

## OVERTURE “SHÉHÉRAZADE” BY MAURICE RAVEL: GENRE AND SEMANTIC PROJECTIONS

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**SUMMARY.** The article is devoted to the study of the genre specificity of M. Ravel's overture de féerie “*Shéhérazade*” (1898) and the identification of its important semantic aspects. The non-traditional genre definition of the composition as an overture de féerie reveals the composer's desire to *actualize* the theatrical context known to the listener (the féerie genre). The composer seems to extend the “exotic” semantic layer, given in the title by the name of the heroine of the Arabian tales “One Thousand and One Nights”, to the “stereophonic” space of the féerie, and the orchestra completely takes over all the functions of creating the physical and metaphysical dimensions of the féerie. The multidimensionality of the national theatrical genre of the féerie is “folded” in the “*Shéhérazade*” *overture* into an orchestral space that contains multilevel projections of the unfolding of extra-musical meanings. This is how the connections between the first orchestral composition and the compositions of the following years - “Waltz” (“choreographic poem”) and “Bolero” (“ballet for orchestra”) – are revealed. The unity of plastic and sound gestures, sensual and deeply hidden from thoughts fantasies will remain a distinctive characteristic of Maurice Ravel's thinking until his last compositions.

**Keywords:** Maurice Ravel, Shéhérazade, overture de féerie, genre innovation, semantic projection, Orientalism.

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## Introduction

The compositions of Maurice Ravel attract performers and researchers with original artistic concepts that reveal the uniqueness of the composer's style system and the independence of genre solutions. From the very first opuses, the composer follows his own path, and his "voice" immediately becomes noticeable in the colorful sound context of the French musical culture of the fin de siècle.

Among Ravel's earliest compositions, which clearly reveal the individual "Me" of their author, is the overture de féerie "*Shéhérazade*" (1898), based on the Arabian tales "One Thousand and One Nights". A few years later, the composer wrote another composition with the same title, but with completely different genre parameters – "*Shéhérazade*" (Three Poems for Voice and Orchestra) (1903) based on poems by Tristan Klingsor.

Both compositions embody dissimilar artistic ideas and have independent concepts. Their performance fate also developed in a different way. "Three Poems for Voice and Orchestra" (Durand, 1914), published during the composer's lifetime, put the overture de féerie on the sidelines for a long time, and its score was published only in 1975 (S.E.M.U.P. et A.R.I.M.A., New York). And Ravel's critical references in his "Autobiographical Sketch" about "the significant influence of Russian composers"<sup>4</sup> on him while working on his unfinished opera "*Shéhérazade*" in the late 90s of the XIX century further consolidated the later vocal and orchestral version of *Shéhérazade* as original and artistically perfect. To this day, the focus of researchers' attention is mainly on the composer's interpretation of the semantic space of Arabic fairy tales through the prism of Tristan Klingsor's prose poetic texts, although they do not ignore the "*Shéhérazade*" overture<sup>5</sup>.

Both of the composer's early compositions are represented in contemporary music practice, so studying the genre and style parameters of Ravel's orchestral debut is a necessary step in understanding the unique artistic world of the French artist. The "*Shéhérazade*" overture reveals important features of Ravel's musical thinking. So, let's focus on its exceptional genre characteristics and methods of implementing the author's idea.

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<sup>4</sup> Ravel Maurice. *Esquisse autobiographique*. Maurice Ravel. L'intégrale – Correspondance (1895–1937) écrits et entretiens. Sous la direction de Manuel Cornejo. Paris : Le Passeur, p. 1438.

<sup>5</sup> Marnat, M. *Maurice Ravel*. Paris: Fayard, 1995; Roger, Nichols. *Ravel*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

## 2. "Overture de Féerie": Specifics of the Genre Definition

In November 1898 Ravel finished his first composition for symphony orchestra, the overture de féerie "Shéhérazade". At this time, he was a student of Gabriel Fauré's class at the Paris Conservatoire and already had creative experience of working with chamber vocal and piano genres (in the Catalog of the composer's compositions compiled by M. Mame, the "Shéhérazade" overture is marked as O.17<sup>6</sup>). However, in the field of large forms it was the composer's debut and the prevailing negative reviews of contemporaries at the premiere testify to the fact how alien Ravel's artistic ideas remained to them.

Already the definition of the genre shows the originality of the composer's idea. The author's definition of "**overture de féerie**" refers to the French theatrical genre of "féerie", the basis of which was fantastic plots, miraculous transformations, vivid visual effects and the synthesis of various artistic languages (words, music, gesture and dance). Its origins are in spectacular productions of the ballet de cour and comédie-ballet, in which visual, verbal and musical expression of the plot were intricately woven into an exciting illusion. Jean-Philippe Rameau<sup>7</sup> is considered the creator of the "opéra-féerie" genre. The fusion of mythological and magical plans of plot unfolding, magical twists and turns of action, and the possibility of immersing the audience in a reality far away from the commonplace and everyday life, characteristic of the opéra-féerie, explained the great popularity of the genre, explained the great popularity of the genre on the French theater stage of the next romantic XIX century (opéras-féerie "*La fée aux roses*" by Fromental Halévy (1849), "*La Chatte blanche*" (1852) by des Frères Cogniard, "*Le Roi d'Ys*" by Édouard Lalo (1888), "*Isoline*" by André Messager (1888), etc.).

Of course, as a fine connoisseur of national traditions, Ravel was well aware of this stratum of French culture, which is why his reflection in the definition of "overture de féerie" seems particularly important for understanding the author's intention. The author's unusual definition of the genre is all the more impossible to ignore, given how carefully Ravel always searched for the right word to express his ideas. Hinting at the theatrical context known to the listener, the composer seems to extend the "exotic" semantic layer to the "stereophonic"

<sup>6</sup> Marnat, M. *Maurice Ravel*. Paris: Fayard, 1995. p. 730

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the use of the term "opéra-féerie," the authors of the article "Opéra féerie" in The New Grove Dictionary write: «While the term opéra féerie was uncommon in the 18th century (although it did exist, e.g. Dezède's Alcindor, 1787), and entered the current vocabulary only after 1800, modern scholars use it with justice to refer to these earlier works». In: Bartlett, M., Elizabeth, C. *Opéra féerie*. Grove Music Online: website. Link: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.18674>

space of the *féerie* given in the title by the name of the heroine of the Arabian fairy tales “One Thousand and One Nights”. It should be emphasized that he is writing not a composition for the stage, “but an orchestral piece”. Therefore, **the orchestra** fully assumes all the functions of creating **the multi-dimensional space of the *féerie*, its physical and metaphysical dimensions**.

In the light of the above-mentioned, we should note that at the same time the semantic projections of the genre of the *féerie* attracted Maurice Maeterlinck, a brilliant contemporary of Ravel, a Belgian symbolist writer. He labeled his famous play “The Blue Bird” (1908) as “*Féerie en six actes et douze tableaux*”. Related artistic ideas of the writer are subtly commented on by modern researchers, emphasizing that the *féerie* should be understood here **as a special semantic matrix of the “vision of the world” as a unity of the visible and invisible**<sup>8</sup>. Proceeding from the fact that art “must obstruct the obvious visibility of things in order to penetrate into their essence”, Maeterlinck finds in the *féerie* “a means of depicting his irrational worldview and rediscovering this magical space of indivisibility, the inseparability of man and the universe”<sup>9</sup>. Then “people no longer seem isolated, but immersed in their relationship with the whole world. They are part of a network of correspondences circulating through the universe, linking humans and animals, animate and inanimate beings, things on and under the Earth, sounds, colors and elements”.<sup>10</sup>

The semantic fields outlined above are close to the spiritual world of Ravel, a refined Dandy who devoted his entire life to the Service of Beauty and the identification of the unity of its laws in life and art. We see strikingly close reasoning in his article of 1931: “For me there are not many arts, but only one: Music, painting and literature differ only in the means of expression. Therefore, there are not different types of artists, but only different types of *spécialistes*”.<sup>11</sup> The creation of ideal artistic structures in which all elements would merge into a whole determines the composer’s main creative routes. On this path, the “*fantasie lyrique*” “*L’Enfant et les Sortilèges*” (1925) becomes a vivid expression of Ravel’s creative credo. It unites not only different artistic languages, but also the fictional and the real (autobiographical) into a unique space of true *féerie*. It is remarkable that already in his first orchestral composition, Ravel, with genius insight, “rolled up” all the intentions of his

<sup>8</sup> Vandenborre, Katia. *Analyse comparative de la féerie chez Maeterlinck et Wyspiański. La Noce face au premier théâtre de Maeterlinck*, TRANS- [En línea], 8/ 2009. Link: <http://journals.openedition.org/trans/348>

<sup>9</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> Gorceix, Paul. *De La Princesse Maleine à La Princesse Isabelle. Essai sur le théâtre de Maeterlinck*. Maurice Maeterlinck, Œuvres II : théâtre I, Bruxelles, Complexe, 1999. p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ravel, M. *Mes souvenirs d'enfant paresseux*. Maurice Ravel. L'intégrale – Correspondance (1895–1937) écrits et entretiens. Sous la direction de Manuel Cornejo. Paris : Le Passeur. p. 1443.

further creative movement into a fifteen-minute orchestral canvas, leaving the label "overture de féerie" on the surface of his artistic ideas.

However, the author's genre definition went unnoticed by his contemporaries, and the "guiding star" for understanding the music of the overture was its title "Shéhérazade". It clearly resonated with the total fascination of European society with the East at the end of the XIX century, when Orientalism dominated in the decorative elements of architectural ensembles and paintings; it was evident in the "oriental" details of the closet of the Parisian artistic elite and the organization of interiors; it flourished in the decoration of ceremonial salons with Japanese prints, Chinese gravures, valuable examples of oriental weapons and showcases with exquisite exotic trinkets. In line with this fascination was also the success of "oriental" compositions of Russian composers in Paris. "Antar", "Shéhérazade", "Sadko" by N. Rimsky-Korsakov, "Tamara" by M. Balakirev, included in the concert program of the World Universal Exhibition in 1889, were well known to French listeners. It is quite natural that on reading the title Shéhérazade, the audience expected to hear another variant of the interpretation of the popular plot of Arabian fairy tales, and the parallels with Rimsky-Korsakov's "Shéhérazade" were on the surface.

Certainly, Ravel was not aloof from these ideas that had taken hold of French society. According to the testimony of Ravel's friend Ricardo Viñes, during the Exhibition in Paris the composer spent hours in Kampong, a reconstruction of a village on the island of Java, which became a genuine sensation and surprised visitors to the Exhibition with the unconventional sounds of Indonesian musical instruments and the dances of graceful dancers. Perhaps it was this experience of combining the mesmerizing grace of movements and the sound of gamelan, when the visible and audible were combined in a new and unusual reality, that became the basis for the artistic conception of Ravel's first orchestral composition.

In addition, an important source of Ravel's artistic ideas were his contacts with prominent representatives of French culture of the time. Thanks to G. Fauré, who always showed concern for his students, Ravel was accepted by representatives of the Parisian artistic elite, united around "*La Revue blanche*" – one of the best magazines in Paris. Here André Gide, Jules Renard, Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Claudel, Stéphane Mallarmé, and other prominent French figures discussed the pressing issues of modern life. In particular, Joseph-Charles Mardrus, a great connoisseur of Eastern culture, who realized a new "authentic" translation of the tales of "*One Thousand and One Nights*", was often mentioned<sup>12</sup>. This may also have encouraged Ravel to conceive

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<sup>12</sup> The first edition of the tales of "One Thousand and One Nights" in Europe was published in 1704. In a new translation by Joseph Charles Mardrus, the tales were published from 1899 to 1904 (16 volumes in total).

of his first opera, “Shéhérazade”. As a result, only the “overture de féerie” was finished, for which the composer chose a triple orchestra with an expanded group of percussion instruments. And this fact should also be noted as extraordinary in the career of a novice composer who boldly used a huge orchestral composition in his first composition, requiring great skill and musical taste on the part of the composer.

“Shéhérazade” was performed in a concert of the National Society on May 27, 1899 under the baton of the author and immediately showed the complexities of understanding Ravel’s music. For the composer, who was still a student at the conservatory, the opportunity to hear his composition in a concert of the National Society was a rare chance to make a name for himself. Gabriel Fauré played a major role in organizing this concert, insisting that his student overcome his shyness and submit the score for consideration, and ensuring that the National Society committee accepted the composition of an unknown young composer.

It is interesting from the standpoint of the present day to see how the story of the preparation of the overture for the premiere unfolded. Having received an approving score, Ravel had to prepare and scrutinize the musical text in all the parts himself, since the National Society was “saving money as much as possible”<sup>13</sup>. Vincent d’Indy, who was to conduct the overture, wrote to the author of “Shéhérazade” on April 29, 1899, that he needed to discuss the details of the performance of the composition, which “is not yet clear in all its details in my mind”<sup>14</sup>. It is significant that in the very next letter this authoritative musician, out of inertia, calls “Shéhérazade” a “**poème symphonique**”, apologizing that “circumstances prevent him from conducting the composition”<sup>15</sup>.

Fauré was very worried about this situation. He lamented that Ravel, who spent all day copying parts, was in such a difficult position<sup>16</sup>. As a result, the composer himself took the console, appearing in front of the public for the first time both as the author of an orchestral work and as a conductor.

“Shéhérazade” was not welcomed by the audience and drowned in the noise of indignant whistles and stomping. Ricardo Viñes described the evening of the premiere in his diary like this: “I was the only one who confronted

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<sup>13</sup> d’Indy, Vincent. Lettre à Maurice Ravel № 5 de 29.04.1899. Maurice Ravel. *L’intégrale – Correspondance (1895–1937) écrits et entretiens*. Sous la direction de Manuel Cornejo. Paris : Le Passeur, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit. p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> d’Indy, Vincent. Lettre à Maurice Ravel № 6 de 8 ou 15.05.1899. Maurice Ravel. *L’intégrale – Correspondance (1895–1937) écrits et entretiens*. Sous la direction de Manuel Cornejo. Paris : Le Passeur, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> Fauré, G. Lettre à Ernest Chausson № 7 de 20.05.1899. Maurice Ravel. *L’intégrale – Correspondance (1895–1937) écrits et entretiens*. Sous la direction de Manuel Cornejo. Paris: Le Passeur, p. 68.

the entire hall, shouting 'bravo,' 'bravo,' 'bravo,' standing up, applauding with all my might, in such a way that everyone had to pay attention to me. In fact, Ravel deserved it, because he had talent, he was young and unknown to everyone"<sup>17</sup>.

After the concert, official criticism literally attacked the composer. Pierre Lalo, who remained hostile to Ravel until the end of his career, was particularly polemical. Lalo's review, published in the authoritative "Temps" on June 13, 1899, testified to his fierce rejection of the conception of the composition, his misunderstanding of the principles of form and the logic of the movement of the material: "In reality, "Shéhérazade" consists of a sequence of very short fragments connected to each other only superficially. It is 10 bars, or 15, or 30, which seem to expound an idea; then suddenly there is a completely different material and again another. It is not known where it comes from or where it is going. To call this **rhapsody** an overture "built on a classical model"<sup>18</sup>, Ravel must have had great naivety or imagination; unless he is mocking us"<sup>19</sup>.

This rather pejorative definition of "rhapsody" used by the critic for a symphonic composition of the late XIX century is quite revealing, which speaks eloquently of how unnoticed the composer's methods of combining the musical elements of the orchestral fabric remained. And yet, paying tribute to the sophistication of Ravel's harmonic language and the colorfulness of the sound of individual episodes, Lalo admitted that "he could have made a great artist". Therefore, "we should wish Mr. Ravel not to neglect unity and to think more often of Beethoven"<sup>20</sup> [ibid].

Similar reviews appeared in other publications, expressing the hope that a great future could await Ravel, provided he worked hard, further improved his compositional technique and developed his own style, different from Debussy, Satie and the Russians.

The wise Fauré advised Ravel not to pay attention to criticism and believed that the very attention to the young composer's name and the atmosphere of scandal around him was extremely useful. As for the unfair

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<sup>17</sup> Marnat, M. *Maurice Ravel*. Paris: Fayard, 1995. p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> The program of the concert included the author's commentary on the composition, which explained the compositional intent of the overture; Ravel wrote that the overture was "built on **the model of classical overtures**": "the piece opens with an introduction in which the theme of "Shéhérazade", given to the oboe, is carried on by the French horns and trumpets. Then the overture in the true sense of the word begins. *The first part*: the initial motif in B-minor; development - the Theme of the episode (with the trumpets expounding the second motif in F sharp major), inspired by a Persian melody - Conclusion of the first part. *Second part*: development of four themes - Pedal based on an increase of the original motive. *Third part*: return of the first and second motives in simultaneity. *Recapitulation of the introduction*, which is fulfilling the role of a coda". In: Marnat, M. *Maurice Ravel*. Paris: Fayard, 1995. p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Marnat, M. *Maurice Ravel*. Paris: Fayard, 1995. p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Op.cit. p. 92.

assessments and judgments of reviewers, he was sure that very soon these opinions would be refuted.

Ravel himself was rather pleased with his conducting debut and the premiere of the overture. In a letter to Florent Schmitt (dated June 9, 1899) he wrote: "As this ... (choose your own epithet) quite accurately pointed out, "Shéhérazade" was greatly booed. True, they applauded too, and I must admit, for the love of truth, that there was more applause than whistles: I was even called twice. D'Indy, who, however, had kept a perfect attitude towards me, exulted that at least something had stirred up the passions. As far as I could tell from the conductor's desk, I had succeeded in the orchestration. Everyone found it colorful; and "Menestrel" even declared it "curious"<sup>21</sup>.

Ravel's student and friend Manuel Rosenthal recalled that the composer later spoke disparagingly of his first symphonic composition: "He was ashamed of it, which is why it was not published. Laughing at himself, he said that the whole-tone scales used here were enough for him to last a lifetime! Also, it is very poorly orchestrated. And finally, there's **nothing** here, it's horrible."<sup>22</sup>.

Ravel's assessment seems overly harsh. The composer still managed to say his own word, and it is hard to believe in the sincerity of his words that there is "nothing in this composition". In this context, it is important to note that later, Ravel would say something similar about his brilliant "Bolero": "My masterpiece? It is the "Bolero". But unfortunately, *it has no music*"<sup>23</sup>. We should also emphasize that "Bolero" (according to the genre definition "ballet for orchestra") was the composer's last theatrical composition, summing up his numerous references to various *stage genres* (opera, ballet and dance *divertissements*). Thus, between the earliest and the last orchestral composition, a kind of arch emerges, encompassing Ravel's entire path and revealing the remarkable integrity of his creative principles and aesthetic guidelines.

So, impressive replacements of the author's genre definition (symphonic poem, rhapsody), as well as the use in modern practice of the genre definition "overture" without the author's specification "féerie" make it difficult to understand the semantic levels of the composition. It seems that it is the definition of "féerie" that indicates the main characteristics of the content – *exclusion from the ordinary context, the charm of fantasy and fiction*. The title "Shéhérazade" suggests little to the listener, and what becomes important is what lies beyond the sphere of the purely musical.

<sup>21</sup> Ravel, M. Lettre à Florent Schmitt № 9 de 9.06.1899. Maurice Ravel. L'intégrale – Correspondance (1895–1937) écrits et entretiens. Sous la direction de Manuel Cornejo. Paris : Le Passeur, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> Ravel. Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal / recueillis par Marcel Marnat. Paris: Hazan, 1995. p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> Marnat M. *Maurice Ravel*. p. 635.



What the young composer was really thinking about can only be answered by studying the score of the overture, which should be given independent attention.

## Conclusion

Already in his early composition, Ravel seeks to delineate the semantic space of his music through an appeal to an unconventional genre model. The definition of "Shéhérazade" as an overture de féerie indicates that the main meanings of the composition should not be sought in the musical portraits of the protagonist (Shéhérazade) or in the sound illustrations of the stories she tells. Actualizing a powerful layer of national culture represented by the theatrical féerie, Ravel emphasizes by genre definition the idea of creating a *new artistic world* in which the author's fantasies and his voice merge.

In none of his "Shéhérazades" (1899 and 1903) did the composer seek to portray an "authentic Orient." Ravel's individual vision of the Orient as the Other, as a space of freedom of the spirit, persisted throughout his life, until his last unrealized composition inspired by a trip to Baghdad (the opera "Morgiana"<sup>24</sup>).

The multidimensionality of the theatrical genre of féerie, which traditionally requires synthetic scenes, is "rolled up" in the "Shéhérazade" overture into **an orchestral space** that accommodates multi-level projections of the unfolding of extramusical meanings. This reveals the links between the first orchestral composition and the compositions of the following years – "Waltz" ("choreographic poem") and "Bolero" ("ballet for orchestra"). The unity of plastic and sound gesture, of sensual fantasies and deeply hidden reflections, will remain a distinctive characteristic of Maurice Ravel's thinking until the very last of his compositions.

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<sup>24</sup> Only 10 pages of sketches dating back to 1932 have been saved.

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