

THE OSMOSIS OF THE DIVERSITY IN MAURICE RAVEL'S WORK

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SUMMARY. Our study investigates the unity-diversity dichotomy of Maurice Ravel's oeuvre based on the following factors: psycho-aesthetic principles, cultural background and the dialog with contemporary artistic trends. As a whole, his work shows some permanent aesthetic and stylistic reference points experimented and used since his impressionist period, mostly in piano and orchestral pieces. Similarly to Debussy, Ravel widely employs the duplication technique, as a basic style element of musical impressionism. Due to the duplication, which affects both the linear and horizontal parameters of the construction, his work absorbs in a coherent language, a large number of style elements and composition solutions from the French, Spanish, Russian and extra-European cultures. This creative feature corresponds to his neutral aesthetic position, as a source of the artistic dialog between the past and the present, the rational and the inspirational, the local and the foreign art. Our analysis, mainly focused on his impressionist piano works, proposes to identify different coherency levels of Ravel's musical language, as a source of many hermeneutic reflections.

Keywords: psycho-aesthetic principles, cultural background, dialog with contemporary artistic trends, duplication, impressionism, musical language, harmony, and tone-colour.

Despite his critical attitude towards the celebrity, Ravel became the most popular composer in France. According to the statistics of SACEM realized in 1992, some of his works outrun, in the matter of earning royalties, any of pop, rock or film composers'.² The unusual notoriety of certain Ravel opuses in the consumer society of our times, which transforms the "pearls" of classical music in its own object of delectation, lead to a one-sided view of his oeuvre. Unfortunately, one can observe this attitude in the scholarship of his works, since Ravel is – despite his popularity – a relative modestly studied composer.

Nevertheless, these problems, regarding his reception, do not represent a novelty. The composer himself has been confronting permanently with a hostile critique, which placed him all the time in the shadow of Debussy, with a conservative academic environment, which trammelled him in his professional accomplishment, and frequently with a puzzled public.

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² Ivry, Benjamin, *Maurice Ravel: a life*, Welcome Rain Publishers, New York, 2000, p. 1

In a superficial view, Ravel would seem to be a composer full of contradictions, but a thorough analysis reveals the rare complexity of his personality. His work, consisting of about 60 opuses, reflects a great flexibility of musical genres and tone-colour mobility, as a special dynamic in his dialog with several artistic orientations and messages.

Hereinafter, we present the elements, which diversify the panoramic view of his oeuvre, but also those factors, which assure to his music stylistic-aesthetic coherence and permanence.

Consequently, our pleading will have the following structure:

1. The context of Ravel's music, as a source of diversity (psycho-aesthetic aspects, socio-cultural roots);
2. The synthesis-principles of his creative thought, as integrating elements of the diversity;
3. The manifestation of these factors at the level of his works.

1. The context of the Ravelian phenomenon has a great complexity. The inner form of his music has been sketched in a deep relationship with his domestic environment. As the composer himself remembered: *"Well, in my childhood I was much interested in mechanisms... I visited factories often, very often, as a small boy with my father. It was these machines, their clicking and roaring, which, with the Spanish folk songs sung to me at night-time as a berceuse by my mother, formed my first instruction in music!"*³

In the following table, we make an attempt of identifying the multiple manifestations of these psycho-aesthetic principles on various levels of Ravel's personality and music:

Ex. 1

Ravel's parents	Father - Joseph Ravel (Swiss engineer)	Mother - Marie Delouart (Basque origin)
As psycho-aesthetic principles	Mechanic principle	Iberic ethos
As passions	Collecting of mechanical toys	Spain as a second homeland, a place of refuge, idealized place
As aesthetic conceptions	The creation as a conscious process (Baudelaire, E.A. Poe)	The quasi-permanence of the Spanish ethos in his music
As programs	Toccata (Le Tombeau de Couperin), L'Enfant et les Sortilèges, La Vallée des Cloches (Miroirs), Noël des jouets, Le Grillon (Histoires Naturelles)	Habanera (Sites Auriculaires), Rapsodie Espagnole, L'Heure Espagnole, Sérénade Grottesque, Boléro, Don Quichotte à Dulcinée
As principles of composition	Rigorousness in construction, chiselled output, perfectionism, ostinato and duplication techniques	An unusual preference for dance rhythms

The psycho-aesthetic principles of Ravel's music

³ *** *The Cambridge Companion of Ravel* (ed. by Deborah Mawer), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 59

Through their confrontations, we enter in the universe of a complex and contradictory personality,⁴ which integrates several dichotomies: artificial-natural, mechanic-alive, ration-inspiration, reality-illusion, etc. Most of Ravel scholars remarked the discrepancy between his lucid, ironic, sketched spirit and the ineffableness, sensitiveness, subtleness of his music.

To these premises, one can attach the implication of the Parisian cultural-artistic environment in which Ravel has been formed as a composer and artist, though he manifested since his childhood an ambiguous relationship towards it: both a receptive and a distant attitude. As the capital of the European culture, status achieved by the late 19th century, Paris became a magnetic force for several artists, attracting personalities and cultural events from the whole world. In this sense, the World Exposition of 1889 represented both for Debussy's and Ravel's music an important turning point, through the presence of significant Russian composers and the Balinese Gamelan music on the Parisian stages.

Ex. 2

	Paris as a source of intercultural dialogues (World Expositions). Its impact on Ravel's music
Russian music ("The Five")	Folk modes, modal harmony, orchestration
Oriental culture	Gamelan sonorities, oriental sujets, fairy-tale atmosphere (Shéhérazade; Laideronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes)
Afro-american culture	Blues and jazz influences (Sonate pour violon et piano, p. II, Blues; Concerto pour piano et orchestre en sol majeur, p. I, III; L'Enfant et les Sortilèges)
Gypsy culture	Tzigane

The cultural background of Ravel's music

Though his music does not have, generally, a single comprehensive stylistic-aesthetic orientation, one can identify, at the level of certain opuses, several dialogs with contemporary artistic movements, as specific marks for different creative periods of his oeuvre. Thus, the works of his youth, composed in the late 19th century, has been conceived under the influence of the symbolist trends. His mature works, realized in the fist two decades of the 20th century

⁴ Since his youth, Ravel was attracted by the symbolist artist circles, adopting the habit of Baudelaire's dandy. His personality was also deeply affected by the unconventional attitude of E. Satie. According to his best friend, the Spanish piano player Ricardo Viñes, Ravel was orienting toward all that was "poetry, fantasy, precious and rare, paradoxical and refined", in: Viñes, Ricardo, *Des Souvenirs d'enfance et d'adolescence*, in: *La Revue Musicale*, Dec., 1938

are closer to the impressionistic movement.⁵ Around the First World War, his works emphasize expressionistic messages, and subsequently neoclassical elements. The later compositions show the interest of Ravel toward the futurist aesthetics⁶:

Ex. 3

Artistic trends	Period	Ravel's dialog with contemporary artistic trends Their impact on his music
Symbolism	The last decade of the 19 th century	A new vision about the perception of time and space, the objectual nature of the artwork, the consequent cultivation of ambiguities (Sites auriculaires)
Impressionism	The first two decades of the 20 th century	The preoccupation for harmony, tone-color, duplication technique, impressionistic sujets (Jeux d'Eau, Miroirs, Daphnis et Chloé)
Expressionism	Around the First World War	Violence or resignation (Chansons Madécasses, Gaspard de la nuit, La Valse, Ronsard à son âme)
Neoclassicism	The third decade of the 20 th century	Abstraction, manipulation and reconstruction (the multiple aspects of dance)
Futurism	Late works (and many projects)	A quasi-obsession for the mechanic principle (Bolero)

Ravel's dialog with contemporary artistic trends

At the level of psycho-aesthetic factors, the unifying principle, which assures the integration of these complex and diversified premises, resides in his generalized playful attitude, which is concretizing in a great variety of particular manifestations. As a man, Ravel adopted the metaphor of masks, like a virtual contact point with his present. But what lies beneath them – one could ask? It is hard to say, as once removed Ravel also disappears. As an interviewer for De Telegraph exclaimed *"It is not easy to find the hiding place of Maurice Ravel."*⁷ His detached, reserved attitude toward his contemporaries and even toward his own works (in the spirit of the symbolist aesthetics, and especially of Edgar Allan Poe's) assured a necessary equidistance in order to develop a proper and coherent musical language.

⁵ His labelling as an impressionist composer is problematic, because there is a more or less implicit terminological confusion between impressionism and symbolism. Though one can identify certain symbolist elements in Ravel's case, like his declared artistic faith or the adaptation of many symbolist poetic messages in his compositions, the musical manifestation of this trend wasn't cleared up satisfactory until today. Therefore, we use the impressionism term to designate the musical style configured at the intersection of impressionism and symbolism (including the eventual symbolist origin of the message).

⁶ Thus, his oeuvre cannot be described by the characteristics of a single artistic orientation. Nevertheless, the compositions belonging to his symbolist and impressionist period has a greater importance both in their number and significance. His dialog with other contemporary artistic trends was mostly occasional, like the expressionism and futurism, excepting the neo-classical opuses characteristic of most of his post-war works.

⁷ *** *The Cambridge Companion of Ravel*, ed. cit., p. 1

2. Though, in a stylistic sense, Ravel's work has a great diversity, the unity and coherence of his music can be found, in our opinion, at the level of certain creative principles and style elements. In this sense, one can identify two basic constructive types of his musical thought (without excluding others):

- The first, mainly focused on vertical structures (harmony, timbre, sonority surfaces), tends to dissolve the sense of musical flow, in the spirit of impressionistic aesthetics;

- The second, based on the pulsating rhythm of the Spanish folk music, with a mostly linear effect on the musical discourse.

Both typologies root in the same technique, called duplication.⁸ This technique is based on the immediate repetition of a short musical material, followed by the exposition and repetition of another one, etc. In the absence of a median section between the exposition and its duplication, the repetition cannot be interpreted as a reprise. The repeated material has to be sufficiently short in order to create the impression of coherence. Structurally, the duplication may alternate between the total identity and fine variations, where the vertical parameter remains nearly always the same. The systematic use of this technique affects our perception of the musical flow. Thus, the repetition, in the lack of new linear information, leads our attention towards the vertical, spatial dimension of music, i.e. harmony, timbre, sonority surfaces. The quasi-systematic repetition of certain materials represents in its effect a considerable drawing-away from the traditional developing techniques and strategies of the musical discourse.

The difference between these typologies resides in their particular manner of altering the traditional perceptions about the musical discourse: a quasi-mechanic versus a quasi-dynamic treatment of time.

Let's see an example for each typology from the piano cycle *Miroirs*.

Ex. 4

***Une barque sur l'Océan* (static principle – duplication)**

⁸ This term was introduced in French musicology by Nicolas Ruwet (*Langage, musique, poésie*, Seuil, Paris, 1972) in connection with certain Debussy opuses analyzed from a structuralist point of view. Subsequently, it was taken over by the Romanian composer, Cornel Țăranu (Țăranu, Cornel, *Elements of musical stylistics*, Vol. 1., "Gh. Dima" Conservatory, Cluj-Napoca, 1981) in his analyses referring to Debussy and Ravel. The same phenomenon is described by Boulez with the term *binom* (Pierre Boulez, *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*, Éd. Gauthier, 1964). In our view, the duplication is one of the basic stylistic elements of the impressionist music.

As one can observe, the duplication is based on a musical material of a single measure. The audition of this measure focuses our attention towards the linear flow of the music (especially the quasi-melodic line placed in the right hand). Nevertheless, the two immediate repetitions of the same material, in the lack of new horizontal information, lead inevitably our attention towards the harmonic and timbre latencies of the vertical plan.

This change of perception is sustained by the nature of the musical materials: the broken chords in the left hand and the ambiguous character of the material exposed in the right hand, which represents a transition between the melody and harmony. In order to avoid the monotony, the composer introduces in the fourth measure new information. By elongating certain notes of the harmonic structure (g sharp, c sharp), a quasi-melody is rising from the sonority surface, which is also a mirrored inversion (*Miroirs*) of the material exposed in the right hand. Due to the duplication, its augmentation leads, paradoxically, to a linear deceleration of the musical flow, static in its essence.

Ex. 5

The image displays a musical score for 'Alborada del gracioso' (dynamic principle). It is divided into two main sections: 'material 1' and 'material 1 duplicated'. The score is written for piano, with a tempo marking 'Assez vif.' and a dynamic marking 'mf'. The first section, 'material 1', consists of two measures. The second section, 'material 1 duplicated', consists of two measures. The score is annotated with blue frames around certain notes, indicating 'effective accents', and green frames around other notes, indicating 'latent accents'. A red box highlights a specific musical phrase in the second section, labeled 'new musical information'. Below the score, two arrows point to the right, labeled 'rarefaction of the accents' and 'spatial dilation'. The title 'Alborada del gracioso (dynamic principle)' is centered below the score.

In this case, we have a somehow contrary procedure, however similar in its effect. Here the basic unity of duplication is a two measure material, having a totally different character, due to its Spanish folk music origin. We have to notice the rhythmic-metric complexity of the discourse, which denotes, in terms of accents, a rarefying. In a first phase, the latent accents⁹ generated

⁹ The effective accents are indicated by blue frames, and latent ones with green frames.

by the overlapping of the materials in the two hands disappear from the fifth measure. Then, from the sixth measure on, according to the occurrence of a new material (the demisemiquaver triplets) the proper accent of the fourth beat also disappears, in order to prepare the totalizing realized by the amplification of vertical resonances through the repetition of “empty fifths” from the lower registers towards the higher ones.

The preparation of the totalizing occurs in the seventh measure, being finalized starting from the ninth measure. The “empty fifths” used to obtain a resonance effect, will play further an important role in dissolving the nervous rhythmic discourse, also projecting its energy in the musical space.

In their effect, both presented typologies lead the musical discourse to a slowing down sensation, implicit toward the focusing on vertical structures, which prove to be indispensable for exploiting their harmonic and timbre resources. Not incidentally, only these two works were later orchestrated by the composer from the entire piano cycle.

Though a theoretic approach allows us to delimitate these typologies and procedures, the compositional practice of Ravel’s music frequently shows a dynamic interaction between them.

Let’s see another example for the interaction of these two principles: the osmosis of the Spanish rhythmic nervousness with the integrating parameter of verticality.

Ex. 6

Introduction et allegro for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet

Ravel uses here two musical materials also employed in *Alborada del gracioso*, for a different scope. While in the already mentioned work they had a primarily contrasting function, in this case, they produce fast dissolutions of the ostinato pulsation in the vertical direction. This solution is realized in the above cited section of the work in two phases, at the level of a single duplication unity, where the broken chord material (harp) which overlaps even the rhythmic-melodic ostinato formula, produces sudden interruptions, in other words, quick temporal expansions. Such a fast oscillation between two temporal phases generates a suspended temporal surface, sustained also by the presence of the duplications.

According to the above mentioned examples, the use of specific typologies based on the duplication technique lead to a partial dilation of our perception about musical time in the limits of the homogenous medium¹⁰ of music, and simultaneously causes its redirecting toward the vertical structures. Therefore, every element belonging to the verticality gains a primary function in these compositions. By this means, the music of Ravel shows an approach to the aesthetics of the impressionist painting.

The dissolution of the moment, or rather its dilatation towards the timeless in the impressionist painting corresponds to the musical phenomenon of the sonority surfaces, which is a result of fusing several contiguous moments in great sounding unities. The moment gains a virtual function, in which the past and future coexists, corresponding to the artistic grasp of the impressions.

Unfortunately, one can observe several misunderstandings, which persists in the apprehension of the vertical structure's role in Ravel's music, giving rise to some defective views concerning to the phenomenon of melody and one of the orchestration.

1. Most of Debussy-Ravel comparative studies emphasize the contoured aspect of Ravel's melodies. Even this statement may have some justification (for example, the famous melody of the *Bolero*), it represents only a half-truth. Otherwise, the obstinate repetition of the *Bolero*'s melodic theme creates the premise of its own dissolution in the general sonority, through the dynamic and orchestral amplification.

Further, there are also many situations when one cannot speak about a proper melody¹¹, but a marginal situation between melody and harmony. Such a compositional solution is the resonance harmony, when the melody generates the harmony, and vice versa, when certain chord elements set up a melodic line through their emphasizing. Here is an example for the latter situation:

¹⁰ „This concept refers to the immanent zone of the aesthetic field, where the music has an authentic and adequate manifestation, delimited by the objective and subjective parameters of the creative and interpretative process.” in: Angi István, *Lectures on Musical Aesthetics*, vol. II, University of Oradea Press, 2004, p. 157

¹¹ In our conception, the melody is a horizontal process, where the notes are organized in functional relationships, gravitating around one or more polar nucleus.

Ex. 7

Une barque sur l'Océan (Miroirs)

This example demonstrates clearly the rise of a melody from the general sonority, through the emphasizing of its harmonic elements.

The music of Ravel turns frequently to sonority structures, which are neutral from a harmonic-functional (implicitly melodic) point of view, like the tetra tonality or pent tonality, these representing the premises and often the instruments for the vertical dissolution of certain musical materials, which are sometimes extremely different by their nature.

2. One emphasizes frequently the great quality of Ravel's (and Debussy's) orchestrations. This statement, like the above mentioned problem of melodic contours, represents also a half-truth. Inverting it, one can affirm that the music of Ravel cannot exist without this parameter, namely, the orchestral colour is an organic element of his music. Thus, the greatest number of his compositions is situated by their vertical structure in a half-way between the piano and orchestra.

Therefore, Ravel achieves the osmosis of his oeuvre's diversity through the integrating treatment of the verticality, namely by generating mutual determined temporal-spatial surfaces, called sonority areas. By the partial suspending of the listener's traditional perception of musical flow, and also through a sensitive balance between the melodic and harmonic factor, Ravel integrates successfully in the structure of his compositions different sort of musical materials. Thus, the unity of harmony and tone-colour achieves a neutralizing potential.

Finally, we should follow the presence and functioning of the already mentioned phenomena at the level of a single opus, namely a juvenile impressionistic piano masterpiece, *Jeux d'Eau*, conceived by Ravel in a bi-thematic sonata form.

The first theme appears rather as sonority by its harmonic structure; register of exposition, and through the presence of the duplication. Moreover, the use of pedal facilitates the obtaining of an increased piano resonance level. Through these instruments, Ravel evokes according to the programmatic content¹², the atmosphere of the aquatic playfulness:

Ex. 8



Jeux d'Eau, first sonata theme

If we listen to this fragment – as a hermeneutical play – on a music box, so beloved by Ravel, the result will be surprising. The presence of such a hermeneutic latency is sustained by the quasi-mechanic flow of the discourse, and also by the unusual register of its exposition through the entire work. If we listen again the piano version, we will notice the introduction of a new hermeneutic horizon¹³ (according to H. G. Gadamer) in the apprehension of this masterpiece, one of the mechanic toys. This is an example for the integrating presence of the cultural and psycho-aesthetic diversity at the level of a single work. The expressive latencies of this piano work, namely the flexible aquatic sonority and one of the mechanic toys, are rooted in the same aesthetic principle: the playful joy.

Moreover, following the rhythmic structure of the above mentioned fragment, we may notice a certain relationship with one of the Spanish folk-dances for the following reasons:

- The quasi-continuous rhythmic pulsation is interrupted by a distinct formula (in our case four demisemiquavers), generating an accent on the last unity of duplication;
- The ostinato-character of the Spanish folk-music, assured in our example by the duplication;
- The element of surprise, specific for the Spanish folk-dances (the expected third repetition of the demisemiquaver formula is omitted):

¹² The programmatic content of this work is based on the following motto by the symbolist poet and writer Henri Régnier: „Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille” (River God laughing at the water which tickles him).

¹³ Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1975

Ex. 9

Jeux d'Eau, first sonata theme

By its sonorities, *Jeux d'Eau* also shows some correspondences with the Gamelan music of Bali. We are pointing to the second sonata theme:

Ex. 10

Jeux d'Eau, second sonata theme

Here the theme (consisting of a tetra tonic material) is repeated three times through the duplication technique, creating the impression of new thematic entries, typical to orchestral writing. Thus, due to the duplications, the discourse is permanently diversified by fresh elements.

In the latter example, one can observe the gradual densification of the starting material through its progressive enrichment. From the second measure, the tetra tonic material is diversified by a register change, while the third measure brings a mixture-based densification of the right-hand material, and the precipitation of the ground sonority. Moreover, the latter structure represents an inversion of the former, realized in the spirit of the double counterpoint. The fourth measure, while continues the discourse, also brings some slight modifications: a register change of the mixture-based

material and a descendent pentatonic structure, resulting from both rhythmic and dynamic emphasizing of the acoustic figuration's ground-notes. This produces a bell-effect, where the pitches of notes disappear in the middle of their overtone's vibrations.

The musical elaboration of this fragment is mainly based on the sonority densification of a tetra tonic material, exploited both in a harmonic and melodic sense. As a result, this section evokes the rich sonority of the Gamelan orchestra.

Concerning the Gamelan-effect, Ravel offers in the *Laideronnette*, *Impératrice des Pagodes* section of his *Ma mère l'Oye* suite a more eloquent example. By the orchestral transcription of this suite, initially conceived for piano four hands, the composer exploits the harmonic and tone-colour potential of its musical structure in order to obtain a typical sonority effect of the Gamelan music:

Ex. 11

The musical score for 'Laideronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes' is presented in three systems. The first system, in 2/4 time (duple metre), shows a 'pentatonic ground material' (marked 'm.d.' and 'pp') which is then 'material 1 (duplicated)'. The second system, in 3/4, 5/8, and 6/8 time signatures, shows 'material 1 var. (duplicated)' and 'material 1 synthesis'. The third system, in 4/8 and 3/8 time signatures, continues the 'material 1 synthesis'. Annotations include 'tetra tonic completed to a pentatony' and 'triple metre'.

Laideronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes (Ma mère l'Oye suite)

Due to the efficient use of a few musical materials, this composition may appear as a simple one. Nevertheless, Ravel obtains a great diversity and colour by their various employments, both in a harmonic and melodic sense. Firstly, we notice the systematic duplication of a pentatonic ground material, exposed in different contexts of sonority (the first varied material results from the rhythmic precipitation of the first material), followed by their synthesis (while the rhythmic precipitation of the first material remains, the

pauses disappears, thus the notes are being absorbed in a “continuous” sonority). On this synthesis-material appears the tetra tonic “melody” which is completed to a pentatonic by the g-sharp note of the ground structure, or rather is being dissolved in this pentatonic background.

The superposition of a pronouncedly skewed “melody” with a slowly changing metric structure of the pentatonic material leads to a poly-metrical complexity, where the accents lose their traditional function of articulating the musical flow. As a result, our attention is directed again toward the vertical (harmonic and tone-colour) potential of these sonority areas.

* * *

Ravel's personality sums up many paradoxes, which are blended together harmonically as a consequence of his native playful spirit. The complexity of his cultural and psycho-aesthetic heritage is integrating naturally at the inter-textual level of his works, so to say, in meta-stylistic aspects.

Due to the widely employment of certain compositional tools (discursive typologies) and neutral musical structures from a harmonic point of view (tetra tonic, pentatonic), the composer achieves such sonority, colour and time-manipulation effects, which lead us, ultimately, to the message and stylistic elements of the symbolist and impressionist movements.

Nevertheless, the composer of these works remains above all, not an impressionist, futurist or neoclassic artist, but the unmistakable Maurice Ravel, a sensitive and unique mirror of such a complex era.

(Translated into English by Fodor Attila)

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