abrupt stop of the piece.

The tempo, the meter, and the tonality match with the parameters of the baroque dance form: it is written in a moderate $\frac{3}{4}$ tempo with upbeat, in C sharp minor with mostly avoided leading tone (it is a trademark of Ravel, regarded to the reminiscence of old forms and genres). The dynamic spectra create a great unity through the phrases: the first eight bars stay in *piano*, the second phrase begins on a higher level (*mezzo forte espressivo*) which grows until *forte* at the beginning of the third phrase, after which fades away first just till *piano*, at the end till *pianissimo*.

The first eight bars represent a classical-symmetrical phrase: the first two bars are repeated and ornamented, being ended by the last four bars as a conclusion. This typical structure is highlighted by the pauses between these short units (E.g. 4). The *sharps* in bars 5-8 (*a* sharp and *b* sharp) are the sign of modulation in the dominant tonality: in G sharp major (E.g. 4).

E.g. 4

Modéré

PIANO

p

mf espr.

Maurice Ravel: *Menuet in C sharp minor*, bars1-9

The second phrase is like the first: two bars repeated and ornamented, followed by a four-bar unit, which increases by a sequential ascendent motif. The tension of this *crescendo* is underlined by the chromatic thirds in the *alto*, the pedal point on the second beat in the *bass*, the *stretto* created by the change of the meter. Like in the first phrase, the small motifs are separated by pauses (E.g. 5).

E.g. 5

p

f

Maurice Ravel: *Menuet in C sharp minor*, 10-16 bars

The last phrase begins on the climax: the thematic entries are highlighted by accents in bars 17-19 (E.g. 6). The last four bars calm down, being faded first till *piano*, later till *pianissimo*. This section feels incomplete, having only 7 bars instead of 8.

E.g. 6

Maurice Ravel: *Menuet in C sharp minor*, bars 14-23

Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn

In 1909 the *Revue musicale mensuelle de la Société Internationale de Musique* asks Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Vincent d'Indy, Paul Dukas, Reynaldo Hahn, and Charles-Marie Widor to compose a piano piece each, for the centenary of the great German composer Joseph Haydn, died in 1809. The only condition is to use Haydn's musically coded name as the subject: H(B)-A-Y(D)-D-N(G), the Y and N letters being replaced by letters of the alphabets in repeating groups of seven (E.g. 7):

E.g. 7

Haydn's musically coded name, given as theme

Ravel's minuet corresponds to the characteristics of the old dance form. The tempo mark *Mouvement de menuet* – or how in classical era was

MINUET - THE REMINISCENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL DANCE FORM...

called: *Tempo di menuetto* – evokes the elegant and transparent movements with the same indications in Haydn's symphonies and piano sonatas. The previously given theme determines the tonality, having three (G, B, D) of four notes of the theme part of the chord of the main tonality – G major.

The monogram theme appears several times during these 54 bars (E.g. 8): 1. in his original form (bars 1-2, 17-18, 43-44, 52-53), 2. in the retrograde performance (bars 19-20), 3. in retrograde of inversion (25-26) and 4. in several transpositions (bars 27-34).

E.g. 8

The image displays a musical score for Maurice Ravel's 'Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn'. It consists of three systems of piano music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system (bars 16-18) shows the monogram 'HAYDN' in the bass clef staff, with red brackets and the number '1' below it. The second system (bars 19-20) shows the monogram 'NDYAH' in the bass clef staff, with red brackets and the number '2' below it. The third system (bars 24-26) shows the monogram 'NDAVH' in the bass clef staff, with red brackets and the numbers '3' and '4' below it. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (mf, pp, f), articulation (accents), and phrasing slurs.

Maurice Ravel: Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn, 17-29 bars

The form and the metre are typical and transparent: there is a short, repeated **A** section (8+8 bars) a development-like **B** section with sudden modulations through several keys. The last four bars of this section represent more-like the 20th century, being written in three rows instead of two, constructed by an ascendent chromatic chordal pattern, colored by the sostenuto pedal – an innovation of the 20th century piano fabrics (regarded

to musicologist Nancy Bricard, Ravel did not have an instrument with *sostenuto* pedal).¹⁶ At bar 43 takes place the final iteration of the **A** section with small differences. The triple metre comes with upbeat, at the end there is a small coda part in a slow tempo (*Lento*) with *rallentando*. As in several neoclassical pieces of Ravel, the melody disappears, fades out.

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¹⁶ Nancy, Bricard, *Ravel – Le tombeau de Couperin*, An Alfred Masterwork Edition, New York, 2003, p. 3.

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