TROIS POÈMES DE STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ: A DEBUSSY-RAVEL COMPARISON

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SUMMARY. Trois Poèmes de Stèphane Mallarmè: *a Debussy - Ravel Comparison.* The two cycles of mélodies, composed by Debussy and Ravel in the same year 1913, represent not only one of the most curious coincidences of modern French music, but also offer a great opportuneness for scholars to investigate in comparison their creative view on the highly crafted and refined art of Mallarmé. Despite their large number of mélodies and a particular affinity for the symbolist poet, the relatively unnoticeable examples of settings based on his oeuvre shows an avoidance of the greatly musical and hermetic verses, characteristic for his mature style. Even the dreamy, noble and playful juvenile poems commonly put on music by the two composers in these cycles (Soupir and Placet futile), are treated with a great care in order to preserve their inner musicality. Thus, the quasi-independent vocal line, with a pronounced recitative character is carried by an almost autonomous musical accompaniment, which oscillates between figurative and expressive states. Beyond the natural differences of the two settings resulting from the particular view of their creators, there are also some important similarities in the employment of the constructive and expressing devices. Even the third mélodies, based on different verses of Mallarmé's late period (Éventail by Debussy and Sourgi de la croupe et du bond by Ravel), show at least one significant characteristic in common: unlike the former two conceived in a basically tonal context, they rather present an expansion of these limits toward the atonality, in a vague musical discourse, just in the spirit of the pronounced abstractness of the poems.

Keywords: Mallarmé, mélodies, Debussy, Ravel, comparison, text-music

The year 1913 was going to produce one of the most curious coincidences in the history of the modern French music. Debussy and Ravel, inspired probably by the reprinted edition of Mallarmé works issued shortly before, have set two identical poems of the French symbolist poet, without knowing about each other intentions.

Thus, two cycles were composed almost simultaneously: the first two melodies based on the same juvenile poems (*Soupir* and *Placet futile*), only the third ones – from the late period of Mallarmé – being different: *Éventail* set by Debussy and *Sourgi de la croupe et du bond* by Ravel.

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Both cycles appear in a period, when the attention of the two composers was directed to genres like the piano and orchestral music. Apparently, the major difference of these compositions rests on the nature of the accompaniment. For Debussy the optimal medium was represented by the piano, Ravel instead had chosen a chamber formation of two piccolo flutes, flute, clarinet, bass clarinet, string quartet and piano (there is also a solo piano version).

The above-mentioned coincidence as fascinating is to the scholars, as unfortunate turned out to be in the relationship of the two composers, as it is fragile. Arbie Orenstein related some details regarding this situation in his biography *Ravel: Man and musician* as it follows: "Ravel completed his songs before Debussy and asked Dr. Edmond Bonniot, Mallarmé's son-in-law, for permission to utilize the poet's texts. The men were on friendly terms and the required authorization was granted immediately. A short time later, when Dr Bonniot was approached by Jacques Durand with a similar request, he agreed to the publication of *Eventail*, but refused *Soupir* and *Placet futile*, whose rights had just been granted to Ravel."[2] Due to the intervention of Ravel, the situation was finally resolved.[3] Later, Debussy commented this situation as a "phenomenon of autosuggestion worthy of communication to the Academy of Medicine."[4]

Even if these poems are not the most typical achievements of Mallarmé's symbolism, one cannot neglect his influence on the young generation of French composers, mostly on Debussy and Ravel. It is known, that Debussy was an attendant at the famous *mardi chez Mallarmé* since the 1890', where he would certainly have heard his ideas about poetry, art and aesthetics. Ravel, for his part, was a great admirer of the esoteric in art, considering Mallarmé as being the *ne plus ultra* of the French poetry. In an interview by Olin Downes, published in New York Times on 7 August, 1927, being asked to elucidate the curious verses of his *Trois poémes*, he declared: "Useless to explain. The poetry speaks to you or it does not. It is very obscure, and if once it seizes you – marvelous! I consider Mallarmé not merely the greatest French poet, but the *only* French poet, since he made the French language, not designed for poetry, poetical [...] Mallarmé exorcised that language, magician that he was. He released winged thoughts, subconscious reveries, from their prisons."[5]

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[2] Orenstein, Arbie, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1975, p. 67.

[3] Ravel wrote to Roland-Manuel on August 27, 1913: „I have just finished *Surgi de la croupe*. We will soon witness a Debussy-Ravel match. The other day, the publisher sent me a desperate letter, because Bonniot refused the authorization for *Soupir* and *Placet futile*, which Debussy had just set to music. I have settled everything." In: Arbie Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York Oxford, 1990, p. 140.

[4] Orenstein, Arbie, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, *ed. cit.*, p. 67.

[5] Orenstein, Arbie, *A Ravel Reader*, *ed. cit.*, p. 450.

Despite their particular affinity for the French poet, Debussy and Ravel produced a relatively unnoticeable number of musical settings inspired by his oeuvre, although both were a prolific composer of melodies. Besides of these cycles, the explicit presence of Mallarmé's verses is confined to a couple of juvenile songs (*Apparitions* by Debussy, and *Sainte* by Ravel), and of course to an implicit orchestral setting of his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* by Debussy.

Considering furthermore, that excepting the last poems of the Mallarmé-cycles, much of them is juvenile, of a relative clarity regarding the poetic content and style, it seems that both avoided, perhaps consciously, the late verses, complex and hermetic. Even these cycles are not organic from a poetic point of view, they nevertheless gain a sort of common aura, without giving up to emphasize the particularity of the messages through proper composing devices and expressive perspectives.

As the last melodies of the two settings are not only based on different verses, but according to Mallarmé's late style, they strongly differ stylistically from the formers, we will take them into discussion separately.

We have to notice from the outset, that both *Soupir* and *Placet futile*, though conceived somehow similarly concerning the lyrical situation, present significant differences regarding the poetic expression. As long as in *Soupir* we may hear the echoes of the romantic topoi of longing, the sensuality of *Placet futile* brings back the atmosphere of the rococo. It seems that Debussy and Ravel partook with Mallarmé the same taste for the French poetic heritage, as for the divergence from the traditional verse forms.

The semantic plan vibrating in the sensibility, profoundness and rich imagery of the *Soupir*, as the refined irony of the *Placet futile* are codified into a complex syntactic structure, deliberately confusing, which lead to a fertile, quasi permanent oscillation between the two levels of signification. The preciousness of the texts, their intrinsic musicality determined both composers to treat them in a relatively autonomous state. This aspect is noticeable both in the careful treatment of the poems' musicality, highlighted by the preponderant metonymic nature of the vocal line, and the ambiguity of its metaphoric reference on the accompanying plan, which lead to a permanent play between the figurative and expressive states of the verses.

There are also some differences of approach, due to a proper artistic view and compositional style. Debussy follows essentially to institute a free flux between the vocal line and accompaniment, which are reciprocally interpenetrating, maintaining at the same time a sort of autonomy. Ravel recognized in Mallarmé's verses the object of his passion for the refinement of poetic expression and polished forms, without giving up the profundity of the musical reflection. The novelty of his approach is given by the accompaniment, a chamber formation adopted through Stravinsky from Schoenberg, experiment continued later in his *Chansons madécasses*. Due to a commission from Diaghilev to re-orchestrate and readapt parts of Mussorgsky's unfinished

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opera *Khovantchina*, Ravel and Stravinsky worked together on the assignment in Clarens, Switzerland, during March and April, 1913, where Ravel was shown the score of *Poèmes de la lyrique japonaise*, which instrumentation, according to Stravinsky, was derived from *Pierrot Lunaire* of Schoenberg. In a letter to Madame Alfredo Casella from April 2, 1913, Ravel wrote about his plan to present these three compositions[6] in a "scandalous" concert of the SMI. The concert took place only the next year, on January 14, 1914, without Schoenberg's piece, performed in Paris for the first time in 1922.

Despite the similarities in the chamber distribution of these works, Ravel rather conceived an orchestral piece, where the musical plans are differentiated, and the vocal line appears to be a peculiar, but organic element of the structure. This causes perhaps, that his melodies present stronger differences from poem to poem, that those of Debussy. We also have to notice that both cycles show a great compositional refinement, in consensus with Mallarmé's highly crafted verses.

Soupir (The Sight)

In the lyric situation of the first poem, the subject (*Mon âme*) addresses himself to a woman (*calme soeur*), as the object of his unachievable desire, her absence being lapped in ambiguity (farness). The subject compares his being with a fountain (*jet d'eau*), while the sky (l'Azur) appears as the metaphoric expression of the object. The comparison follows here the denotation of an eternal longing toward the beloved being, as the *white fountain sighs toward the Azur!* (*un blanc jet d'eau soupire vers l'Azur!*). In the second part of the poem, the distinction between the subject and object is dissolved in metaphors, suggesting at the same time the impossibility of fulfillment (- *Vers l'Azur attendri d'octobre pâle et pur/ Qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie*):

Ex. 1

Mon âme vers ton front où rêve, ô calme soeur,
Un automne jonché de taches de rousseur,
Et vers le ciel errant de ton oeil angélique
Monte, comme dans un jardin mélancolique,
Fidèle, un blanc jet d'eau soupire **vers l'Azur!**

- **Vers l'Azur** attendri d'Octobre pâle et pur
Qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie
Et laisse, sur l'eau morte où la fauve agonie
Des feuilles erre au vent et creuse un froid sillon,
Se traîner le soleil jaune d'un long rayon.
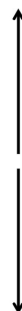
The mirrored structure of *Soupir*

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[6] At that point, Ravel finished only the first two songs of his cycle.

Due to the continuous flux of the verse, there is an exuberant tension between the sophisticated syntactic plan and the continuously ambiguous semantics. Concerning its form, the poem is based on a traditional alexandrine structure, though altered by atypical use of the rhymes. Being divided into two sentences of five lines each, connected by the repetition of the formula *vers l'Azur* as an axis, *Soupir* is a mirrored-poem, both in a proper and a figurative sense. Concerning the latter, Mallarmé's verse expresses the continuous inhalation and emanation of the soul.

Both composers have conceived a tranquil musical discourse, in a middle-ranged to a slow tempo (especially Ravel), with a restrained dynamic, in order to obtain a dreamy atmosphere, pervaded by nostalgia and languor. However, the musical configurations of the verse show significant differences in the two settings, reflecting not only a special attitude toward the text, but also particular compositional views. Debussy's *Soupir* is a continuous flux, where the musical materials are changing in an intangible way, while Ravel articulates a great arch structure of five sections, clearly differentiated, mostly regarding the binary division of the poem. Both melodies make use of the typical style elements of the musical impressionism: the pentatonic and octatonic structures, the resonance technique, the duplication, respectively their mixtures.

Regarding the vocal line, there is a special concern for maintaining the intrinsic musicality of the text, mostly through a flexible treatment of the syllables. The voice is moving in both cases in a relatively tight ambitus, with a preference for the step movements. Melodic leaps occur mostly on lengthy values, emphasizing the clue-elements of the poetic expression. For example, the word *Fidéle*, as the expression of hope is highlighted by both composers, almost similarly:

Ex. 2

The melodic emphasis of the word *Fidéle* in comparison

At Debussy, the flexible treatment of the musical time leads to an impression of parlando-rubato, with frequent quasi-recitativo elements. As a consequence, the articulation of the verse is clear and intelligible. Here, the accompaniment plays a greater role of colouring the expressive aspects of the text. In Ravel's case, the melodic line is apparently more metrical, though the large rhythm values and slow movement generate the same impression of floating and immobility. Similarly, the colourful chamber formation of his setting is compensated at Debussy through the free dialog

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between the voice and piano. Even the accompaniments are expiring and inspiring, due to the employment of stops and starts, respectively duplications at Debussy and the interventions of mini-orchestral blocks in dialogue with the vocal line at Ravel. None of the melodies have a proper beginning and finish, both starting from silence and dissolving in silence through pentatonic materials as expression of the imponderable.

The accompaniment plan appears in an ambiguous relationship with the text, oscillating between the figurative setting of the poetic images and their expressive evocation. Thus, the basic relationship subject (the poetic self) – object (the yearning for the feminine being) is visualized musically through the comparison fountain-azure. Both settings present figurative elements of the moving fountain, its ascension toward the azure, and the reflection of the sky in the resigned still water of October: arch movements in micro- and macro structures, musical elements exposed in mirror.

Debussy's fountain brings the expression of a peaceful, longing atmosphere, through a quasi-continuous, but vague waving:

Ex. 3

Debussy: *Soupir*, m. 1-4

Ravel emphasizes mostly the figurative nature of the fountain by realizing a quasi-static musical beginning, where the chord figurations of the string quartet with flageolet-effects generate a fine, glittering texture:

Ex. 4

Ravel: *Soupir*, m. 1

Both materials reappear in the closing section as an accompaniment of the last poetic image (*Se traîner le soleil jaune d'un long rayon*) exposed figuratively by the prolonged note of the vocal line. However, the closure seems to be unresolved, as the deep sadness of the message:

Ex. 5

Debussy: *Soupir*, m. 29-31

Ex. 6

Ravel: *Soupir*, m. 35

A fundamentally different material is employed to evoke the gloomy atmosphere of the fall, as the expression of the unfulfilled desire. Thus, the quasi-recitative, monotone vocal line is accompanied by whole-tone chord structures at Debussy and octatonic ones at Ravel:

Ex. 7

Debussy: *Soupir*, m. 23-24

Ex. 8

Ravel: *Soupir*, m. 27-30 (score fragment)

Placet futile (Futile plea)

Similar, however, as a lyrical situation, *Placet futile* introduces us in an entirely different atmosphere. Through the typology of the Ronsard sonnet, Mallarmé evokes another type of longing, a much sensual one, making several allusions to the French poetry of the 18th century. There is a continuous ironic conflict between the archaic style of the text and its quasi-prosaic content, which together with the largely explored bucolic metaphors generates an atmosphere of the rococo. Here, the poetic self is represented by an abbot (*abbé*), while the object of his desire is a princess (*Princesse!*). He envies the Greek goddess painted on her cup, blessed by the princess' incidental

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kisses. The poetical digressions, used to bring the princess in an imaginary proximity (*bichon, pastille, rouge, éventail*), and inflaming the sensuous desire, represent the central element of this playful verse, and ones of the two melodies too:

Ex. 9

Princesse! à jalouser le destin d'une Hébé
Qui poind sur cette tasse au baiser de vos lèvres,
J'use mes feux mais n'ai rang discret que d'abbé
Et ne figurerai même nu sur le Sèvres.

Comme je ne suis pas ton bichon embarbé,
Ni la pastille ni du rouge, ni Jeux mièvres
Et que sur moi je sais ton regard clos tombé,
Blonde dont les coiffeurs divins sont des orfèvres!

Nommez-nous... toi de qui tant de ris framboisés
Se joignent en troupeau d'agneaux apprivoisés
Chez tous broutant les vœux et bêlant aux délires,

Nommez-nous... pour qu'Amour ailé d'un éventail
M'y peigne flûte aux doigts endormant ce bercail,
Princesse, nommez-nous berger de vos sourires.

Placet futile – the poem

Both composers catch the subtle irony of the lyrical situation, but in different manners. Debussy introduces through a minuet movement stylizing elements in the spirit of the 18th century, where the vocal line exposes almost continuously a syllabic state of the text. Ravel, by contrast, composes a quasi-dreamy music, with solemn passages. In each case, one observes a sort of expressive exaggeration, unmasking permanently the noble emotions of the abbot, and lowering them in an ironic way to the level of the sensual phantasies. The music, however, remains all the time elegant.

There are two notably changes in comparison with *Soupir*:
1. Instead of a proper dialog between the voice and accompaniment, here they function rather in a parallel way. While in Debussy's setting, there are, in fact, two "pieces" consisting of a vocal line, which is a natural declamation of the text in a recitative manner, and the piano employing the musical substance, Ravel's voice is treated almost like an instrument of the chamber formation.
2. The relative autonomy of the accompaniment leads to quasi-independent musical plan, as a field for thematic-motivic elaboration.

Both melodies outline the different characters present in the verse: the solemnity of the Abbot's emotions and the gentle chit-chat, evoking the Princess. Further similarities are present at the level of musical structure, mostly regarding the delimitation of the quatrains and tercets. Even the function of the employed materials is somehow identical.

Debussy makes use of three different motifs:

- an introductive one, with melodic and rhythmic function, also present in the conclusion:

Ex. 10

Debussy: Placet futile, m. 1-2

- a whole-tone structure, harmonically exposed, as the expression of the Abbot's resignation:

Ex. 11

Debussy: *Placet futile*, m. 15

- and an ornamental one, for evoking the rococo atmosphere and emphasizing the poetic digressions:

Ex. 12

Debussy: *Placet futile*, m. 11-12

Ravel explores two leitmotifs, singularized by tone-colour:

Ex. 13

Princess motive (clarinet)   Abbé motive (strings)

Ravel: *Placet futile* – leitmotifs

and an arabesque material, which synthesizes the two leitmotifs (emphasized below), expressing their playful approach during the digressions, even renouncing at their tone-colour separation:

Ex. 14
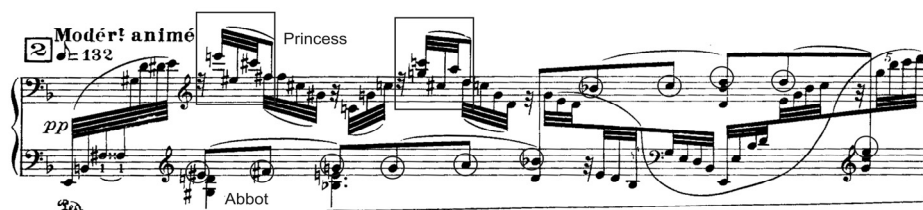
Ravel: *Placet futile*, m. 12

Generally speaking, Ravel's vocal line is more emphatic, sometimes intentionally exaggerated, employing big melodic leaps. Though Debussy's melody is more recitative-declamatory one, he uses – as in *Soupir* – a couple of larger intervals to emphasize certain words. A brief look at these situations shows a striking similar view, which altogether with some other musical solutions demonstrates a sort of dramaturgic consensus. From this perspective, the key elements of the poem appear to be the two invocations of the Princess (*Princesse!*)

Ex. 15

***Placet futile*, correspondent materials**

and the Abbot's two final proposals (*Nommez-nous*), repeated by both composers slightly different each time, according to the evolution of the courtship process. It is also interesting to observe, that these materials structurally are almost identical, being in a mirrored relationship:

Ex. 16

Placet futile, correspondent materials

There are also two other lines similarly emphasized, which express the incertitude of the Abbot (*J'use mes feux mais n'ai rang discret que d'abbé/ Et que sur moi je sais ton regard clos tombé*).

Ravel uses in both cases, almost identically, an "orchestral" block as a musical hyperbola, in ironic contrast with the timid attempts of the Abbot:

Ex. 17

Ravel: *Placet futile*, the second expression of the Abbot's incertitude, m. 15-16 (score fragment)

Debussy duplicates first the vocal line in the accompaniment, and introduces for the second a hexatonic material exposed harmonically:

Ex. 18

Debussy: *Placet futile*, the first expression of the Abbot's incertitude, m. 7-8

Similarly to *Soupir*, both composers use certain elements of musical depiction. Thus, Ravel makes a subconscious oriental (Chinese) allusion to the Sèvres porcelain with pentatony:

Ex. 19

Ravel: *Placet futile*, word-painting, m. 10-11

while the trill in the piano is accompanying the word *flûte* in Debussy's setting:

Ex. 20

Debussy: *Placet futile*, word-painting, m. 26-28

Finally, let's take briefly into consideration the last melodies of the two cycles. If *Soupir* and *Placet futile* were based on the same verses, as the basis of several comparisons, it is difficult to find such connections between *Éventail* by Debussy and *Sourgi de la croupe et du bond* by Ravel. However, there are some similar aspects necessary to point out.

These poems reflect the late, hermetic style of Mallarmé's poetry, which keeps, to some extent, the analogous structure of the cycles. Their subject is also similar regarding their poetic deepness and inner symbolism. *Éventail* brings together elements of the former poems: the fan symbolizes the aspiration to an undefined and ideal (resonating with *Soupir*), while his playful "dialog" with the girl resembles with the atmosphere of *Placet futile*. *Sourgi de la croupe et du bond* it's a profound reflection on the nature of creation and existence through a comparison: the lonely poet is looking at a rose placed in a vase empty of water, waiting for the fulfilment of their reason for being.

Both composers reflect somehow similar to these late poems, by expanding their musical languages to the limits of the tonality in a rather vague discourse by exploring intense chromatics, whole-tone and octatonic structures, where it is hard to identify beyond the atmosphere and some aspects of formal structure analogies between the verses and their musical suggestion. The relative abstractness of these two settings represents in many aspects the boundaries of the poetic-musical dialogs, and also Debussy's and Ravel's exploration in the field of musical symbolism.

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