

Maurice Ravel: Gallic Elegance

(excerpts from *'The Lives of the Great Composers'*, by Harold C. Schonberg)

Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy were to each other in France what Anton Bruckner and Gustav Mahler were to each other in Austria. Their careers overlapped, and they had certain things in common, representing much the same backgrounds and traditions. Debussy and Ravel are classified as impressionists – indeed the only two impressionists of importance. But, as with Bruckner and Mahler, their differences were vaster than the things they had in common.

Where Debussy was a sensuous composer, in the line of Chopin, Ravel was much the more objective, a precisionist whose line runs from Liszt to Saint-Saëns to Fauré. Debussy's music floats on a cushion of air. Ravel's ticks away like a well-assembled chronometer. Stravinsky once referred to Ravel as a "Swiss watchmaker" of music composition. His music contains a great deal of artifice, and he was accused in his day of being artificial. "Has it ever occurred to them," he asked of his detractors, "that one may be artificial by nature?" Ravel never minded being called artificial, but he very much minded being called imitative. Many critics in the first decade of the 20th century wrote that Ravel copied Debussy. Ravel deeply resented the charge, noting that one of his most revealing and enduring works – *Jeux d'Eau* – was composed and published before Debussy had composed piano music of any importance.

Ravel, born in 1875, was not a child prodigy, and remained at the Paris Conservatoire for sixteen years, an unusually long time. In 1898 he began to be performed, in 1901-02 composed and published *Jeux d'Eau*, and by 1905, at the age of 30, was a famous man, when a scandal erupted over his failure to win the *Prix de Rome*. Ravel was not merely a young, talented composer. He was far more, than that. He had proved himself and already was the most-discussed young composer in France. As early as 1895 he was in print with his *Menuet antique*, a short piano piece that already had the sophisticated precision of his mature style. Ricardo Viñes, the Spanish pianist who had been a classmate of Ravel's at the Conservatoire and who eventually was to play the premiers of nearly all of Ravel's and Debussy's piano music, had introduced *Jeux d'Eau* in 1902. In 1903 Ravel composed the song cycle *Shéhérazade*, and in 1904 the *String Quartet* in F major. The denial of the prize to Ravel – nominally because he had finally exceeded the age limit, but most likely because the composition he submitted was deemed a mockery by some members of the jury – was met with indignation not only in musical circles, and the newspapers seized the story, siding with Ravel. For a few months Paris buzzed with the dispute. Ravel was interviewed by *Le Temps* and issued a dignified statement, shortly thereafter leaving the Conservatoire, whose former head – Theodore Dubois – had resigned as director as a result of *l'affaire Ravel*, to be replaced by Gabriel Fauré.

Ravel would from then on, to the end of his life, live quietly as a composer. He was a tiny man, just about five feet tall, elegant, a natty dresser to the point of dandyism. "I would at any time rather have been Beau Brummel than Maurice Ravel," he once said. He claimed Basque ancestry through his

mother, but nobody has been able to trace the family line far enough back to see if the claim had any validity. He never married, and his name was never linked to either a woman or a man. There was a good deal of gossip about him in his day, little if any of it ever substantiated.

For a long time he was a member of a group known as the “Apaches”, along with others who were poets, pianists, composers, writers, music critics and others famous in French intellectual life. This was a French version of Schumann’s *Davidband*. Much of Ravel’s music was first heard by the Apaches, and he listened very carefully to their criticisms. His *Sonatine* and the five *Miroirs* were composed in 1905; the *Introduction and Allegro* for harp, flute, clarinet, and string quartet was finished in 1906, the same year as the song cycle, *Histoires naturelles*. *Miroirs* puzzled the Apaches and only one of the set has achieved much popularity – *Alborada del Gracioso*, with its Spanish snappiness and brilliant piano layout. The other four pieces seemed to wade in a no-man’s land between music and painting. Where *Miroirs* bored most listeners of the day, the *Histoires naturelles*, set to poems by Jules Renard, caused a scandal at its premier, resulting in a screaming match between the Debussyists and Ravelites.

Subsequent works would include hits: one-act comic opera, *L’Heure Espagnole*; *Gaspard de la Nuit* and *Valses nobles et sentimentales* for solo piano, *Ma mere l’Oye* (Mother Goose; piano duet), the *Rhapsodie Espagnole* (for orchestra) and the ballet *Daphnis et Chloë*. The ballet – published shortly following Stravinsky’s two blockbusters – *The Firebird*, and *Petrouchka* – was never particularly popular, the second of two orchestra suits arranged from it became one of the most popular orchestral works of the century. But Ravel’s association with Diaghilev did result in one of the most spectacular orchestral scores of the century and also served to bring Ravel and Stravinsky together. The two composers admired each other and in 1913, even worked together on an orchestration of Mussorgsky’s *Khovantchine* to be used for a ballet. Ravel and the Apaches all turned out of the premiere of Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps* on May 29, 1913, at the Champs-Élysées Theatre, cheering their new champion at a premier that would become legendary for the chaos that it generated among the attending audience.

The last work Ravel completed before the war was the *Trio* in A minor, one of his most polished and elegant scores (the opening theme of the first movement may well be his greatest lyric inspiration). Ravel tried to get into the French army but was rejected as too short and underweight. Early in 1916 he was accepted as a truck driver and even got to the front lines. In 1917 he was discharged for ill health, and he went to Normandy to convalesce, and there worked on *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, banishing both the piano solo version and its arrangement for orchestra in 1917. Then, back in Paris he composed *La Valse*, a “choreographed poem” for Diaghilev, who paid for it but never used the music. Ravel was hurt. The two men met in 1925, and Ravel refused to shake hands. Diaghilev was insulted and challenged Ravel to a duel. As customary, the challenger was talked out of it, and the two never met again. Ravel then purchased a little villa, *Le Belvédère*, at Montfort l’Amaury and stocked it with a collection of mechanical toys, which he loved to wind up and operate for his friends. In 1920 he was awarded the French *Legion of Honor*, and refused to accept it, not having forgotten the way he had been fessed out of the *Prix de Rome*. Later, showing what he thought of the French government, he accepted a decoration from King Leopold of Belgium and an honorary doctorate from Oxford.

Subsequent developments would include the opera-pantomime *l'Enfant de les sortileges*, a *Violin Sonata*, a trip to the United States in 1928, the famous *Bolero* and two *piano concertos*, one of them for the left hand alone, commissioned by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm during the war. In 1932, perhaps as a result of an automobile accident, perhaps from a disease more deeply functional, Ravel had a nervous breakdown, his injuries from the crash appeared to be superficial, and Ravel made light of them. The following year, 1933, he began to lose control of his arms and legs. This was followed by memory loss and an inability to coordinate. Though his mind remained normal. He could not compose or play the piano. In 1927 he underwent brain surgery, from which he never recovered. His malady has been kept secret. On December 28, 1937, Ravel died in a Paris hospital.

He left a small quantity of music, little of it large-scale. And a good deal of his orchestral music was originally composed for the piano. A good deal of his orchestral music was originally composed for the piano, and one of his most popular pieces involves another piano work, his orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The flashy *Tzigane* was originally composed for violin and piano, and shortly thereafter was transcribed for violin and orchestra. All of this music is of a piece; there is very little variation in quality. From the very beginning, Ravel worked out an individual style, and it varied surprisingly little through the years. His early influences were Liszt, Chabrier, Mussorgsky, and Faure and, of course, Debussy played a part in his development. No young composer growing up in Paris after Leapers-midi could entirely escape those new sounds.

But in essence, Ravel's aesthetic worked on different premises from Debussy's. Ravel's was more precise, and a more orthodox formalist, using sonata form and forms derived from classical and baroque models. His music, personal as it is, has a strong feeling of objectivity. Ravel's music never had the languorous sensuousness of Debussy's; it was an etching against the watercolors of his great contemporary. Debussy's forms were often evolved from colors and textures, and followed no known rules. Ravel worked from themes rather than colors and textures. Much more than Debussy he looked to his predecessors: *Jeux d'Eau* was inspired by Liszt's *Les Jeux d'Eau a la Villa d'Este*, and in *Gaspard de la Nuit* he specifically set out to write a post-Lisztian virtuoso piece; *Scarbo*, the last of the set, is one of the most prodigious finger-twisters of the repertory. It came into special favor after World War II, and is one of the most-performed of the 20th century piano works. His *Valse nobles et sentimentales* "shows clearly enough my intention to compose a chain of waltzes in the style of Schubert." (who had composed a series named *Vales Nobles*). The idea may have come from Schubert, the execution is perfumed French, especially the last of the waltzes – an Epilogue – which in a dreamlike manner reminisces about the previous waltzes. Other influences would be Chabrier and Borodin ("*a la manières de..*"), Johann Strauss (*La Valse*) and Mozart (the *piano concerto in G major*). Interestingly, Ravel held the view that "the music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be light-hearted, brilliant and not aim at profundity or at dramatic effects." Ravel makes it clear that he does not like the piano concertos of Brahms; he said that they are against the piano, not for it. In *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, he went back to the clavecinists, and in the United States he met George Gershwin, listened to a great deal of jazz, and incorporated it, with other American devices, into his music, including the Blues movement from the *Violin sonata* and his *G major piano concerto*. For several of his most famous works he turned to Spain for inspiration.

All of his music, no matter what its inspiration, ends up filtered through Ravel's imagination and technique into a consistent amalgam. It all has the Ravel sound. He was a musician pure and simple, working directly with the materials of music and, unlike so many of the composers of the period, he had no theories about music, nor did he involve himself with the various aesthetic movements. There seldom is the feeling of instinct in his music; everything is too carefully arranged and balanced. But with its objectivity, the music also has charm, extraordinary finish, with and color, As an orchestrator he was even more inventive than Debussy, from whom he learned a great deal. For example, in comparison with Debussy's *Iberia*, Ravel's *Rhapsodie Espagnole* – two great scores inspired by Spain – the Ravel orchestration has a springier, lighter quality.

Ravel's prime ended in 1914. Later, in ill health, he found it hard to write, and it bothered him. *"I have failed in my life,"* he told a fellow composer. *"I am not one of the great composers. All the great have produced enormously. There is everything in their work – the best and the worst, but there is always quantity. But I have written relatively very little... and at that, I did it with a great deal of difficulty. I did my work slowly, drop by drop. I have torn all of it out of me by pieces... and now I cannot do any more, and it does not give me any pleasures."* That said, latter-year works such as his *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and the *piano concerto for the left hand* stand among his most exciting and significant contributions.