

**Studies in Pianistic Sonority,
Nuance and Expression:
French Performance Practices in the
Piano Works of Maurice Ravel**

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Abstract

This thesis traces the development of Maurice Ravel's pianism in relation to sonority, nuance and expression by addressing four main areas of research that have remained largely unexplored within Ravel scholarship: the origins of Ravel's pianism and influences to which he was exposed during his formative training; his exploration of innovative pianistic techniques with particular reference to thumb deployment; his activities as performer and teacher, and role in defining a performance tradition for his piano works; his place in the French pianistic canon. Identifying the main research questions addressed in this study, an Introduction outlines the dissertation content, explains the criteria and objectives for the performance component (Public Recital) and concludes with a literature review. Chapter 1 explores the pianistic techniques Ravel acquired during his formative training, and considers how his study of specific works from the nineteenth-century piano repertory shaped and influenced his compositional style and pianism. Chapter 2 discusses Ravel's implementation of his idiosyncratic 'strangler' thumbs as articulators of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and textural material in selected piano works. Ravel's role in defining a performance tradition for his piano works as disseminated to succeeding generations of pianists is addressed in Chapter 3, while Chapters 4 and 5 evaluate Ravel's impact upon twentieth-century French pianism through considering how leading French piano pedagogues and performers responded to his trailblazing piano techniques. It will be shown that through his activities as teacher and performer, as well as composer, Ravel took control of every detail pertaining to his piano works with his meticulously notated scores, piano roll recordings and interpretive guidance imparted to other pianists, thus catalysing

performance practices that promulgated a distinctively French twentieth-century pianistic tradition.

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Note:

Translations of French texts are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, French composer Maurice Ravel created a new pianistic language by exploring sonority, nuance and expression in subtle, colourful and imaginative ways. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pianistic practices are reworked and expanded in Ravel's hands, bringing a fresh perspective to repeated note passages, double note glissandi, wide stretches, rapid movements across the keyboard, multi-layered textures and extended pedalling techniques. In this way Ravel's pianistic sound world encompasses a vast array of touches and articulations, ranging from the Baroque and Classical keyboard techniques employed in the *Sonatine* (1903-5) and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17) to the colouristic landscapes of *Jeux d'eau* (1901) and *Miroirs* (1904-5) and the orchestrally inspired textures of *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908).

That Ravel's knowledge of the piano's capabilities was substantial at the start of his professional career is evident from the extraordinary impact he made with his first major piano work, *Jeux d'eau*, composed only a year after he had completed his composition studies with Gabriel Fauré at the Paris Conservatoire. The violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange stated that 'this piece opened new horizons in piano technique'; Ravel's composition student and close friend Alexis Roland-Manuel declared it to have 'the hallmark of mastery', and Ravel biographer Roger Nichols called it 'the key work for the Impressionist school of French piano writers'.¹ The

¹ Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel* (Lausanne: Editions du Cervin, 1957; 5/1970). Augmented re-edition: *Ravel d'après Ravel, suivi des Rencontres avec Vlado Perlemuter*, ed. Jean Roy (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1989). English edition (from the above 1970 volume): *Ravel according to Ravel*. English trans. Frances Tanner, ed. Harold Taylor (London: Kahn & Averill, 1990), p. 5. Alexis Roland-Manuel: *À la gloire de Ravel* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1938). English edition: *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1947), p. 30. Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 40.

rich profusion of techniques Ravel brought to *Jeux d'eau* and the subsequent piano works pose the question: what were the core components of his pianism that led to such innovation?

This dissertation addresses this by conducting the first comprehensive study into Ravel's formative pianistic training during the period 1882-1897. Primary research questions include the following: How did Ravel's early musical education lead him to compose piano works of such diversity and startling originality? What role did his physical connection with the piano play in the creative process? Most of the existing scholarly literature on Ravel gives only a brief mention to this period amounting to a list of his teachers, the works he performed and some critical commentary on his performances in end-of-term examinations at the Paris Conservatoire.²

In order to get to the foundations of Ravel's pianism this study explores the pedagogical practices of Ravel's piano teachers by scrutinizing their published teaching materials, and analysing the solo and concertante piano works Ravel is known to have played in public during these early years, beginning with Ignaz Moscheles' Piano Concerto No. 3 (1820) with which he gave his debut performance in June 1888 at the age of thirteen. By comparing the findings with Ravel's solo piano works the study has uncovered crucial new evidence pointing to major influences on Ravel's compositional style for the piano that include the *Stile brillante*, the piano works of Robert Schumann, and the piano concertos of Edvard Grieg and Camille Saint-Saëns.

² Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975 revised 1991), pp. 11-17. Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (2011), pp. 9-14.

Ravel's connectivity with the keyboard is seen as having a key role in the materialisation of thematic, textural, and expressive components within his piano works. His habitual practice of working out his compositional material at the piano before committing it to manuscript implies that the majority of Ravel's compositional output was born of this intimate tactile contact with the keyboard. This thesis argues that the impact of this physical experience and the overriding responsibility Ravel assigned to his highly developed thumbs play a significant role in shaping the core building-blocks within the piano works. Practical demonstrations to support this hypothesis are provided in a lecture-recital that works in conjunction with the recital component of this submission.

Ravel's role in creating a performance tradition for his own piano works is central to understanding his views on interpretation. His performances on the concert platform and in the recording studio, coupled with his activities as coach to a number of significant French pianists and as a commentator on his works, provide an extensive and wide-ranging corpus of primary source material. Ravel scholars, including Roy Howat and Ronald Woodley, have explored several aspects of performance practice in the early recordings of Ravel's piano works, albeit within the context of broader subject matter.³ The present research represents a more selective and concentrated investigation into Ravel's pivotal role in defining a performance style for his solo piano works. Ravel's consistency of approach to interpretive practices as performer and teacher is put to the test by analysing a selection of his roll recordings from 1913, 1922 and 1928 and comparing them with recordings made by the select group of pianists whom he advised, henceforth

³ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009). Ronald Woodley, 'Performing Ravel: Style and Practice in the Early Recordings', in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), pp. 214-237.

identified in this study as 'Ravel's disciples': Robert Casadesus, Henriette Faure, Vlado Perlemuter and Yvonne Lefébure. By cross-referencing these recordings with the published performance editions, this study examines the fundamental modes of expression on which a performing style can be built, namely sonority, nuance, rhythm, tempo, articulation, dislocation, arpeggiation, dynamic colouring, pedalling and accuracy.

Ravel's impact on twentieth-century French pianism as a whole is assessed with a comprehensive analysis of eight historic recordings of his last solo piano work, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The roster of pianists includes Ravel's disciples and comprises Marcelle Meyer, Yvonne Lefébure, Madeleine de Valmalète, Robert Casadesus, Jacques Février, Vlado Perlemuter, Henriette Faure and Samson François. All eight pianists studied either at the Paris Conservatoire or the École Normale de Musique with four of the most influential pedagogues of the early twentieth century: Louis Diémer, Marguerite Long, Alfred Cortot and Isidor Philipp. The crucial role of these teacher-pianists in influencing and shaping the performance practice choices adopted by their students in these recordings will be seen as vital to identifying a historically informed tradition through which successive generations of pianists have approached Ravel's piano works.

In an attempt to form a complete picture of Ravel's pianistic style from both compositional and performance perspectives all of Ravel's solo piano works, as well as his two piano concertos have been incorporated into the body of this dissertation, although the study by necessity focusses on particular individual works.

This thesis addresses four main research questions. Firstly, how did Ravel's formative piano studies shape and inform his compositional style in the solo piano works? Secondly, what part did Ravel's physical connectivity with the piano, and

specifically his idiosyncratic thumbs, play in the construction of his unique brand of pianism? Thirdly, what do the historic recordings of Ravel's solo piano works made by the composer himself and the pianists who sought his interpretive advice reveal about aspects of style and performance practice that go beyond the written notation? Finally, what are the essential characteristics that define Ravel's pianism and is it possible to identify particular French pianists that embody the salient technical and interpretive qualities in their recorded performances?⁴

Chapter Outline

The dissertation comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 investigates the origins of Ravel's pianism, the formative influences, his pianistic training and contact with particular individuals, including the pianist Ricardo Viñes and the composer Emmanuel Chabrier. According to his contemporaries, Ravel always composed at the keyboard, experimenting with ideas before committing them to paper. Central to the arguments put forward in Chapter 2 is the way in which Ravel's physicality, his distinctive piano technique, and in particular the shape and flexibility of his thumbs underpinned his compositional choices when creating his thematic and textural material in all the solo piano works. Chapter 2 sets out the evidence with an investigation that includes a detailed analysis of 'Scarbo' from *Gaspard de la nuit*.

Ravel was fastidious regarding the dissemination of his views on how to perform his solo piano works. It is fortuitous that he was present during the early days of the recording industry and his piano roll recordings are testimony to his pioneering spirit and foresight. Regrettably scholars and critics have often been dismissive of Ravel's pianistic abilities as evidenced by these recorded

⁴ The scope of the present study does not extend to include non-French school pianists.

performances. In a fresh appraisal of Ravel's piano roll recordings, Chapter 3 seeks to redress the balance and shed new light upon Ravel's ground-breaking and imaginative approach to pianistic colour as a performer, his control of the piano keys in subtle textures, the blending of delicate sonorities, and his exploration of extended pedalling techniques. Ravel's performances are compared alongside recordings made by his disciples and cross-referenced against the published performance editions to ascertain how faithful he was to the indications in his scores. In doing so, this chapter presents evidence that endorses the validity of Ravel's roll recordings as important historical documents of performance practice.

The two final chapters address Ravel's place in the pantheon of twentieth-century French pianism. Chapter 4 presents a comparative analysis of eight recorded interpretations of his last work for solo piano, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-1917), made by pianists whose performance styles were shaped by contact with Ravel and three of his most illustrious contemporaries, Marguerite Long, Alfred Cortot and Isidor Philipp. Marguerite Long gave the first performance of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* at the Salle Gaveau on 11 April 1919. As Ravel's closest collaborator at this juncture, her technical and interpretive views are significant. In the absence of a recording of this work by Long, recordings made by her students, including Yvonne Lefébure, Marcelle Meyer, Jacques Février, and Samson François are assessed to identify the hallmarks of Long's pedagogical style that was characterized by the '*jeu perlé*' technique, clarity of fingerwork, sparse pedalling, and moderate dynamic colouring. Except for Jacques Février, each of Long's students mentioned above, continued their piano studies with Alfred Cortot. An important question addressed here is the extent to which their recorded performances of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* fuse Long's finger-based technique with Cortot's technique in which the fingers,

wrists and extended limbs work together to create a legato-based touch that reaches the depth of the piano key in order to explore tone quality and sonority. The earliest recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* was made by Madeleine de Valmalète in 1929, and will be included in this investigation for its individual approach stemming from the teaching methods of her teacher, Isidor Philipp. How each pianist infuses the music with their own views and personalities provides further insight into the plurality of French interpretive approaches that arises from the recordings.

Chapter 5 focusses on Ravel's continued exploration of pianistic sonority in the chamber and orchestral works composed after *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and concludes with an appraisal of the core techniques and interpretive ideas that emerge from the evidence presented in this dissertation as the defining characteristics of a historically informed performance style for Ravel's piano works.

Performance Component: Public Recital

This submission as a whole comprises two elements, the dissertation and public recital. It is therefore appropriate that the objectives of the latter be outlined here. The performance component which accompanies this thesis is divided into two main sections: Part A, lasting approximately thirty minutes consists of a lecture-recital aimed at presenting practical evidence of the decisive role played by Ravel's thumbs in creating and articulating thematic material within his piano works. This illustrated discussion relates to the written arguments in Chapter 2 of the dissertation. Part B, lasting sixty minutes comprises a formal public recital incorporating a selection of piano works that trace the development of Ravel's pianism from technical and interpretive perspectives. Many of Ravel's pianistic innovations can be heard for the first time in *Jeux d'eau*, including multi-layered

textures, polyphonic voicing, and extended thumb techniques. In 'Noctuelles', 'Oiseaux tristes' and 'Alborada del gracioso' from *Miroirs*, Ravel adopts a more sophisticated harmonic language, and a greater sense of rhythmic freedom coupled with concise dynamic colouring and a kaleidoscopic range of articulation. This refinement of piano techniques reaches its apotheosis in *Gaspard de la nuit*, where Ravel puts virtuosity completely at the service of interpretation. The recital concludes with the 'Prélude', 'Fugue' and 'Toccata' from Ravel's last solo work for piano, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, a work that underlines Ravel's allegiance to the past, to French Baroque keyboard techniques and practices, and to the qualities that have defined French pianism from its inception, namely clarity, balance, colour and sensibility.

The recital programme is as follows:

<i>Jeux d'eau</i> (1901)	5
<i>Miroirs</i> (1904-5)	15
1. 'Noctuelles',	
2. 'Oiseaux tristes'	
4. 'Alborada del gracioso'	
<i>Gaspard de la nuit</i> (1908)	23
'Ondine'	
'Le Gibet'	
'Scarbo'	
<i>Le Tombeau de Couperin</i> (1914-1917)	12
'Prélude'	
'Fugue'	
'Toccata'	

Literature Review

The existing Ravel literature, published during the composer's lifetime and since his death is extensive. Consequently the objectives of this review are to assess

the significant scholarly publications that relate specifically to the topic under investigation, Ravel and the piano. Dealing firstly with Ravel's pianism within the context of biography it is necessary to acknowledge two major contributors to this field of study in the English language, namely Arbie Orenstein and Roger Nichols.⁵

In *Ravel: Man & Musician* (1975) Orenstein draws upon written testimony from Ravel's colleagues accompanied by extracts from Ravel's own writings and correspondence. One of Orenstein's most perceptive observations relates to the central role the piano played within Ravel's working life as a composer:

The piano is the privileged instrument in Ravel's art not only because he was a pianist and composed at the keyboard, but because virtually all of the fresh trends in his style first appeared in the piano music.⁶

He also supplies information pertaining to the piano solo and duo repertoire that Ravel performed during his formative studies including details of examination pieces and progress reports from Ravel's teachers at the Paris Conservatoire. However, archival research conducted at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in preparation for this dissertation has uncovered evidence that calls into question some of Orenstein's data, as will be evidenced in Chapter 1 of this study.

A Ravel Reader (1990) complements *Ravel: Man and Musician* in that Orenstein focuses specifically on primary source materials, that is Ravel in his own words, both written and spoken. Orenstein does not provide any commentary on Ravel's training other than the following general observation: 'At the Conservatoire, he methodically analysed the standard masterworks of the Baroque, Classical and

⁵ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (1975, rev. 1991). Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, Ecrits, Entretiens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989). English edition: *A Ravel Reader, Correspondence, Articles, Interviews*. Translation by Dennis Collins, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (2011). Roger Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987).

⁶ Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, p. 135.

Romantic periods and performed a wide variety of nineteenth-century piano music'.⁷ This study will demonstrate that Ravel's choices regarding 'nineteenth-century piano music' played a decisive role in shaping his pianistic style of composition. Notwithstanding, this wide-ranging guide includes Ravel's correspondence (346 out of an estimated figure of 1500 letters), his brief recollections on the genesis of each of his compositions in 'An Autobiographical Sketch of Maurice Ravel',⁸ a harmonic analysis of the works,⁹ published articles and interviews, his views as a critic, and his comments on editing the piano music of Felix Mendelssohn.

Of particular significance to this study are the appendices compiled by Jean Touzelet in both of Orenstein's books that detail Ravel's recorded performances of his piano works, together with a comprehensive list of historic recordings by other pianists. The period from 1912 to 1939 is covered in *Ravel: Man and Musician* while the scope of investigation is expanded from 1911 to 1988 in *A Ravel Reader*. Touzelet provides documented evidence that underlines Ravel's understanding and experience of the recording process as performer, producer and jury member on various advisory boards. The discography is organised by performer, and Touzelet supplies background information that places each recording within its historical context. Touzelet does not attempt a critical commentary on aspects of performance style and interpretation in these recordings. However, his listings provide valuable core material from which this study explores issues relating to the performance practice choices demonstrated in the recordings of Ravel's solo piano works.

Roger Nichols's comprehensive biography, *Ravel* (2011) is a complete reworking and in his own words a 'threefold expansion' of his 1977 volume for the

⁷ Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 2.

⁸ Alexis Roland-Manuel, 'Une Esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel', *La Revue musicale* (December 1938). English trans. Arbie Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, pp. 29-37.

⁹ Published in René Lenormand, *Étude sur l'harmonie moderne* (Paris: Eschig, 1913).

Master Musicians series.¹⁰ This is an impressive work of scholarship that sets out Ravel's life and career within a fluid, detailed chronology. Nichols does not attempt any in-depth analyses of Ravel's compositions; nevertheless his comments on the solo piano works are insightful. He makes several references to Ravel's activities in the recording studio, but in his brief assessments of the recorded performances he is somewhat disparaging of Ravel's pianistic abilities. His verdict on Ravel's 1913 piano roll recordings of *Sonatine* and *Valses nobles et sentimentales* is dismissive: '[...] neither performance is technically impeccable, but some sense of the works' spirit nonetheless comes through'.¹¹ This study seeks to redress the balance by identifying the many positive qualities in Ravel's recorded performances with a detailed examination of the roll recordings.

Nichols's monograph *Ravel Remembered* (1987) is a compendium of short articles and recollections of Ravel by his contemporaries. Contributions by Ravel's composition students, Alexis Roland-Manuel,¹² Manuel Rosenthal¹³ and Maurice Delage¹⁴ provide first-hand information about Ravel's physicality and posture at the piano. Delage's observation that 'Nature endowed Ravel with knotted, tapering hands and with thumbs that could move freely round the central joint and cover two white keys simultaneously', is explored within Chapter 2 of this thesis that deals with Ravel's physical connection with the piano and the resultant implications for his solo piano compositions.

¹⁰ London: Dent, 1977.

¹¹ Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 161.

¹² Roland-Manuel, [*À la gloire de*] *Ravel* (Paris: 1938). English edition: Cynthia Jolly (ed.), *Ravel*, (1947).

¹³ Marcel Marnat (ed.), *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal recueillis par Marcel Marnat* (Paris: Hazan, 1995).

¹⁴ Maurice Delage, *Maurice Ravel*, incomplete lecture script in the BNF (Rés. Vmb. Ms. 44).

As regards French-language publications the journals of the Fondation Maurice Ravel, *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* (1985-present) have provided a substantial corpus of primary and secondary source material for this study. Articles relating to Ravel's pianism include 'L'image publique de Maurice Ravel 1920-1937' by Marcel Marnat;¹⁵ 'Maurice Ravel et sa bibliothèque musicale' by Jean-Michel Nectoux ;¹⁶ 'Quand Ravel conseillait Vlado Perlemuter' by Jacques Gandoiun, Vice President of La Fondation Maurice Ravel;¹⁷ 'Where Ravel ends and Debussy begins' by Charles Rosen¹⁸ and 'Ravel, Viñes les années des formation; goûts croisés, curiosités partagées' by Ricardo Viñes's great-niece Nina Gubisch-Viñes.¹⁹

Turning to French pianism at large and Ravel's place within it, Charles Timbrell's landmark survey, *French Pianism: A Historical Perspective* (1999) paints a panoramic view of French piano pedagogy and performance practices from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the final years of the twentieth century.²⁰ Timbrell begins by identifying the pivotal role played by the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel's alma mater, as the vanguard of technical and interpretive innovation in piano performance. He presents a concise genealogy of the noted pedagogues working in Paris within all its music institutions, including foreign émigrés who settled in the city, and identifies the main characteristics of their methods as outlined in their training manuals and other teaching materials. Aspects of technique and musicianship are discussed in a series of interviews conducted with noted interpreters of French piano music. Of particular relevance to this study is the pedagogical documentation relating to Ravel's last piano professor at the

¹⁵ Issue No. 3, 1987, pp. 27-52.

¹⁶ No. 3, 1987, pp. 53-62.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 63-64.

¹⁸ No. 5, 1990-92, pp. 34-35.

¹⁹ No. 14, 2011, pp. 16-42.

²⁰ Charles Timbrell, *French Pianism: A Historical Perspective* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1999).

Conservatoire, Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot (1833-1914), who published much of his teaching material around the time when Ravel was studying with him (between 1891 and 1895). An interview conducted by Timbrell in 1986 with Paul Loyonnet (1889-1988), who also studied with de Bériot, provides first-hand information into the latter's working methods.²¹ Given Loyonnet's advanced age at the time this interview was recorded coupled with the anecdotal nature of his recollections, the current study sets out to verify his comments by examining de Bériot's exercise treatises and piano compositions for hard evidence of de Bériot's pedagogical practices. By incorporating additional analyses of teaching materials by Ravel's other piano teachers, Henri Ghys, Émile Descombes, Eugène Anthiôme and Santiago Riera, this study presents the first complete appraisal of Ravel's pianistic training during this vital period in his development as a pianist-composer.

In April 1939, *La revue internationale de musique* published a special volume devoted to 'The Piano - the instrument, the works, interpretation, pedagogy, technique and critical commentaries' with contributions from leading French musicians of the day.²² They include articles by Jacques Février ('Les exigences de Ravel'), Alfred Cortot ('Attitudes de l'interprète'), and Alfredo Casella, ('Les grands interprètes du passé et du présent'). Charles Koechlin, who was a contemporary of Ravel in Gabriel Fauré's composition class, evaluates Ravel's place in the evolution of piano writing in a substantial article titled 'L'évolution de l'écriture pianistique'. He acknowledges Ravel's innovative approach to pianistic figurations, adding that this new style of writing demanded from its interpreters 'a masterful technique that benefited from being more fluid, more secure, more incisive and stronger than the

²¹ Ibid., pp. 183-192.

²² 'Le Piano - l'instrument, les oeuvres, l'interprétation, l'enseignement, la technique et documentation critique', *La Revue internationale de musique* (Paris, 1939).

technique of their predecessors'.²³ How the first generation of French pianists to study and perform Ravel's piano works at the beginning of the twentieth century set about acquiring and perfecting this technique is explored in an analysis of their recorded performances in Chapters 3 and 4 of this study.

Roy Howat's seminal book, *The Art of French Piano Music* (2009) compares the pianistic styles of Claude Debussy, Gabriel Fauré, Emmanuel Chabrier and Maurice Ravel.²⁴ Howat explores aspects of musical semantics in the piano works and in Ravel's case he makes thematic, harmonic, rhythmic, textural and structural connections to the keyboard works of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers as diverse as Domenico Scarlatti, Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt and Emmanuel Chabrier. Thus Ravel's assimilation of the idioms and practices of other composers into his brand of pianistic composition underpins Howat's analytical methodology. This study builds upon Howat's scholarship by focusing specifically on the piano works Ravel actually performed in public during his formative studies, including three virtuosic masterpieces by Robert Schumann, the *Fantasy* Op. 17, Sonata in G minor Op. 22, and the *Andante and Variations* Op. 46 (Ravel received a Premier prix for his performance of the Op. 22 Sonata at the age of sixteen). Howat refers to these works but he does not explore them in any detail, opting instead to flag up thematic connections between *Carnaval* Op. 9 and Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales*.²⁵ This study will show that many of the pianistic techniques that appear in Schumann's Op. 17, Op. 22 and Op. 46 were absorbed and reworked by Ravel in his solo piano works. Additionally the virtuosic concertante works by Ignaz

²³ '[...] une technique magistrale avec d'avantage de rapidité, de sûreté, d'attaque et de force, que pour les musiciens anciens'. Charles Koechlin, 'L'évolution de l'écriture pianistique', *La Revue internationale de musique* (1939), pp. 822-852.

²⁴ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (2009).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-2.

Moscheles, Henri Herz, Frédéric Chopin and Felix Mendelssohn that featured prominently in Ravel's early studies are not mentioned by Howat. Their significant impact on Ravel's pianism is highlighted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Regarding matters of performance practice Howat argues that for Debussy, Fauré, Chabrier and Ravel one should 'read the music's notation and structure as the composers did and we're more likely to hear it as they intended'. He goes on to add:

The composers did all they could to make themselves clear on the page and, as much as any music, this repertoire demands straightforward and unaffected performance, letting its emotional frankness and expressive logic speak for themselves.²⁶

Howat's statement has an air of literalness that is somewhat disconcerting in its implication that by reading the score an informed interpretation will emerge. The current study challenges this assertion by comparing the published performing editions of the solo piano works with Ravel's piano roll recordings to identify the ways in which Ravel modifies his interpretations in performance. Ravel's roll recordings are in effect complete unedited takes; thus his performances carry elements of spontaneity and unpredictability that form an integral part of live performance. Further comparisons with recorded performances made by Ravel's disciples lend weight to the argument that Ravel's written notation is not the end of the matter and that by combining analysis of the score together with these historic recordings it is possible to gain further clarity on Ravel's thoughts regarding performance practices in his solo piano works. That Ravel's performances together with those of his disciples lean toward being eloquent and emotional as opposed to frank and logical will be argued within this dissertation.

Howat does discuss Ravel's roll recordings in an appendix and explores aspects of pianistic performance practice such as pedalling, finger techniques, and

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. xiv.

the simulation of orchestral sonorities in conjunction with solo piano works that Ravel subsequently orchestrated, such as the 'Prélude', 'Forlane', 'Rigaudon' and 'Menuet' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. However he acknowledges in his Introduction that he does not attempt to play the role of an interpretive guru:

Finally the book ventures some practical information at the keyboard. Without spoon-feeding the aim is to help the readers find their own informed solutions, addressing questions that regularly arise in lessons and classes.

Ravel's role in counselling other pianists on the performance of his piano music has been preserved in several short monographs. The most authoritative of these come from Henriette Faure in *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel* (1978)²⁷ and Vlado Perlemuter in *Ravel d'après Ravel* (1957).²⁸ Both pianists studied Ravel's piano works with the composer during the 1920s, and were among the earliest pianists to perform all the piano works in concert. Faure is particularly perceptive regarding Ravel's methodology during these coaching sessions:

[...] he wanted results immediately and not one of the details was left to chance. He was quick and nervous in his movements and in his playing. He rarely wrote anything in the score but he often demonstrated and projected his thoughts in a most persuasive manner.²⁹

Pianist Paul Roberts in his recent book *Reflections: the Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (2012),³⁰ hails Faure's monograph as the most reliable primary source for studying performance practices in Ravel's piano music but makes a glaring error in failing to incorporate her 1959 recording of *Miroirs* and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* into his discussions on style and practice. There are cursory references to key

²⁷ Henriette Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel* (Paris: A.T.P., 1978).

²⁸ Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel* (1957; 5/1970). Augmented re-edition: *Ravel d'après Ravel, suivi des rencontres avec Vlado Perlemuter*, ed. Jean Roy (1989). English edition: *Ravel according to Ravel*. English trans. Tanner, ed. Taylor (1990).

²⁹ 'Mais il voulait la réalisation immédiate jusque dans les moindres détails et pas un de ces détails n'était laissé au hasard. Il était nerveux et rapide dans ses déplacements et dans son jeu. Il annotait rarement, mais il montrait beaucoup et il paraît sa musique d'une manière très persuasive'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, p. 25.

³⁰ Paul Roberts, *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 2012).

interpreters of Ravel's piano music including Vlado Perlemuter, Robert Casadesus, Jacques Février and Yvonne Lefébure but again no mention of their recordings.

Vlado Perlemuter's recollections are presented in conversation format with the violinist and close friend of Ravel, Hélène Jourdan-Morhange. He sheds much light on Ravel's exacting approach to rhythm, tempo, voicing, dynamics, sonority and pianistic/orchestral colour in his piano works with specific reference to the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. The current study appraises the validity of both Faure and Perlemuter's written commentaries by comparing them with their recorded performances of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* in Chapter 3 and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in Chapter 4.

Dean Elder's compendium *Pianists at Play* (1985)³¹ and Carola Grindea: *Great Pianists and Pedagogues* (2007)³² contain several interviews with Robert and Gaby Casadesus who collaborated with Ravel on the concert platform and in the recording studio. Yvonne Lefébure's thoughts on interpreting Ravel's piano music are documented in Yvette Carbou's *La leçon de musique* (1995)³³ and in televised masterclasses and performances where Lefébure's consummate grasp of Ravel's pianistic language comes alive in her demonstrations of various piano techniques including articulation, pedalling and the evocation of orchestral sonorities.³⁴

Marguerite Long, who gave the premieres of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in 1919 and the Concerto in G in 1932, set down her interpretive views on Ravel's piano music in a monograph entitled *Au piano avec Maurice Ravel*,³⁵ a slim volume

³¹ Dean Elder, *Pianists at Play* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1986).

³² Carole Grindea, *Great Pianists and Pedagogues in Conversation* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007).

³³ Yvette Carbou, *La leçon de musique d'Yvonne Lefébure* (Paris: Van der Velde, 1995).

³⁴ Yvonne Lefébure, television documentary: 'Yvonne Lefébure teaches how to play Ravel' (St Germain, 1974), www.youtube.com/watch?v=L06_enYnmBE. (Accessed 22 October 2012).

³⁵ Marguerite Long, *Au piano avec Maurice Ravel*, edited by Pierre Laumonier (Paris: Julliard, 1971). English edition: *At the piano with Maurice Ravel*, trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: Dent, 1973).

dismissed by Ronald Woodley in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* as ‘a curiously annoying, self-serving book which delivers so much less than its title promises’.³⁶ It is hard to disagree with this statement given that Long overstates her relationship with Ravel and her observations lack focus when analysing the piano works. Despite her reputation as a superlative technician Long’s pedagogical publications, including her technical treatise, *Le Piano* (1959)³⁷ contain few pearls of wisdom on how to approach Ravel’s innovative piano techniques. Consequently this study looks not to Long’s written commentaries for evidence of her pivotal role in defining early performance practice techniques in Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin* but to the recorded performances of her students, including Marcelle Meyer, Yvonne Lefébure, Henriette Faure, Jacques Février and Samson François.

Jeanne Thieffry’s transcripts of Alfred Cortot’s masterclasses at the École Normale de Musique, reproduced in *Alfred Cortot: cours d’interprétation recueilli et rédigé par Jeanne Thieffry* (1934), provide detailed commentaries on Cortot’s interpretive guidance when coaching Ravel’s piano works.³⁸ Cortot himself also discusses the piano music of Ravel in the second volume of a four-volume series of books called *French Piano Music* (1930).³⁹ His comments are almost poetic in nuance, clothed in a language that inspired and empowered his students to discover the music for themselves, albeit coupled with thorough analytical knowledge of the piano piece under study.⁴⁰ The heuristic quality that Cortot encouraged through his teaching is addressed in an investigation of the recorded performances of Ravel’s *Le*

³⁶ Woodley, in Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, pp. 213-39.

³⁷ Paris: Salabert, 1959.

³⁸ Jeanne Thieffry (ed.): *Alfred Cortot: cours d’interprétation recueilli et rédigé par Jeanne Thieffry* (Paris: Legoux, 1934). English edition: *Alfred Cortot’s Studies in Musical Interpretation*, trans. Robert Jaques (London: Harrap, 1937, reprinted 1989).

³⁹ Alfred Cortot, *La musique française de piano* (Paris: Rieder, 1930).

⁴⁰ Kenneth Hamilton describes Cortot as a ‘French late -Romantic player’ in Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 12.

Tombeau de Couperin by several of his students, including Vlado Perlemuter, Marcelle Meyer, Yvonne Lefébure and Samson François.

Finally, the extent to which these opposing teaching methodologies - Long's classical objectivity versus Cortot's romantic subjectivity - underpin the recorded performances of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by the pianists who studied with both of them, namely Marcelle Meyer, Yvonne Lefébure, and Samson François, is assessed. Supplementary documentation including letters, drafts of pedagogical papers, concert programmes, articles and reviews from journals and newspapers have been sourced from the Fonds Long and Cortot at the Médiathèque Musicale Mahler.

Ronald Woodley's thought-provoking chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (2000) 'Performing Ravel: style and practice in the early recordings', investigates Ravel's use of agogic stresses, dislocation and arpeggiation in his piano roll recordings of the *Sonatine* and *Valses nobles et sentimentales*.⁴¹ Woodley compares Ravel's stylistic practices to those adopted by two of the latter's disciples, Robert Casadesus and Vlado Perlemuter in their recorded performances of a selection of Ravel's piano works. However, the scope of Woodley's study does not extend to pianistic issues such as what techniques they employ, how they explore pianistic sonority, nuance and expression and ultimately, what do their recorded interpretations tell us about stylistic practices that go beyond Ravel's written notation. These are questions that the current study addresses by examining one work from each of Ravel's piano roll recording sessions (*Valses nobles et sentimentales* from 1913, 'Oiseaux tristes' from 1922, and 'La vallée des cloches' from 1928), alongside recordings by Casadesus, Perlemuter and two other beneficiaries of Ravel's counsel, Henriette Faure and Yvonne Lefébure.

⁴¹ Woodley, in Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, pp. 213-37.

With regard to performance practice literature, Robert Philip's ground-breaking study *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (1992)⁴² focusses on features of performance that have undergone the greatest change during the first half of the twentieth century, or in his words 'the habits which make the performances on early recordings sound most old-fashioned to a modern listener'.⁴³ His investigations explore modifications in tempo, the application of rubato and the use of portamento and vibrato by violinists within the context of nineteenth-century romantic repertoire. Philip broadens his field of exploration to include pianistic performance practices in a follow-up volume, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (2004).⁴⁴ He addresses the twentieth century at large, including the move towards a more literal reading of the composer's text and an emphasis on technical accuracy that saw a reduction in the freedom of interpretation that had characterized the performances of the first half of the century. Philip cites the pianism of Artur Schnabel and Vladimir Horowitz as case studies but he does not extend his investigations to early twentieth-century French piano music.

John Rink in *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation* (1995) and *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding* (2002)⁴⁵ makes a strong case for the study of recorded performances that 'add features never fully notated in any score - myriad nuances of articulation, timbre, dynamics, vibrato, pitch, duration

⁴² Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁴⁵ John Rink (ed.), *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). John Rink (ed.), *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

etc'.⁴⁶ Further pioneering research conducted at the Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM) and particularly Daniel Leech-Wilkinson's online study *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performances* (2012) underlines the need for musicology to embrace the analysis of performances through historic recordings and makes the case for 'studying music from performances rather than from the scores'.⁴⁷ Leech-Wilkinson provides an extensive history of recording techniques from their origins to the present day in Chapter 3 'Understanding the Sources: Performance and Recording'. In Chapter 6, 'Changing Performance Styles: Piano Playing', he traces the development of expressive practices including legato playing, the use of rubato and the projection of thematic material (voicing) in the piano works of Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms. His case studies incorporate a wide selection of recordings from across the twentieth century, embracing several European schools of pianism including Clara Schumann's students (Fanny Davies, Ilona Eibenschütz and Adelina de Lara), Benno Moiseiwitsch, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Alfred Cortot, Vlado Perlemuter and Jean-Marc Luisada. Leech-Wilkinson's focus lies with 'the sound the performers make' as opposed to 'what they do with their hands and feet to make those sounds'. By his own admission he does not explore technique as such, which he acknowledges 'is perhaps the most important element in the whole process, since it makes everything else possible'.⁴⁸ The current study takes up the gauntlet by addressing the ways in which Ravel's startlingly original pianistic techniques were understood

⁴⁶ Rink, *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, p. 199.

⁴⁷ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Changing Sound of Music: Approaches to Studying Recorded Musical Performances* (Online Study: Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music, 2012).

<http://www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/studies/chapters/chap1.html>. Section 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, section 46.

and realized in the historic recorded performances by Ravel himself, his disciples and other French pianists.

The author of this dissertation draws on extensive experience of studying and performing the complete piano works of Maurice Ravel. His pedagogical genealogy traces lines of apostolic succession to Cécile Ousset (a student of Marcel Ciampi and thus Louis Diémer), Phyllis Sellick (a student of Isidor Philipp, and thus Georges Mathias and Camille Saint-Saëns), Noretta Conci (a student of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Yvonne Lefébure), and Bernice Lehmann (a student of Benno Moiseiwitsch who was one of the earliest non-French pianists to record Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* c. 1919). During 2013-2014 the author was given access to Ravel's 1908 Érard grand piano at the Musée Maurice Ravel (La Belvédère) at Montfort l'Amaury allowing him to explore aspects of pianism such as touch, sonority, repetition, voicing and dynamic colours within Ravel's solo piano works as Ravel himself would have experienced them.

Ravel's piano works exist in several published performance editions. This study has been conducted using the most thorough and scholarly of these, the critical Urtext Edition prepared by Roger Nichols,⁴⁹ together with the earliest published editions by Durand.⁵⁰ Ravel's orchestrations of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and the 'Prélude', 'Forlane', 'Rigaudon' and 'Menuet' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* have been cross-referenced with the solo piano versions of these works.⁵¹

Other solo piano scores that have been consulted include Ravel's own printed copies with autograph corrections of the first edition by Durand held at the

⁴⁹ London: Peters, 1991-2014.

⁵⁰ *Maurice Ravel: Œuvres pour piano*, reprint of original editions (Paris: Durand, 2014).

⁵¹ *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Durand, 1912) and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (Paris: Durand, 1919). Reprinted (New York: Dover 2001).

Département de musique of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.⁵² Additionally the working scores of pianists who studied with Ravel, namely Vlado Perlemuter⁵³ and Robert Casadesus⁵⁴ (also accessed through the Département de musique of the Bibliothèque nationale de France), have been scrutinized alongside the scores of noted pedagogues who worked closely with the composer and helped to shape a performance tradition for the solo piano works. Marguerite Long's archive at the Mediathèque Musicale Mahler (MMM) contains her working scores of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and the Concerto in G.⁵⁵ Alfred Cortot's archive, also at the MMM, holds his scores of 'Alborada del gracioso', 'Ondine', 'Scarbo', *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and *Le Tombeau de Couperin*.

Ravel's roll recordings of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*,⁵⁶ 'Oiseaux tristes' from *Miroirs*,⁵⁷ and 'La vallée des cloches' from *Miroirs*⁵⁸ have been investigated using four realizations: an LP recording titled 'Maurice Ravel plays Ravel',⁵⁹ two CD releases, the Condon Collection,⁶⁰ and the Caswell Collection vol. 4,⁶¹ and a private CD produced by Denis Hall and Rex Lawson at the Pianola Institute.⁶² The recordings of a selection of Ravel's solo piano works by Madeleine de Valamalète,⁶³ Robert

⁵² *Pavane pour une Infante défunte* (Vm.Bob 21893), *Jeux d'eau* (manuscript jottings only: Vm.Bob 26628/IFN 55006420), *Sonatine* (IFN 8478966), 'Une barque sur l'océan' (MS.13453/17328), 'Alborada del gracioso' (Vm.Bob 5902), 'La vallée des cloches' (Vm.Bob -17682), *Miroirs* (Vma.2967), *Miroirs* (Edition by E. Demets, 1906, Vm.Bob -300001), *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Vm.Bob 21899) and *Gaspard de la nuit* (Vm.Bob - 21897).

⁵³ *Miroirs* (Edition Demets, 1906, IFN - 55000847), *Gaspard de la nuit* (Edition Durand, 1909, IFN 55000856), *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Edition Durand, 1911, IFN 55000846) and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (Edition Durand, 1919, IFN 55000857).

⁵⁴ *Miroirs* (New York: Schirmer Great Performance Edition 1586/3360 (1985).

⁵⁵ Paris: Durand, 1932.

⁵⁶ Welte, Roll No. C2888, 1913.

⁵⁷ Duo-Art, Roll No. 082, 1922.

⁵⁸ Duo-Art, Roll no. 72750, 1928.

⁵⁹ LP: Ember: GVC 39, 1975. CD reissue 2009.

⁶⁰ CD: Dal Segno DSPRCD004, 1992.

⁶¹ CD: Pierian 0013, 2002.

⁶² The author acquired this CD at the Pianola Institute, Bromley, in February 28 2017.

⁶³ CD: Arbiter 144, 2005 [Original recording 1928].

Casadesus,⁶⁴ Marcelle Meyer,⁶⁵ Vlado Perlemuter,⁶⁶ Henriette Faure,⁶⁷ Samson François,⁶⁸ Jacques Février,⁶⁹ and Yvonne Lefébure⁷⁰ have been analysed for evidence of their performance practices.

This diverse body of primary and secondary literature has provided much insightful scholarship relating to Ravel's pianism. Nevertheless it has also highlighted areas of Ravel's pianistic activity that have not been addressed by Ravel scholarship to date. Ravel's early physical involvement with the piano, his pianistic training, the teachers that shaped his pianism, and most importantly how Ravel's novel approach to technique and innovative grasp of colour and sonority acquired during those early years morphed into the scintillating multi-layered textures that define his solo piano works, are addressed for the first time in this study. The solo piano repertoire Ravel studied and performed is cross-referenced with his own piano compositions, revealing many links that were unacknowledged in previous Ravel scholarship. Ravel's 'strangler thumbs' have been referenced by many musicologists and performers but this study charts new territory with a detailed analysis of a selection of the solo piano works to reveal the overriding responsibility Ravel assigns to his thumbs in underpinning fingering permutations and articulating thematic material.

Ravel's roll recordings have been the butt of many jibes due chiefly to imperfections in the transfer process from the roll recordings to LPs and discs.

⁶⁴ LP: Sony Masterworks MH2K 63316, December 4 1951 (issued 1952), CD reissue, Sony, 1998.

⁶⁵ LP: EMI Références, 2909633, 1954. CD reissue, EMI France 0946 384699-2-6, 2007.

⁶⁶ LP: Vox Legends Vox Box CDX2 5507, 1999 [Original recording, 1956].

⁶⁷ LP: Pathé, XPTX714 33DTX292, 1959. CD reissue, BnF Collection [no catalogue number], 2014.

⁶⁸ LP: CVC 2054-6 IME- Pathé Marconi, 1957/58. LP, EMI France, 1967. CD, EMI, 2002. CD including the Piano Concerti, Warner Classics 5099967831, 2012.

⁶⁹ LP: L'oeuvre intégrale pour piano, Adès 7041-4, recorded in 1971, released in 1987.

⁷⁰ CD: FYCD 018, recorded in 1975, released in 1986.

Thanks to recent improved remasterings by Denis Condon, Ken Caswell, and Denis Hall it is now possible to appreciate the merits of Ravel's performances and particularly his personal approach to pianistic sonority, nuance and expression. Once more the spotlight is focussed on Ravel's physical connection with the piano, his manipulation of the keys and his moulding of textures and sonorities. How Ravel conveyed these techniques and ideas to other pianists is examined in a comparative analysis of the roll recordings with recordings made by the pianists whom Ravel coached. The impact of Ravel's pianistic style of composition on French pianism during the twentieth century is evaluated in an extended analysis of technical and interpretive practices in the recorded performances of several renowned French pianists.

Chapter 1

The Origins of Ravel's Pianism

Maurice Ravel's original compositions for solo piano barely fill two compact discs and yet the long-term impact of this concentrated and exquisitely honed corpus of works upon twentieth-century pianism was immeasurable. The sheer scale of technical and compositional innovation that Ravel brought to each successive piece was a mark of his prodigious knowledge of the piano's capabilities. How Ravel acquired this information is investigated within this opening chapter which takes its starting point from Ravel's own methodology as recorded by his biographer Alexis Roland-Manuel:

Choose a model; imitate him. If you have nothing to say, all you can do is copy. If you have got something to say, your personality will appear at its best in your unconscious infidelity.¹

That Ravel's personality shone through from an early age is evident from Alfred Cortot's recollections of him at the Paris Conservatoire:

Ravel's first essays in composition for the piano date from his student days. His fellow students, of whom I was one, soon discovered the signs of an uncommonly strongly marked musical talent in this slightly bantering, intellectual and somewhat distant young man, who read Mallarmé and visited Erik Satie. And if we allowed ourselves some reservations with regard to his abilities as a virtuoso, we were always delighted, between two lessons, to play to one another a few measures of highly audacious music, about which we always agreed on one point at least – they must have been taken from one of Ravel's latest compositions.²

¹ Roland-Manuel, *[À la gloire de] Ravel* (Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1938). English trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1947), p. 134.

² 'Ses premiers essais pianistiques datent du temps de ses études au Conservatoire. Ses condisciples, dont j'étais, n'avaient pas tardé à discerner chez ce jeune homme volontiers narquois, raisonneur, et quelque peu distant, qui lisait Mallarmé et fréquentait Erik Satie, les signes d'une personnalité musicale singulièrement accentuée. Et si nous nous permettions quelques réserves sur les aptitudes à la virtuosité instrumentale, nous nous délectons par contre, entre deux cours, à nous communiquer quelques mesures exceptionnellement audacieuses dont il était toujours convenu qu'elles provenaient de la dernière composition de Ravel'. Alfred Cortot, *La musique française du piano, Deuxième Série* (Paris: Rieder, 1932), pp. 22-23.

Likewise the Catalan pianist Ricardo Viñes, who met Ravel for the first time in October 1888 at the Cours Schaller,³ alludes to the mystique that Ravel seems to have cultivated between the ages of fourteen and twenty:

[...] he was by nature a being of complex and deep emotions, who as he left adolescence, trained himself to be more sociable, simple and direct, and to hide the complexities of his character beneath an appearance of whimsical good humour.⁴

At this time Ravel was a full-time student at the Paris Conservatoire, taking piano lessons initially in the preparatory piano class with Eugène-Jean-Baptiste Anthôme from 1889 to 1891 and subsequently in the advanced class with Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot from 1891 to 1895. His first acknowledged work for solo piano, the *Sérénade grotesque*, dates from 1893 (although it was not published until 1975), and reflects Cortot's description of his pianistic style of composition as being 'highly audacious'. Viñes' reference to Ravel being 'at his most natural' during these years would seem to suggest that he was also at his most receptive to all the musical influences around him. Thus Ravel's openness of spirit, his willingness to engage with the music of others and to learn by example without replicating exactly the compositional formulae and pianistic practices of composers past and present, must have been informed to a large degree through his interaction with the piano and specifically the works he studied and performed as a student.

This chapter constitutes the first detailed investigation of Ravel's pianistic studies beginning with his earliest lessons with Henri Ghys in 1882 from the age of seven and ending with his last recorded lessons with Santiago Riera in 1897. The diverse body of music which informed Ravel's technical and interpretive knowledge of

³ Nina Gubisch-Viñes, the great niece of Ricardo Viñes, states that Viñes went to the Cours Schaller for the first time with Enrique Granados on 18 October 1888 and attended his first course on the 29 October, where he probably met Ravel. *La rencontre: les prémices d'une amitié. Cahiers Maurice Ravel*, No. 14 (Paris: Séguier, 2011), pp. 16-42.

⁴ Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 14.

the piano during this period, ranging from exercise methods, teaching manuals, solo and concerto repertoire will be scrutinised to ascertain the influences they brought to bear upon Ravel's compositional style in his solo and concertante works. His own pianistic abilities, often derided in the published literature on Ravel, are flagged up here with an examination of the advanced technical and interpretive skills he acquired through the study of substantial nineteenth-century piano repertoire to shed further light on the scintillating pianism that emerges from his solo piano works.

Pre-Conservatoire Piano Studies: Henri Ghys (1882-88)

Ravel's earliest piano studies began at the age of seven under the tutelage of pianist-composer Henri Ghys (1839-1908) who was a close friend of Emmanuel Chabrier. Judging from a comment recorded by Ghys in his diary following Ravel's first lesson on 31 May 1882, it was an auspicious start: 'Today I began to teach a young pupil Maurice Ravel who appears to be bright'.⁵ Three months later Ghys rewarded Ravel by presenting him with a four-hand arrangement of the *Air du Roy Louis XIII* 'arranged specially for his young pupil Maurice Ravel by his teacher Henri Ghys'.⁶ The piece takes the form of a da capo air in C major with a central trio section in F major. Teacher and pupil roles are clearly defined in that the secondo part carries the lion's share of material including interpretive instructions (*una corda* and sustaining pedal marks, spread chords, variations in the accompanimental patterns) whilst the simpler treble part, presumably played by the young Ravel, carries the melodic line with both hands in unison for the most part. Added acciaccaturas and

⁵ 'Je commence aujourd'hui un petit élève Maurice Ravel qui me paraît intelligent'. Jean Roy, *Chronologie, Cahiers Maurice Ravel, Volume 1* (1985), p. 10.

⁶ '[...] transcrit expressément pour son petit élève Maurice Ravel par son professeur Henri Ghys'. The manuscript score consists of nine pages and is dated August 30 1882. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Res VMA MS-1067.

changes in register provide some technical challenges and dynamic gradations range between *pp* and *f*.

Ravel kept a score of the *Air* in his music library at his home, Le Belvédère, in Montfort l'Amaury, together with two other compositions by Ghys, the *Redowa fantaisiste* in F major⁷ and the *Douze Préludes*.⁸ The former derives its title from a Czech round dance featuring waltz steps. Both melody and harmony are dominated by chromatic inflexions and sighing appoggiaturas. Ghys adopts a similar style in the *Douze Préludes*, which owe a great deal to the character pieces of Robert Schumann. Ravel's copies of these three works bear little evidence of use, and there is no record of Ravel's thoughts regarding his early studies with Ghys. However, what is clear is that with Ghys' encouragement and guidance, Ravel began exploring a wide range of music in piano duet and two-piano arrangements from the age of seven onwards, an activity that would remain central to his work as a composer. Seven years on, in November 1889, Ravel would take this pursuit to another level as a momentous meeting with Ricardo Viñes (both boys were fourteen) at the Cours Schaller piano classes allowed them to indulge their mutual passion for new music with regular piano duet sessions at which they played through works by the Russian 'Five', and non-Establishment figures including Erik Satie and Emmanuel Chabrier. Ghys' close association with Chabrier, who would later exert a powerful influence on Ravel's composing style for the piano, probably paved the way for Ravel and Viñes to give a private performance of the *Trois valse romantiques* for Chabrier in February 1893.

Ghys' predilection for the music of Robert Schumann seems also to have left its mark on Ravel. On February 15 1892, Ravel, aged seventeen, participated in an

⁷ Paris: Lemoine, 1886.

⁸ Brussels: Breitkopf, 1891.

all-Schumann programme at the Salle Érard, when he performed the *Andante and Variations* Op. 46 for two pianos with Ghys. The breadth of compositional and pianistic techniques explored by Schumann in the *Andante and Variations* provided a wealth of source material for the youthful Ravel. Both the melodic and harmonic languages are characterized by appoggiaturas and sinuous chromaticisms, including some delicious minor second clashes, while the ensuing variations develop the theme within a variety of accompanimental textures, moods and articulations. Midway through the work, Schumann casts the theme in a pattern that alternates thumbs and dyads (Example 1.1a), a configuration that Ravel also adopts at the beginning of 'Noctuelles' from *Miroirs* (Example 1.1b). The latter is often linked to a similar layout employed by Mili Balakirev in the opening section of his Oriental fantasy *Islamey* (Example 1.1c)⁹ although there is no extant evidence to suggest that Ravel played this piece to performance standard, unlike Schumann's Op. 46.

Example 1.1

a) Schumann: *Andante and Variations* Op.46, bars 156-158

⁹ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 131.

b) Ravel: *Miroirs* (1905), 'Noctuelles', bars 1-2

♩ = 128 environ
Très léger

pp

c) Balakirev: *Islamey* (1869), bars 13-14 (right hand)

(Presto con fuoco ♩ = 168)

13

f

Ravel's physical connectivity with Schumann's pianism is underlined in the following observation by his former composition student Manuel Rosenthal: 'Ravel constantly returned to the profound humanity of Schumann's music and particularly to his innumerable pianistic innovations'.¹⁰ Roy Howat describes Schumann's effect upon French music as 'immeasurable' citing his influence on Debussy, Fauré, Chabrier, and Ravel plus his aesthetic kinship with the French clavecinistes in the tenderness of his language.¹¹ Equally for the pianist Yvonne Loriod (1924-2010) the transference of techniques and interpretive ideas between Schumann and twentieth-century French pianism underpinned her pedagogical philosophy, which she passed on to generations of students at the Paris Conservatoire:

Do not deprive yourself. Because when you play Schumann well, you learn to play Mozart, too. When you play Boulez well you find fingerings to play Schumann. Everything fits

¹⁰ 'Sans cesse Ravel revenait sur la profonde humanité de la musique de Schumann et partout les innombrables trouvailles pianistiques'. Marcel Marnat (ed.), *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal recueillis par Marcel Marnat* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), introduction.

¹¹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, p. 159.

together. The role of an interpreter is not to specialize. But you must deliver the works to the public. The public chooses afterwards.¹²

Pre-Conservatoire Piano Studies: Émile Descombes (1888-89)

Ravel seems to have shown considerable talent and progress during his studies with Ghys to the extent that plans were put in place for him to sit the entrance examination to the Paris Conservatoire. For this more specialised preparation Ghys passed his young student to Émile Descombes (1829-1912), who taught a preparatory piano class at the Paris Conservatoire and whose fame as a teacher rested principally upon his claim to be a disciple of Chopin. However, as James Methuen-Campbell states in *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin* (1992): '[...] in terms of actually passing on [Chopin's] precepts of interpretation to future generations, there were only two [...] pupils who can be regarded as having any long term impact: Karl Mikuli and Georges Mathias (Ravel's studies of Mathias' *Allegro Symphonique* in 1895 will be discussed in due course within this chapter).¹³ Methuen-Campbell exercises a degree of caution in referring to Descombes as 'possibly having passed on aspects of the authentic Chopin tradition'.¹⁴ Nevertheless Descombes' list of students around this time was impressive including Édouard Risler (1873-1929), Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947), Erik Satie (1886-1925) and arguably the most notable interpreter of Chopin's music during the first half of the twentieth century, Alfred Cortot (1877-1962).

¹² Christopher Dingle, 'Yvonne Loriod as Source and Influence', in Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (eds.), *Messiaen Perspectives 1: Sources and Influences*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 197-212.

¹³ James Methuen-Campbell, 'Chopin in performance', in Jim Samson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 194. Surprisingly, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's pioneering survey of Chopin's pianism, *Chopin vu par ses élèves* (Neuchâtel: Baconnière, 1970) makes no reference to Descombes.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Ravel's progress as a pianist by the age of thirteen can be gauged by his participation in a concert at the Salle Érard on 24 June 1888 during which twenty-four of Descombes' pupils performed extracts from different piano concerti. For Ravel, this was his first public performance, and the work chosen for him to perform was Ignaz Moscheles' Piano Concerto No. 3 Op. 58 (1820). It is not known which movement or section of the concerto Ravel actually played, although the answer to this conundrum may be found in Descombes' pedagogical publications, specifically his editions of concerto extracts entitled the *École du piano: Premières solos: extraits des concertos des grands maîtres révus et doigtés par E.D.*¹⁵ Number 49 is taken from Moscheles' Op. 58 where the first movement exposition is reproduced excepting the omission of eight bars of solo and orchestral exchanges. Descombes' revisions advocate left-hand additions and many dynamic suggestions reflecting a romantic approach to performance practice that seems slightly at odds with Moscheles' classically conceived textures in the original version. It is highly likely that it was this extract that Ravel performed in June 1888 and a clear indication of the enormous strides he had made in acquiring a fluid and secure piano technique.

Moscheles' Op. 58 belongs to a style of pianism that was all the rage during the early nineteenth century, the *Stile brillante*, where virtuoso pianists sought to dazzle their audiences with performances of their latest compositions that explored a wealth of pyrotechnical skills. After the declamatory opening chords Moscheles introduces a lyrical theme supported by a bass line and inner accompaniment of extended arpeggios. He piles on the technical challenges with brisk semiquaver passagework involving changing note patterns, alternating chromatic scale patterns

¹⁵ Paris: Louis Alleton, 1909. The series comprises approximately fifty concerti in total, including works by Mozart, Beethoven, Hummel, Dussek, Mendelssohn, Cramer and Weber.

and Scottish snap figurations that were fashionable during this era. Ornamented melodies in double thirds, repeated note passages, and fast-moving two-part contrapuntal textures between the hands in parallel thirds, sixths and contrary motion complete this busy exposition.

The recollections of one of Moscheles' piano students, William Frederick Pecher, together with journal articles describing Moscheles' playing style, are sourced in Mark Kroll's recent book *Ignaz Moscheles and the Changing World of Musical Europe*.¹⁶ Pecher states that Moscheles' primary goal was to make the piano sing, that he was heavily influenced by the bel canto tradition and that he was a master of contrapuntal (and specifically fugal) techniques.¹⁷ Furthermore, an article from the *Quarterly Musical Magazine Review* (1827) noted the 'equality and evenness of touch, which from the extreme neatness and clarity of articulation that it bestows, is amongst Mr Moscheles' greatest beauties'.¹⁸ These statements resonate tellingly with qualities attributed to the pianism of Sigismond Thalberg (1812-1871) that will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to his most important student, Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot with whom Ravel completed his piano studies at the Paris Conservatoire between 1891 and 1895.

Ignaz Moscheles (1794-1870) undertook his early studies in Prague and subsequently taught in London, Vienna and Leipzig, yet his playing style reflects an aesthetic kinship with those traits associated with the French school of pianism as disseminated throughout the nineteenth century in the pedagogical practices of Louis Adam, Friedrich Kalkbrenner, Antoine François Marmontel and Louis Diémer at the Paris Conservatoire. Thus Moscheles' pianism could be said to embrace several

¹⁶ Mark Kroll, *Ignaz Moscheles and the Changing World of Musical Europe* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

European schools of pianism, a fact corroborated by his co-authorship of a comprehensive study of early nineteenth-century pedagogical practices entitled *Méthode des Méthodes* (1840) with critic and musicologist François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871).¹⁹

Moscheles' pianistic style of composition as demonstrated in Op. 58 provides a foretaste of the virtuoso techniques developed by composer-pianists Franz Liszt and Camille Saint-Saëns in their later concerti (the latter's Second and Fifth Concerti in particular, dated 1868 and 1896 respectively). That they in turn were acknowledged as major influences on Ravel's style of pianism, which incorporates brilliance and virtuosity at every turn, creates a significant genealogical link that will be explored during this chapter.

Other areas in which Moscheles and Ravel's pianistic choices overlap include their enthusiasm for the keyboard works of Domenico Scarlatti and their preference for the pianos made by Sebastian Érard. Moscheles included a selection of Scarlatti's sonatas in his pioneering series of "historical soirées" held for the first time at the Hanover Square Rooms in February and March 1837.²⁰ In this respect he was ahead of his time, not only in championing Baroque keyboard works but also as one of the first people to perform publicly on the harpsichord in England since the eighteenth century and the originator of the solo piano recital, predating Liszt's two solo concerts at the same venue in June 1840 that 'gave birth to the term "recital" within

¹⁹ François-Joseph Fétis & Ignaz Moscheles, *Méthode des méthodes de piano* (Paris: Schlesinger, 1840). English édition (London: Chappell, 1840). The treatise compares the teaching methods of Louis Adam, Johann Baptiste Cramer, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Friedrich Kalkbrenner and Henri Herz alongside Muzio Clementi, Carl Czerny, Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach and Jan Ladislav Dussek. Additionally it references the performance styles of several celebrated pianists including Chopin, Adam Henselt, Kalkbrenner, Liszt, and Thalberg.

²⁰ Kroll, 'Le Concert c'est Moscheles: Historical Soirées and the Invention of the Solo Piano Recital', *Ignaz Moscheles and the Changing World of Musical Europe*, 'Le Concert, c'est Moscheles', pp. 284-285.

musical vocabulary'.²¹ With the encouragement of Fétis, Moscheles began to incorporate the keyboard works of the French clavecinistes (including Jacques-Champion de Chambonnières, François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau) into his concert programmes from 1838 onwards.²²

The significant influence of Domenico Scarlatti on Ravel's composing style for the piano is given added weight by Roland-Manuel's observation that during his visits to Ravel's home in 1911: 'the only score I saw on the music stand was the Breitkopf edition of Sixty Sonatas by Scarlatti'.²³ Ravel's exploration of virtuosic techniques in the piano works owes much to Scarlatti's inventiveness in his keyboard sonatas that incorporates wide leaps, hand crossings, countless configurations of changing notes, and quick changes of register for coloristic effect. One need only glance at Ravel's energetic piano writing in the second movement of the Piano Trio (1914) and the 'Toccatà' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17) to see such procedures at work. Roger Nichols refers to Ravel 'following in the steps of Domenico Scarlatti turning the keyboard instrument into a huge guitar in "Alborada del gracioso" ' (1905) with his strummed chords and brisk repeated notes.²⁴ Roy Howat traces Ravel's compression of sonata form into a binary structure in the Finale of his Piano Concerto in G (1929-31) and the integration of dissonant notes into consonant chords, for example, at the outset of 'Valse 2' from the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911) to corresponding techniques employed by Scarlatti in his keyboard sonatas.

²¹ Janet Ritterman and William Weber, 'Origins of the Piano Recital in England 1830-1870', in Therese Ellsworth and Susan Wollenberg (eds.), *The Piano in Nineteenth Century British Culture, Instruments, Performers and Repertoire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 179. See also Kroll, *Ignaz Moscheles and the Changing World of Musical Europe*, pp. 284-5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 292.

²³ Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers* (Paris: Éditions du Tambourinaire, 1939). Quoted in Roger Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 141.

²⁴ Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 74.

Moscheles, according to his wife Charlotte, had nothing but praise for the Érard grand piano: '[...] it has the power of an organ and the softness of a flute [...] with a touch light enough even to satisfy me [...] I can slowly spin out the tone as on a stringed instrument'.²⁵ His emphasis upon the Érard's potential for evoking other instrumental sonorities strikes a chord with Ravel's references to orchestral instruments throughout his solo piano works. Vlado Perlemuter recalls Ravel stating his intentions regarding 'Scarbo' from *Gaspard de la nuit*: 'I wanted to make an orchestral transcription for the piano!'²⁶ Equally the Érard's lightness of touch as highlighted by Moscheles, facilitated by the double escapement action developed by Sebastian Érard in the 1820s, was a quality that Ravel would later tap into when exploring rapid glissandi and repeated note techniques in works such as 'Alborada del gracioso' from *Miroirs*, and the 'Toccatà' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The present writer was given access to Ravel's 1908 Érard grand piano, at the Musée Maurice Ravel in Montfort l'Amaury, affording him unique insights into the pianistic sonorities and colours the composer himself would have experienced as he gave life to his solo piano works. These studies served to underline the ease with which Ravel's pianistic sound world emerges naturally from the Érard's straight-strung mechanism allowing for clarity of definition within each register which in turn extends the possibilities with regard to pedalling techniques, including half-pedalling and vibrato pedalling.

For the entrance examination to the Paris Conservatoire in November 1889,

²⁵ Charlotte Moscheles ed., *Aus Moscheles' Leben - nach Briefen und Tagebüchern, Herausgegeben von Seiner Frau* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1872-3). English trans. A.D. Coleridge (New York: Holt, 1879), Chapter 23 (1853).

²⁶ 'J'ai voulu faire une transcription d'orchestre au piano!'. Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel* (Lausanne: Éditions du Cervin, 1957; 5/1970). Augmented re-edition: *Ravel d'après Ravel, suivi des Rencontres avec Vlado Perlemuter*, ed. Jean Roy (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1989). English edition (from the above 1970 volume): *Ravel according to Ravel*. English trans. Frances Tanner, ed. Harold Taylor (London: Kahn & Averill, 1990), p. 35.

Ravel played an excerpt from a Chopin concerto. Which of Chopin's two concertos (Op. 21 composed in 1829 or Op. 11 composed in 1830) Ravel performed is unclear, although Descombes did transcribe the first movement expositions of both works. Notwithstanding this, either exposition would have been a logical progression, with regard to Ravel's pianistic advancement at this stage in his development, from Moscheles' pianism, described by Mark Kroll as 'a link between the classical style of the eighteenth century and the new directions of the nineteenth'.²⁷ On first glance many of the techniques adopted by Chopin in his concertos adhere to the *Stile brillante* model witnessed in Moscheles' Piano Concerto No. 3. They also recall the virtuosic piano writing encountered in the piano concertos of Friedrich Kalbrenner (1785-1849), to whom Chopin dedicated his Piano Concerto in E minor Op. 11. These include a dramatic opening statement by the soloist, followed by melody and accompaniment textures and elaborate sequential passagework. However, the harmonic and rhythmic freedom that Chopin injects into both expositions, coupled with the innovative reworking of technical and interpretive elements, goes far beyond Moscheles' brilliant approach. As Ravel later commented in an article published in *Le Courrier musical*:

Chopin was not merely satisfied to transform pianistic technique. His inspired passagework may be observed amidst brilliant, exquisite and profound harmonic progressions. There is always hidden meaning, which is often conveyed by an intense poem of despair.²⁸

In Chopin's concertos the wealth of polyrhythmic patterns, accented appoggiaturas, melodic ornamentation, intricate part writing and dynamic colouring

²⁷ Kroll, *Ignaz Moscheles and the Changing World of Musical Europe*, p. 3.

²⁸ 'Chopin ne se satisfait pas de bouleverser la technique pianistique. Les traits sont inspirés. À travers ces successions brillantes, d'adorables, de profondes harmonies se perçoivent. Toujours l'arrière-pensée qui se traduit souvent par un poème intense de désespoir'. Maurice Ravel, 'Les Polonaises, les Nocturnes, les Impromptus, la Barcarolle - Impressions', *Le Courrier musical*, 13 (1 January 1910), pp. 31-32. Reproduced in Arbie Orenstein, *Maurice Ravel: lettres, écrits, entretiens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), pp. 291-3. English trans. by Dennis Collins: 'The Polonaises, Nocturnes, Impromptus, the Barcarolle - Impressions', sourced in Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader, Correspondence, Articles, Interviews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). pp. 335-337.

underpinned by meticulous details of pedalling come together to create a sound world that somehow still manages to conjure the illusion of flexibility within the framework of classical sonata form. Adapting structural templates to accommodate new compositional techniques and modes of expression is something that also preoccupied Ravel as he later grappled with sonata form in such diverse contexts as *Jeux d'eau*, *Sonatine*, 'Ondine', 'Scarbo', and the Concerto in G.

Chopin's textures call for a technique that embraces the individuality and independence of each finger, alongside the cultivation of a flexible wrist within both lateral and rotational contexts. Of paramount importance was the exploration of touch; the following description by one of Chopin's students reflects the levels of concentrated listening and muscular control required to produce the exact sound:

In legato playing one should not merely join the notes but bind them together, clinging to the keys - practising (as Moscheles also recommends) obtaining every colour of sound just by modifying the weight of the fingers falling on the keys. As for the staccato it should be just like the dot over an *i* - like the buzz of a string plucked on a harp or the guitar - like a violin pizzicato.²⁹

Such references draw immediate parallels with Ravel's practice of experimenting at the keyboard during the early stages of composition as he searched for orchestral sonorities.

Advanced Piano Studies at the Paris Conservatoire

The information presented above points to Ravel having amassed a considerable armoury of technical skills and interpretive knowledge by the age of fourteen through his studies of early nineteenth-century solo and concertante piano works and that he was well prepared for the forthcoming entrance examination to continue his training at France's most prestigious musical institution. In November 1889, the

²⁹ Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin vu par ses élèves* (Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1970). *Chopin, Pianist and Teacher as seen by his pupils*, ed. Roy Howat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 32.

Director of the Paris Conservatoire, Ambroise Thomas and six faculty members auditioned forty-six students for the piano classes, accepting nineteen in total, of whom twelve were admitted to the advanced piano class and seven to the preparatory piano division. Ravel's performance of the Chopin concerto earned him a place in the latter group and specifically the class of Eugène-Jean-Baptiste Anthiôme (1836-1916).³⁰ An exhibition held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France during the Ravel centennial year in 1975 included a table of significant dates relating to Ravel's piano studies at the Conservatoire, which is reproduced below (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: Calendar detailing Ravel's pianistic studies and competition history at the Paris Conservatoire (1889-1895)³¹

Date	Details of Ravel's activities
4 November 1889	admitted to Eugène Anthiôme's preparatory class
10 July 1890	won second prize (deuxième médaille du piano)
8 July 1891	won first prize (première médaille du piano)
9 November 1891	admitted to Charles de Bériot's advanced piano class
1892	no participation in internal competitions (ne présente aucun concours) [sic]
1893-1895	not placed in competitions for piano or harmony
July 1895	expelled from piano and harmony classes (radié des classes) [sic]

Studies with Eugène-Jean-Baptiste Anthiôme (1889-1891)

Ravel's two years of study with the pianist-composer Eugène Anthiôme are particularly important and relevant within the context of this chapter. It was during this period that Ravel, still only in his middle teens, achieved his two major successes in internal piano competitions at the Conservatoire: a second prize in July 1890 and the coveted first prize beating fellow student Alfred Cortot into second place in July

³⁰ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975. Revised: New York: Dover, 1991), pp. 13-14.

³¹ François Lesure and Jean-Michel Nectoux, 'Études: le calendrier précis (et inédit) de son séjour au Conservatoire', *Maurice Ravel: Exposition* (Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1975), p. 13.

1891. These accolades suggest that Ravel's star as a virtuoso player shone brightly, that his technique and musicianship had advanced significantly, and that he was capable of giving secure and confident performances under pressure.

Ironically it seems that of all Ravel's piano professors (including Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot and Santiago Riera who will be discussed later in this chapter) Anthôme was the least adventurous, judging from his published pedagogical works and numerous salon pieces for solo piano. In the introduction to his overly academic technical treatise, *L'Art du piano - Méthode théorique et pratique pour les commençants* (1880), Anthôme nails his credentials to the Conservatoire mast, citing fifteen years of teaching the same method as an endorsement for its success.³² The advice he dispenses to ensure a correct hand position and neat fingerwork seems dogmatic and inflexible, as the following examples reveal:

It is necessary to exaggerate everything when practising and deconstructing the movements one makes with the fingers, hand and forearm. It is necessary to lift the fingers as high as possible to give a certain flexibility to the articulation. It is necessary to force (overdo) the articulation of the fourth finger to a greater degree.³³

For the January and June examinations of 1890, Ravel's choices remained firmly rooted in the early nineteenth-century repertory with performances of a Chopin Polonaise and the finale of a Mendelssohn concerto (no further information exists regarding the exact works performed). Felix Mendelssohn's two piano concertos, Op. 25 and Op. 40, composed in 1832 and 1837 respectively, adhere to the *Stile brillante*. Both finales explore fast-moving arpeggiated figurations with many double octave passages incorporating a thorough workout for the fourth finger in Op. 25, whereas a three-part texture of upper line melody, internal arpeggios shared between the

³² Eugène-Jean-Baptiste Anthôme, *L'Art du Piano - Méthode théorique et pratique pour les commençants* (Paris: Lissarrague, 1880).

³³ 'Il faut toujours exagérer quand on étudie et décompose les mouvements que l'on doit effectuer avec la main, avec les doigts ou avec l'avant-bras'. Il faut lever les doigts aussi haut que possible, cela donne de la souplesse aux articulations. Il faut forcer beaucoup l'articulation du quatrième doigt'. Ibid., p. 10.

hands and pedal notes prevails in the finale of Op. 40. Although there is no exact information to confirm which of these Ravel played, the Op. 40 finale seems to share a greater affinity with Ravel's pianistic style. As Charles Rosen points out 'Ravel sat very low, and in his music there are no examples of unison octaves fortissimo in both hands which are the trademark of so much nineteenth-century virtuosity. [...] "Scarbo" contains octaves alternating between the hands that do not require a raised position of the arms'.³⁴ Rosen does not cite his source for these observations but they probably originate with comments made by Ravel's student Manuel Rosenthal.³⁵ That Ravel adopted a low seating position is given some credence in several images of the composer at the piano (see Plate 1 in Chapter 2) and in particular a short silent film of the composer in mid-performance (investigated further in Chapter 2 of this dissertation).³⁶

Once more the evidence points to Ravel demonstrating a keen aptitude for *Stile brillante* techniques and in this case with Mendelssohn's idiosyncratic pianism, namely his pearly cantilenas, the need for evenness and clarity of articulation, delicate dynamic nuances and control of fast-moving passagework. That Ravel's pianistic style would later be defined by similar qualities in *Jeux d'eau*, *Sonatine* and 'Ondine' from *Gaspard de la nuit*, highlights the cross-fertilization of techniques that occurred between the various European schools of pianism during the nineteenth century.

³⁴ Charles Rosen, *Piano Notes* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 4.

³⁵ Manuel Rosenthal in Marcel Marnat (ed.), *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal recueillis par Marcel Marnat* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), p. 36. See Chapter 2 of this thesis, p. 84 and n. 4.

³⁶ *Maurice Ravel playing the piano in January 1928* (silent film). <https://youtu.be/9SjD1m4fQUY> [Accessed 20 August 2016]

Spurred on by his second prize and with the encouragement of Anthiôme who observed that Ravel was ‘rather gifted and would progress well with serious effort’,³⁷ Ravel seems to have made considerable headway during the year 1890-91 and his performances of Robert Schumann’s Sonata in G minor Op. 22 (1831-38) and a sonata by Hummel in the end of term examinations resulted in a Premier Prix. Coincidentally Claude Debussy had also secured his highest pianistic accolade, a Deuxième Prix, at the Paris Conservatoire in 1877 with a performance of the first movement of Schumann’s Op. 22.³⁸ The exact details of which of Johann Nepomuk Hummel’s sonatas Ravel played and whether or not he performed the complete work is unclear. However a closer examination of Schumann’s compositional language and the pianistic techniques in the Sonata in G minor uncovers many direct links to Ravel’s piano works.

The title Sonata implies symmetry and organisation, but from the very outset the mood of Schumann’s Op. 22 is one of hedonism and exuberance, reflected in the tempo marking of the opening movement, ‘as fast as possible’, and a driving rhythmic energy replete with offbeat phrases, tied notes, and syncopated figurations. Schumann begins with two contrasting motifs, a right-hand melody that descends stepwise across a perfect fourth, accompanied by extended Alberti bass patterns akin to string-crossing figurations (Example 1.2a). The falling interval of a perfect fourth carries huge significance for Ravel in that according to Jacques Février it is associated with the word *Ma-man* and is a subtle reference to Ravel’s mother.³⁹ Long before its appearance in Ravel’s opera *L’enfant et les sortilèges* (1925) he had applied it within a thematic context in many of his piano works including the second section

³⁷ Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, p. 14.

³⁸ http://www.debussy.fr/cdfr/bio/bio1_62-82.php [accessed 15 July 2016].

³⁹ Sourced in Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 71. Février also imparted this information to Roy Howat who studied with him.

of the trio in *Menuet Antique* (1895) and 'La vallée des cloches' (1904-5) from *Miroirs*. In *Sonatine* (1903-5), it assumes a cyclic role in thematically linking all three movements (Examples 1.2b-d).

Example 1.2

a) Schumann: Sonata in G minor op. 22, 1st movement, bars 1-5

So rasch wie möglich ♩ = 144

fz *f* *f*

Pedal

b) Ravel: *Sonatine* (1903-5), 'Modéré', bars 1-3

Modéré *doux et expressif*

p

c) *Sonatine*, 'Mouvement de Menuet', bars 1-2

Mouvement de menuet

p

d) *Sonatine*, 'Animé' bars 1-4

From a technical perspective Schumann's use of widely spaced arpeggios and broken chord patterns in this first movement often highlights the thumbs in various contexts. In bars 24-40 the right-hand thumb is singled out to play syncopated appoggiaturas that resolve by sliding from black to white notes, a device used by Ravel during the opening bars of 'Noctuelles' from *Miroirs* (Examples 1.3a and 1.3b).

Example 1.3

a) Schumann, *Sonata in G minor*, Op. 22, 1st movement, bars 24-28 (right hand)

b) Ravel, *Miroirs* (1904-5), 'Noctuelles', bar 6

The unique ability of the thumb to articulate with weight and power is tapped in several left hand passages within the first movement exposition of Op. 22 as outlined in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Left-hand thumb techniques in the first movement exposition of Schumann's Sonata in G minor Op. 22.

Bars	Role assigned to left-hand thumb
16-19	Offbeat dominant pedal against bass melody
40-44	Chromatic countermelody against V (of B flat major) pedal
44-56	Doubling the octave melody in the right hand
67-70	Off beat countermelody within extended Alberti bass patterns

Ravel's idiosyncratic thumbs were agile and supple which implies that he would have relished the pianistic sensation of negotiating such passages. In the final movement of Op. 22 (Rondo) the right-hand thumb takes on the role of soloist as it plays the principal theme within a broken octave texture (Example 1.4).

Example 1.4: Schumann: Sonata in G minor Op. 22, 4th movement, bars 1-4

Rondo
Presto ♩ = 160 1

The musical score for Example 1.4 shows the first four bars of the Rondo section. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line with a broken octave texture, starting with a forte (sf) dynamic. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line with a dominant pedal point. The score includes fingerings (1) and a 'simile' marking. A 'Pedal' marking is present in the bass line.

Ravel's studies of the piano works of Chopin with Descombes and Anthôme would have equipped him with a knowledge of lateral and rotational wrist techniques, both of which are indispensable for the ease of execution of these widely-spaced

figurations. With such firm foundations it is easy to see how Ravel made the transition to the arpeggio-based patterns that often transcend the whole keyboard at lightening speed in works such as *Jeux d'eau*, 'Une barque sur l'océan', 'Ondine' and 'Scarbo'.

A remarkable feature of Schumann's compositional style as seen in the first movement of the Sonata Op. 22 is his skilful handling of stable and unstable elements within the sonata form framework. The instability arises from a contrapuntal approach to voicing, rhythm and harmony augmented by much independent movement between the hands and a dynamic trajectory that is in constant flux. To balance this, Schumann applies simple repetition and sequence techniques to delineate and clarify the structure. For the performer, maintaining technical and interpretive control over such disparate components must seem at times like a knife-edge balancing act, but Ravel was able to carry it off (at least in the eyes and ears of the Conservatoire jury). Likewise Ravel the composer was to demonstrate consummate skill when reworking sonata form structure within the Impressionist and Symbolist contexts of *Jeux d'eau* and 'Scarbo' respectively.

Schumann's compositional style in the Sonata Op. 22 provided a rich source of ideas for Ravel to explore and develop in his piano writing. In the second movement, 'Scherzo', Schumann undermines the triple metre by singling out offbeat quavers with sforzandi, using hemiola effects, placing crescendos across the bar to emphasize the third beat, and phrasing the melody within irregular shapes across barlines. All these devices are replicated in Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* where his notated articulation threatens to undermine the stability of the Viennese Waltz rhythm (Examples 1:5a and 1:5b).

Example 1.5

a) Schumann: Sonata in G minor Op. 22, 3rd movement, bars 3-7

Scherzo
Sehr rasch und markiert ♩ = 138

3

f *sf*

Pedal

b) Ravel, *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911), 'Valse 1', bars 3-8

3 **Modéré - très franc** ♩ = 176

f

6

Schumann's deft manipulation of the harmonic pulse through the brisk modulating sequences in the final movement (bars 60-92) finds its counterpart in corresponding passages from the 'Prélude' (bars 14-21), 'Rigaudon' (bars 25-34) and 'Toccatà' (bars 177-180) from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Even the simple left hand dyads at the beginning of the third movement, 'Andantino', call to mind the opening bars of *À la manière de Chabrier*.

However, what emerges most vividly from this investigation of Schumann's Sonata Op. 22 is the prominent role he assigns to the thumbs in both outer movements to articulate the thematic material (melodies and countermelodies), colour the harmony (with appoggiaturas and chromatic slides) and add power and weight at crucial moments in the structure. How Ravel proceeded to develop these

features and to take thumb techniques onto another level in his solo piano works is explored in Chapter 2.

Judging by Ravel's public performances and competition successes up to July 1891 he had developed considerable technical facility, interpretive understanding and an aptitude for the early Romantic piano repertoire. However, vital information uncovered during this investigation from the Paris Conservatoire's archival records reveals that Ravel's winning performances were accomplished with other concertante works that have not been cited in the published literature on Ravel to date. For the Classes préparatoires de piano in 1890 the set piece for the final round of the 'Concours de Piano' was Henri Herz's Piano Concerto No. 3 Op. 87 (1835) and in 1891, Ignaz Moscheles' Piano Concerto No. 4 Op. 64 (1823).⁴⁰

Ravel's first public performance had featured Moscheles' Piano Concerto No. 3, so it is somewhat fitting that he should achieve his greatest pianistic success three years later with the Piano Concerto No. 4, a work that combines the brilliance of Mozart with the gravitas of Beethoven, whilst looking forward to the lyricism and virtuosity of Chopin and Schumann's concerti. Ravel's technical command of the keyboard must have been even more impressive for him to have dealt with the hefty challenges of Henri Herz's Concerto No. 3, where not a single note is left unadorned and the complex polyphonic textures call for even, rapid fingerwork and highly developed wrists. For Ravel to surmount such hurdles was a considerable achievement and further testimony to the maturity of his virtuoso technique by the age of sixteen. The mercurial and sparkling pianism coupled with delicate and well-balanced orchestral accompaniment that define Herz's Concerto No. 3 strike a chord

⁴⁰ *Le Conservatoire National de Musique et de Déclamation - documents historiques et administratifs*. Recueillis ou reconstitués par Constant Pierre (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1900), p. 595.

with Ravel's own intentions with his Piano Concerto in G which he referred to as a 'divertissement'.⁴¹ As Ravel remarked in an interview shortly after completing the Piano Concerto in G in 1931: 'My only wish was to write a genuine concerto, that is, a brilliant work, clearly highlighting the soloist's virtuosity, without seeking to show profundity'.⁴² Likewise Jeremy Nicholas wrote in his booklet notes for a recording of Herz's Concerto No. 3 in 2006: 'It reminds us that good, even great music can possess the simple function of entertaining and lifting the spirit'.⁴³

Advanced Piano Studies at the Paris Conservatoire: Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot (1891-1895)

Ravel's success in the final competition in the summer of 1891 meant that he was admitted into the senior piano class of Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot (1833-1914) the following autumn where he remained for the duration of his piano studies at the Conservatoire. Unfortunately his failure to win any other prizes over the next three and a half years resulted in his expulsion from the Conservatoire in July 1895. Nevertheless, Ravel's working relationship with de Bériot seems to have been cordial and productive in that he studied and performed a challenging repertoire eliciting many favourable comments from his teacher (see Table 1.3).⁴⁴

As Charles Timbrell observes in *French Pianism: a Historical Perspective*, de Bériot's teaching centred upon 'developing skills in critical listening, refinement of touch, singing tone, slow practice and exacting use of the pedals'.⁴⁵ This emphasis on

⁴¹ Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: lettres, écrits, entretiens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989). English edition: *A Ravel Reader, Correspondence, Articles, Interviews*. Translation by Dennis Collins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 494.

⁴² Interview conducted by Pierre Leroi, *Excelsior*, 30 October 1931. Reproduced in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 485.

⁴³ The Romantic Piano Concerto: Henri Herz (1803-1888). Howard Shelley (pianist and conductor) with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, CD, Hyperion CDA 67537 (2006).

⁴⁴ Ravel's high regard for de Bériot is reflected in his dedication of the *Rapsodie espagnole* (1908) to his former teacher.

⁴⁵ Charles Timbrell, *French Pianism: a Historical Perspective* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1999), p. 46.

sound production and the emulation of vocal sonorities at the piano comes as no surprise when one considers de Bériot's distinguished musical pedigree. His mother was the mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran famed for her performances as Rossini's operatic heroines, his uncle was the baritone and vocal pedagogue Manuel Garcia, and his aunt was the accomplished singer, pianist and composer Pauline Viardot, a close friend of Frédéric Chopin and Clara Schumann and the dedicatee of Saint Saëns' opera *Samson et Delilah*. Of equal significance is the fact that de Bériot studied with the legendary pianist Sigismond Thalberg (1812-1871) whose ground-breaking contributions to the development of piano technique and especially the cultivation of a singing tone on the piano were laid out in a four-volume anthology, *L'Art du chant appliqué au Piano* compiled between 1853 and 1864 and comprising 25 virtuosic transcriptions of arias and popular songs with accompaniments for solo piano.⁴⁶

It is worth pausing here to examine Thalberg's approach to keyboard sonority, its role in shaping de Bériot's teaching practices and the subsequent impact on Ravel's pianism. Like his teacher, Ignaz Moscheles, Thalberg had been gripped by the new developments in piano construction in France during the early nineteenth century. Sebastian Érard's double escapement action enabled a struck hammer to remain close to the string until the finger was removed from the key. Consequently pianists had much more control over the attack and release of the key, the repetition of notes, and most importantly greater control over dynamic colouring. Thalberg set his priorities firmly on exploring these advances to extract new sonorities from the pianoforte and specifically to cultivate the most exquisite singing tone using the art

⁴⁶ Sigismond Thalberg: *L'Art de chant appliqué au piano, oeuvres célèbres vocales et orchestrales des grands maitres, transcrites, accentuées et doigtées pour le piano, avec annotations du célèbre pianiste sur le style et l'exécution de ces chefs d'oeuvre, ornées du portrait de Sigismond Thalberg* (Mainz: Schott, 1853-64).

of *bel canto* as his muse. His role in the expansion of pianistic sonority manifested itself in the ways in which he redistributed melodic and harmonic material to create new pianistic textures, often of considerable ingenuity and complexity. The melodies are often shared between the hands and the accompanimental figurations range from tremolos, arpeggiated chords and figurations, syncopated chords, and glissandi. In a section titled 'Rules for Modern Piano-Forte Playing' within the Preface to *L'Art du chant appliqué au Piano*, Thalberg provides technical guidance on the art of producing a singing melodic line on the piano using phrases such as 'keys must be felt rather than struck, pressed as though with a soft hand and fingers of velvet; articulate melodies with subdued accompaniments; hear the harmonies as a whole (not as separate notes), and avoid working too much with the fingers and too little with the mind'.⁴⁷ The zeal with which Thalberg pursued his quest for a vocally-inspired pianistic sonority is further emphasized with the following concluding statement to his set of rules: 'I have personally studied during five years under the direction of one of the first professors of singing in Italy'.⁴⁸ The professor was none other than de Bériot's uncle, the aforementioned Manuel Garcia.

In an interview with Charles Timbrell for the *Journal of the American Liszt Society* in 1986, pianist Paul Loyonnet (1889-1988), who studied with de Bériot from 1899 to 1905 gives an illuminating first-hand account of his teaching style.⁴⁹ He mentions de Bériot's insistence upon the cultivation of a singing tone and the exploration of nuances including the highlighting of top notes in chords, adding that

⁴⁷ Sigismond Thalberg, 'Rules for Modern Piano-Forte Playing (from *L'Art du Chant appliqué au Piano*)', in Sigismond Thalberg and Henri Vieuxtemps, *Thalberg and Vieuxtemps Grand Concert Book* (New York: unidentified publisher, 1857, pp. 4-5. Sourced from the British Library (Digitized 30 August 2016). See also Kenneth Hamilton, 'Thalberg and *L'art du chant*', in 'A Singing Tone', in *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 155-163.

⁴⁸ Thalberg and Vieuxtemps, *Thalberg and Vieuxtemps Grand Concert Book*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Reproduced in Timbrell, *French Pianism*, pp. 183-192.

his main textural idea was that the fingers should be wedded to the keys to make an impression on them rather than strike them. In all these recommendations de Bériot can be seen as a faithful advocate for Thalberg's brand of pianism. That de Bériot in turn passed on Thalberg's pianistic style to Ravel through his teaching is most evident in 'Ondine' from *Gaspard de la nuit*, Ravel's most remarkable study in balancing melodic and accompanimental textures and controlling the piano keys within the most subtle dynamic shades.

Loyonnet recalls de Bériot mentioning Thalberg on only one occasion when he assigned the latter's *Étude in A minor* (the *Thème et Étude* Op. 45) to one of his students who was having difficulties with repeated notes.⁵⁰ De Bériot added: 'each time Thalberg played this *Étude*, one wanted to go home and practise it immediately'.⁵¹ In the final section of the *Étude* the main theme appears as triplet semiquaver repeated note figurations in the right hand at the centre of the texture, while the left hand leaps across from bass to treble providing a light chordal accompaniment, giving the illusion of three parts played by three hands (Example 1.6a). Thalberg's *Étude* appeared in 1837, the year in which he went head to head with his main rival Franz Liszt in the now legendary pianistic duel held at the salon of Princess Cristina Belgiojoso. The following year, Liszt composed the first version of his *Études d'exécution transcendante d'après Paganini*, S. 140, which includes the spectacular study in repeated note techniques, 'La Campanella'. Unlike Thalberg, Liszt avoids hand-crossing in 'La Campanella', maintaining textural independence between the hands, although as Kenneth Hamilton points out 'Thalberg's trademark

⁵⁰ Paris: Troupenas, [1842-3].

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

‘three-handed’ arpeggio effects turn up in Liszt’s music after 1837’.⁵² However it is Thalberg’s model that Ravel follows in his exploration of repeated note and hand-crossing techniques in ‘Alborada del gracioso’ and ‘Scarbo’ (Examples 1.6b and c).

Example 1.6

a) Thalberg: *Thème et Étude* Op. 45, bar 68



b) Ravel: *Miroirs*, ‘Alborada del gracioso’, bars 52-53

c) Ravel: *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), ‘Scarbo’, bars 256-259

Significantly Ravel’s period of study with de Bériot coincided with the publication of several volumes of piano exercises and studies by the latter that provide a comprehensive picture of his teaching methods. These include *Mécanisme*

⁵² Kenneth Hamilton, ‘Liszt’s early and Weimar piano works’, in Kenneth Hamilton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 82.

et style Op. 66, *Le vade-mecum du Pianiste*,⁵³ *Trente-Six Études de Difficulté transcendante (Concours hebdomadaires du Conservatoire) pour piano*,⁵⁴ and *La Sonorité du Piano - Étude pratique et exercices spéciaux pour acquérir une bonne sonorité*.⁵⁵

In *Mécanisme et style*, de Bériot separates the purely digital techniques of piano playing from issues of style and interpretation. Part One comprises a handbook of daily gymnastic exercises that explore the five fingers in twenty-four finger permutations without passing the thumb, scales in octaves, thirds, sixths, and arpeggios, all designed to acquire what de Bériot terms ‘une grande égalité et une indépendance parfaite’.⁵⁶ Despite de Bériot’s adherence to the stereotypical *vade-mecum* format in *Mécanisme et style* (adopted by the majority of the nineteenth-century piano professors at the Conservatoire in their published treatises, including Eugène Anthème), he avoids the use of terms such as exaggerated movements, high fingers, agility and speed, preferring to concentrate upon tone production, and slow methodical practice. In Part Two, devoted to Style, de Bériot’s focus is upon ‘clarity of execution as being the essential quality from which accuracy arises as a matter of course’.⁵⁷ He uses words like colours, shades and tints, and connects the rise and fall of a musical phrase to calligraphic shapes, curves and nuances.⁵⁸ Such a likeness would surely have struck a chord with Ravel, bearing in mind his distinctive handwriting and acute feel for design as captured on the front cover of the first edition of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. In a section devoted to expression and

⁵³ Paris: Hamelle, 1889.

⁵⁴ Paris: Leduc, 1890.

⁵⁵ Dated 1894. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Catalogue No. VM 85 1036.

⁵⁶ Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot, *Mécanisme et style* Op. 66 (Paris: Hamelle, 1889). Première Partie: Mécanisme, Avant-propos/Préface.

⁵⁷ [...] c’est le netteté unie à la mesure qui est la qualité primordiale, la justesse étant une question d’accord’. ‘Exposé’, *Mécanisme et Style*, Deuxième Partie: Style, p. 2.

⁵⁸ ‘Des nuances en général’, *Mécanisme et Style*, Deuxième Partie: Style, p. 2.

punctuation de Bériot urges the pianist to breathe and follow the natural accentuation of the melodic phrase like a singer.⁵⁹ A subsequent volume on tone production, *La Sonorité du piano* Op. 67, addresses legato playing using finger substitution and the smooth passage of the thumb involving a sliding action, procedures that Ravel would explore in great detail in his piano works, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 2.

The *Thirty-Six Studies of Transcendental Difficulty* were composed to address specific technical problems experienced by de Bériot's Conservatoire students. They comprise a series of short exercises with titles denoting each technical hurdle to be surmounted. Many of de Bériot's configurations bear a striking resemblance to patterns later adopted by Ravel in the piano works, including the arabesque-like shapes of No. 6 (*Traits sautés*) reworked in 'Oiseaux tristes'; wide stretches within irregular patterns in No. 18 (*Égalité dans les traits irréguliers*) at the climax of 'Ondine' (bar 66); a mix of diverse intervals with exceptional leaps in No. 25 (*Mélange des divers intervalles aux écarts exceptionnels*) and double thirds mixed in with single notes in No. 26 (*Tierces mêlées de notes simples*) throughout *Miroirs*, and *Gaspard de la nuit*.

According to Loyonnet, de Bériot also encouraged his students to master the studies of another of his teachers, Hubert Ferdinand Kufferath (1818-1896), a former disciple of Felix Mendelssohn. Kufferath's *Six Concert Studies* Op. 8 put pianistic pyrotechnics well and truly under the spotlight, testing not only the pianist's voicing skills in differentiating between the melody and several accompanimental strands (*alla Thalberg*) but also intensifying the digital demands to a herculean degree with each successive study. A three-part texture of melody,

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

broken chord and arpeggiated accompaniment and bass line (reminiscent of those adopted by Mendelssohn in many of his *Songs without words*) undergoes extreme development involving the redistribution of fast-moving figurations between the hands, complex ornamentation against the melody, doubling of all three voices in octaves simultaneously, and filling those octaves in for the climactic Sixth Study. Despite the turbulent and somewhat cumbersome nature of Kufferath's part writing there is a tangible connection with Ravel's skilful and virtuosic handling of similar textures in 'Scarbo'.

Classes with de Bériot, as recalled by Loyonnet, either focussed upon technique or interpretation. For the weekly technique class students were required to learn a new Prelude and Fugue, a new Chopin Study and one of de Bériot's Transcendental Studies. However Loyonnet's overriding memory of de Bériot's teaching priorities is of lessons that concentrated on matters of interpretation at the expense of technical considerations:

Aside from working on nuance, he gave little attention to technique *per se*, thinking, like some other professors, that technique would develop itself through the pieces studied. This in itself is all right if one has good work habits and preliminary formations of muscles. Unfortunately he never taught me to organise my practice and often if I played badly he would say 'play it again' - sometimes writing in a fingering.⁶⁰

An article by Jean-Michel Nectoux detailing the contents of Ravel's music library at his home in Montfort l'Amaury refers to several scores used by Ravel during his studies with Anthème and de Bériot, including studies and salon pieces by them:

The technical manuals and character pieces of his two piano professors featured prominently in his repertoire, but one also finds notated fingerings in the Well-Tempered Clavier, Gradus ad Parnassum, the studies of Rubinstein, Vieuxtemps and the works of Saint-Saëns.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Paul Loyonnet, interview with Charles Timbrell, *French Pianism*, p. 185.

⁶¹ 'Les œuvres techniques ou pittoresques de ses deux professeurs du piano forment une bonne partie de son répertoire, mais on relève aussi les doigtés sur le Well Tempered Clavier, Gradus ad Parnassum, des études de Rubinstein, Vieuxtemps, et des œuvres de Saint-Saëns'. Jean-Michel Nectoux. *Maurice Ravel et sa bibliothèque musicale*. Cahiers Maurice Ravel No. 3 (1987), pp. 53-62.

Little is known about Ravel's practising habits at the Conservatoire but the presence of annotated scores of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* and Muzio Clementi's well-known studies *Gradus ad Parnassum* implies that he was prepared to put in the hours where necessary, a fact backed up by de Bériot's positive comments on his performance of Mendelssohn's *Capriccio in B minor* at the end of year assessments in 1892 (see Table 1.3).

The repertoire of piano works studied by Ravel under de Bériot's instruction reflected the current tastes and requirements at the Paris Conservatoire with the curriculum for all pianists focussing upon the works of Bach, Cramer, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt and Schumann. The music of Camille Saint-Saëns, as elder statesman of the French musical establishment was also endorsed alongside newly composed works by a select group of Conservatoire professors including Théodore Dubois, de Bériot and Louis Diémer (who taught Ravel's contemporaries Alfred Cortot and Édouard Risler).⁶²

As the list of works performed by Ravel for the biennial examinations at the Conservatoire demonstrates in Table 1.3 Ravel seems not to have strayed beyond the bounds of nineteenth-century European repertoire (within the Conservatoire at least), although the emotional breadth of the works covers a broad spectrum, from the crisp sparkling fingerwork required for Mendelssohn's *Capriccio in B minor* (yet more *Stile brillante*) to the expansive improvisatory landscape of Schumann's *Fantasy Op. 17*. Taken collectively, de Bériot's observations regarding

⁶² Elaine Brody, *Paris, The Musical Kaleidoscope, 1870-1925* (London: Robson, 1984), p. 171.

Table 1.3: Works performed by Ravel for the biennial examinations of 1892-1895 ⁶³

Work	Ravel's age/date	Critique from de Beriot
Mendelssohn: <i>Capriccio in B minor</i>	16	Very good musical organization. He also seems to be a good worker, which only the future will indicate.
Grieg: Piano Concerto ⁶⁴	January 1893 ⁶⁵	
Saint Saëns: Piano Concerto (number not specified)		
Chopin: Ballade No. 4 Op. 52	18 (June 1893)	A good pupil, plays with feeling and warmth but not always with full control.
Schumann: <i>Fantasy</i> Op. 17	18 (January 1894)	A great deal of temperament but a tendency to pursue big effects. Needs to be held in check.
Weber: Scherzo	19	Talent, warmth, overly enamoured of violence. Intermittent work.
Chopin: Étude	19	A spirited performance, communicative, on condition [occasion?] it does lapse into exaggeration. Works without excess.
Mathias: <i>Allegro symphonique</i>	20 (June 1895) ⁶⁶	Very good progress. Spirited temperament.

Ravel's performances paint a positive picture, and despite a recurrent theme with regard to the need for restraint at times Ravel comes over as a powerful committed performer with an individual voice.

1893 was a seminal year in Ravel's musical life from several perspectives. The challenging repertoire he studied and performed for the internal examinations at the Conservatoire included Grieg's Piano Concerto Op. 16 (January), a Saint-Saëns piano concerto (unspecified), and Chopin's Ballade No. 4 Op. 52 (June). Towards the end of that year he would also have been preparing the Schumann *Fantasy* op. 17 for the January 1894 examination. Outside the Conservatoire, he continued his exploration of other musical genres in piano duet and two pianos arrangements with Ricardo

⁶³ List of works performed by Ravel (with comments by de Bériot) for the biennial keyboard examinations supplied by Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, p. 15.

⁶⁴ Information regarding the concertos by Grieg and Saint Saëns supplied in a chronological list of works. *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁶⁵ The dates for Ravel's performances of the Grieg Piano Concerto Op. 16, Chopin Ballade No. 4, Op. 52 and Schumann Op. 17 are supplied by Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Added by author. Ravel turned twenty on 7 March 1895, therefore the *Allegro Symphonique* by Mathias must have been performed at the June examination that year - his last internal assessment before his expulsion from the Conservatoire. See also Nichols, *ibid.*, p. 14.

Viñes. In January 1893 they were busy rehearsing Emmanuel Chabrier's *Trois valse romantiques* that they played through to the composer on 8 February, the day before they performed the work at a concert in Paris.⁶⁷ Of even greater significance was the fact that Ravel composed his first acknowledged piano work, the *Sérénade grotesque* at some point during 1893.⁶⁸ This short work, lasting less than four minutes, has received little attention from scholars to date but when compared alongside Grieg's Piano Concerto, which Ravel was studying with de Bériot at this time, some noteworthy connections emerge relating to thematic structure and nationalistic styles.

Grieg's principal thematic motif in the Concerto, announced by the solo piano at the first entry, consists of three notes that descend a perfect fourth through a minor second followed by a major third. Ravel's recurrent use of the perfect fourth in various guises within his piano works, and its symbolic association to the word 'Maman' has been mentioned above in relation to Schumann's Sonata in G minor Op. 22. However, Ravel uses the exact same intervallic arrangement of the falling fourth as Grieg for his first extended theme in the *Sérénade grotesque* (bars 14-21) and hammers the point home in bars 19-20 by doubling the note values and adding tenuto marks and accents (Example 1.7a and 1.7b). Even the second theme at the 'Poco più lento' (bar 57) begins with the same three notes in inversion, a minor second and a (minor) third (Example 1.7c). This pattern also appears in the central section of the *Menuet Antique* (1895) with each note marked tenuto (Example 1.7d). Grieg's recycling of the three-note motif in various guises within all three

⁶⁷ Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 14.

⁶⁸ Discovered in the Ravel manuscript archives by Arbie Orenstein in the early 1970s and eventually published in 1975 by Salabert.

movements of his concerto is a technique adopted later by Ravel in several works including *Sonatine* and the Concerto in G.

Example 1.7

a) Grieg: Piano Concerto in A minor, Op.16, first movement, bars 1-2

Allegro molto moderato. ♩ = 84

2 *ff* *poco rit*

b) Ravel: *Sérénade grotesque* (1893), bars 10-20

Leggiero e rall.....Largo **Presto** ♩ = 120

11 *sf* *marcato* *sf* *sf* *legg. γ*

16 *sf* *sf* *sf*

c) Ravel: *Sérénade grotesque*, bar 57

57 **Poco piu lento**

Right hand

sf 2

d) Ravel: *Menuet Antique* (1895), bars 46-50



Norwegian folk dance rhythms and the timbre of the Hardanger fiddle permeate the fabric of the final movement of Grieg's Concerto. In much the same way Ravel looks to his Basque heritage and imbues the *Sérénade grotesque* with Spanish colour from the outset using dry arpeggiated sonorities (marked 'pizzicatissimo' and 'très rude') to evoke the sounds of fingernails plucking the gut strings of an acoustic guitar. Ravel went on to explore other idiomatic possibilities including habañera and flamenco rhythms and modal scales in the 'Habanera' from *Sites auriculaires* (1895), 'Alborada del gracioso' from *Miroirs* (1905-6), and the Concerto in G (1929-31).

The answer to which of Saint-Saëns's piano concerti Ravel studied and performed during 1893 may lie in his library at Montfort l'Amaury that contained scores of the Second Concerto in G minor Op. 22 and the Fifth Concerto in F major Op. 103. The latter was composed in 1896 and can therefore be ruled out for this investigation. No. 2 in G minor Op. 22, composed in 1868 (the same year as the Grieg Piano Concerto) encapsulates Saint-Saëns's pianism and is brought to life by the composer in a piano roll recording dating from 1904.⁶⁹ Saint-Saëns' performance of an abridged arrangement of the first movement confirms him as a consummate exponent of the so-called *style sévère* school of playing that is sprightly, clean, clear, light and even throughout. His compositional language owes much to the *Stile*

⁶⁹ *Three French Pianists*, remastered on CD, Symposium 1305 (2006).

brillante that was extremely familiar to Ravel by 1893 from his previous studies of the Moscheles, Chopin and Mendelssohn concerti. Significantly both Saint-Saëns and Ravel could trace their pianistic lineages back to the pedagogue and pianist Frederick Kalkbrenner. Saint-Saëns' teacher, Camille Stamaty had been Kalkbrenner's star pupil, and all three were famed for their highly developed digital techniques acquired with the aid of Kalkbrenner's mechanical device, the *guide-mains*. Ravel's pianistic grandfather Thalberg also studied briefly with Kalkbrenner but there is no record of him having used the *guide-mains* to acquire his vocally inspired keyboard facility.

The falling perfect fourth features prominently as a significant motif in the Second Concerto, principally as the head of the first subject theme in the opening movement (Fig. 1). It also reappears as a rhythmic ostinato played by the timpani at the beginning of the Scherzo. In the final Presto movement the tarantella theme begins with alternating minor seconds and major sevenths (bar 5), intervals that form the very cornerstones of Ravel's melodic and harmonic language.

In terms of pianistic technique Saint-Saëns' style as witnessed in this Concerto combines Lisztian bravura tempered by French classical restraint. The contrapuntal passagework of the Bachian introductory cadenza gives way to melodic and accompanimental textures brimming with intricate embellishments. The piano's decorative double note figurations at the beginning of the development section point to an important genealogical chain extending back to Franz Liszt's 'Feux Follets' from the *Études d'exécution transcendante* (1851), and forward to Ravel's 'Ondine' from *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908) (Ex. 1.8a, b and c).⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Kenneth Hamilton refers to Ravel using 'the Transcendental Studies as a reference guide to pianistic possibilities when composing *Gaspard de la nuit*'. 'Great Tradition, Grand Manner Golden Age' in K. Hamilton, *After the Golden Age, Romantic Pianism in Modern Performance* (2008), p. 10.

Example 1.8

a) Liszt: *Études d'exécution transcendante* (1851), 'Feux follets', bar 69

b) Saint-Saëns: *Concerto in G minor, Op. 22* (1868), 1st movement, bars 41-42

c) Ravel: *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), 'Ondine', bar 57

Of even more significance is the extended arpeggio writing that underpins Saint-Saëns' multi-layered textures at the beginning of the recapitulation in the first movement of the Second Concerto (Example 1.9b). Saint-Saëns inherited such techniques from Liszt, as demonstrated in the latter's *Troisième étude de concert*, 'Un sospiro' where the textural configuration comprises an internal melody played by alternating thumbs surrounded by rapid arpeggios (Example 1.9a). In turn Liszt

borrowed this device, the ‘three-handed technique’ from his pianistic nemesis and Ravel’s pedagogical grandfather, Thalberg. That Ravel continued this apostolic line is evident in the closing pages of *Jeux d’eau* (Example 1.9c) and in the first movement cadenza of the Concerto in G (Figure 26), where an internal melody played by the left hand thumb is accompanied by extended arpeggios in the left hand and trills in the right hand.

Example 1.9

a) Liszt: *Trois études de concert*, S.144, ‘Un sospiro’ (1857), bars 53-55

Un poco più mosso

53

non legato egualmente

p dolce

P *P* *P* *P* *P*

b) Saint-Saëns: Piano Concerto Op. 22, first movement, bars 65-66

65

p

Péd. * *Péd.* * *Péd.* * *Péd.* *

66

leggierissimo

9 *9*

8^{va}

Péd. *9* *

c) Ravel: *Jeux d'eau* (1901), bars 79-81

The musical score for Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, bars 79-81, is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a common time signature. The key signature is G major (one sharp).
 - **System 1 (Bar 79):** The right hand features a complex, multi-layered chromatic pattern of sixteenth notes, with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano). The left hand has a bass line with quarter notes. A bracket groups the right-hand part across the system.
 - **System 2 (Bar 80):** The right hand continues the chromatic pattern, now with a dynamic marking of *m.g.* (mezzo-forte) and the instruction *un peu marque*. The left hand has a bass line with quarter notes and some rests. A bracket groups the right-hand part across the system.
 - **System 3 (Bar 81):** The right hand continues the chromatic pattern, with a dynamic marking of *m.g.* and a '15' marking under the pattern. The left hand has a bass line with quarter notes. A bracket groups the right-hand part across the system.

By making a direct comparison between Saint-Saëns' Second Concerto and Ravel's Concerto in G, further connections emerge. Techniques employed by Saint-Saëns such as the Lisztian alternate double-octave chromatic ascent to drive towards the recapitulation of the first movement (four bars prior to Fig. E) are replicated by Ravel in exactly the same place (Fig. 17), although Ravel's version is in single notes, played in both hands that cover the whole seven octave range (there are several instances of Ravel using alternate double octaves to effect his lightning crescendi in

‘Scarbo’ and the ‘Toccata’). However, it is in the more delicate and capricious writing that the spirit of Saint-Saëns looms largest in Ravel’s pianism, binding both composers to the idiosyncratic French sensibilities of playfulness, balance and elegance. The central scherzo movement of Op. 22, the final movement of Ravel’s Concerto in G, and also the central Allegro section of the Concerto for the Left Hand (Fig. 14 onwards) bear witness to this sense of joyfulness, while the decorative filigree of Saint-Saëns’ textures finds added expression and pathos in Ravel’s hands at figures 8-14 of the Concerto for the Left Hand, and the recapitulation of the central Adagio (Fig. 6) in the Concerto in G.⁷¹

With the Grieg and Saint-Saëns concerti duly dispatched, Ravel turned his attention to two early Romantic masterpieces, Chopin’s Ballade No. 4 Op. 52 and Schumann’s *Fantasy* Op. 17, which he performed for the internal competition in June 1893 and January 1894 respectively. The very fact that Ravel was able to tackle these demanding works, whose physical and emotional challenges require a complete pianistic technique, is further testimony to his considerable progress as a pianist and interpreter by the age of nineteen. Roy Howat refers to Chopin as having ‘effectively invented the symphonic poem at the keyboard, devising forms that cohere while defying conventional analysis, in ways that interested both Debussy and Ravel’.⁷² The Ballade No. 4 illustrates Chopin’s compositional ingenuity at its most advanced, fusing elements of sonata form and variation techniques within a myriad combination of textures. The first subject theme (bar 8) undergoes melodic, harmonic and textural modification at every appearance, from delicate

⁷¹ Michael J. Puri explores the affinity between Saint-Saëns’ and Ravel’s reworking of sonata form structures in their concerti in ‘Saint-Saëns, Ravel and their Piano Concerti: Sounding out a legacy’, *Camille Saint-Saëns and his World*, ed. Jann Pasler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 334-357.

⁷² Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, p. 64.

ornamentation accompanied by chords (bar 23), adding a double note countermelody (bar 58) with further enrichment of the accompaniment, in canon (bar 135) to its most expansive statement, a long cantilena melody with wide sweeping arpeggio accompaniment (bar 152). This spectral transformation of the same basic thematic and melodic material is something that must have gripped Ravel's imagination and it was a technique he explored later in 'Ondine', 'Le Gibet' and *Jeux d'eau*.

Howat pinpoints many cogent similarities between Chopin and Ravel's pianism, and in the particular case of the Ballade No. 4, arguably the most groundbreaking and virtuosic of the Four Ballades, he highlights a few instances where Chopin's figurations, pianistic techniques and textures find their way into Ravel's piano works. These include octatonic progressions combined with diminished chords, the surging left-hand passagework that recalls similar passages in 'Scarbo' and an emotional breadth and intensity that looks forward to *Gaspard de la nuit* and *La Valse*. Additionally the arabesque-like patterns that characterise much of Chopin's pianism, for example bars 76-80 in Ballade No. 4 (Example 1.10a), evolve into the voluptuous expansive patterns of *Jeux d'eau* and 'Une barque sur l'océan', the hushed contrapuntal dialogue in the cadenza of 'Oiseaux tristes' (Example 1.10b) and even the eloquent and intimate opening phrase of the *Prélude* (Example 1.10c).

Example 1.10

a) Chopin: Ballade No. 4 Op. 52, bars 76-79

The image shows a musical score for Chopin's Ballade No. 4, Op. 52, bars 76-79. The score is in G major, 3/4 time, and features a complex texture with rapid sixteenth-note passages in the right hand and a more rhythmic left hand. The right hand part is marked 'leggiere' and 'rit.' (ritardando). The left hand part is marked 'leggiere' and 'rit.' (ritardando). The score shows a transition from a more active texture to a more hushed, contrapuntal texture.

b) Ravel: *Miroirs* (1905), 'Oiseaux tristes', extract from the cadenza (bar 25)

Pressez légèrement

ppp

c) Ravel: *Prélude* (1913), bars 1-3

Assez lent et très expressif (d'un rythme libre)

p

Any comparison between Ballade No. 4 and the *Sérénade grotesque* may at first seem odd, considering they inhabit differing emotional worlds. However, the opening sections of both works merit close scrutiny as Chopin and Ravel avoid any reference to the tonic key and use similar methods to reach this objective. The Ballade No. 4 opens in C major, with the prominent E natural announced by the left hand functioning more as the third of a C major chord than the leading note of the tonic F minor. When the first subject theme enters at bar 8 with the bass line providing an F pedal, Chopin undermines the tonic by playing it off against the leading note, E natural. Eventually the E natural slips down to an E flat heralding a modulation to A flat major (bars 10-12). In the *Sérénade grotesque*, Ravel goes one step further. His opening chords are built from up from a version of the whole tone scale that omits the tonic, F sharp, altogether. This first chord, a V7 in third inversion, which contains the leading note, E sharp, avoids resolution through parallel movement and when a prominent bass note does appear in bar 4 it is the

flattened supertonic, G. The tonic F sharp finally arrives in bar 11, but is immediately destabilised by being paired with the G in a semitonal tremolo. In the ensuing 'Presto' section any attempt to establish the tonic chord on the first beat is averted with edgy chromaticisms. Ravel's parallel seventh chords call to mind a similar technique adopted by Chopin in bars 72-73 of the Ballade No. 4 to create a bridge between the first and second subject material.

Throughout his pianistic studies, Ravel constantly returned to the music of Robert Schumann; even his earliest forays into composing include a set of variations on a theme by Schumann. Ravel verbalised his fondness for Schumann's pianism in a comment related to Manuel Rosenthal:

Yes, I'm well aware there are awkward, even clumsy turns, but even so, Schumann invented much of our pianistic writing... of our harmonic feeling.... We must place very, very highly - perhaps higher even than all the others - a musician who, with the seven wretched notes of the scale, somehow expresses so fully what lives in the human heart.⁷³

At first it may seem hard to imagine the reserved and modest Ravel tackling Schumann's *Fantasy* Op. 17 with its extrovert and unrestrained romanticism, although at some point in 1893, de Bériot had expressed a view that Ravel's playing had become 'too romantic'.⁷⁴ As Schumann himself wrote in a letter to his soon-to-be wife Clara in March 1838: 'The first movement of the work is perhaps the most passionate of all I have ever composed - a deep yearning for you'. Further comments by de Bériot's regarding Ravel's performance of the *Fantasy* in January 1894 attest to Ravel's eagerness to get to grips with the enthralling musical narrative of Op. 17: '[...] a great deal of temperament but a tendency to pursue big effects. Needs to be held in check'.⁷⁵

⁷³ Rosenthal in Marnat (ed.), *Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal* (1995), pp. 8-9.

⁷⁴ Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 13.

⁷⁵ See Table 1.3.

In the *Fantasy*, Schumann breathes new life into the three-movement classical sonata structure tapping into a freedom of expression that challenges the very core of sonata form. The impassioned melody underpinned by an extraordinary harmonic colour at the opening (a V pedal beneath swirling scalic figurations that trace a ii7 chord) conjures an immediate sense of expectation and wonderment. Schumann avoids cadences in favour of rests and pauses that suspend the musical flow where dissonances resolve onto other dissonances. He doubles melodic lines in octaves and double octaves, and juxtaposes contrasting emotions from the contemplative and poignant to the playful and passionate. These are only a few examples of the techniques and gestures that resurface in Ravel's most exuberant piano work, *Gaspard de la nuit*. Ravel's comment to Vlado Perlemuter regarding his overall concept for 'Scarbo' is particularly apposite at this juncture: 'I wanted to write a caricature of romanticism - perhaps it got the better of me.'⁷⁶ Ravel did perform the *Fantasy* on more than one occasion, a fact verified in a comment made by musicologist and critic Paul Landormy in 1894, in which he states that Schumann's *Fantasy* Op. 17 and Emmanuel Chabrier's *Bourrée fantasque* were Ravel's only two party pieces at this time, adding 'he played with very strange ideas in mind, but with a technique that was rather rough and stiff.'⁷⁷

As the information presented in Table 1.3 implies, Ravel's pianistic studies during 1894 and 1895 seem to have lost a degree of momentum, a fact reflected in the comparatively short works he submitted for the half-yearly examinations, a Chopin study, a scherzo by Carl Maria von Weber (both unspecified) and for his third and final attempt to win a prize at the Conservatoire in June 1895 the *Allegro*

⁷⁶ Perlemuter, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 35. Also Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 103.

⁷⁷ Paul Landormy, *La musique française de piano après Debussy*. Nichols, *Ravel* (2011), p. 16.

*symphonique*⁷⁸ by Georges Mathias. It is not known which of Chopin's Études Ravel performed, but as Paul Loyonnet recalled 'all of de Bériot's students had to learn a new Chopin study for the Friday technique class', adding that 'de Bériot was tolerant of our slow and often imperfect Chopin études'.⁷⁹ Ravel's performances of the Ballade No. 4 and Schumann's *Fantasy* suggest that his pianistic prowess by the age of nineteen was underpinned by an impressive range of technical skills and that he would have been capable of meeting the challenges of any of Chopin's Op. 10 and Op. 25 Études. One need only compare Ravel's right-hand double-note configurations in bars 57-61 of 'Ondine' with similar patterns in bars 15-16 of Chopin's Op. 25 No. 6, or the wide leaping textures in bars 66-67 of 'Ondine' with the driving arpeggios of Op. 25 No. 12 to sense the impact of Chopin's pianism upon Ravel. Equally so the exhilarating passagework coupled with the drama and humour that characterizes Weber's pianism would have been a natural choice for Ravel with his accumulated performing experience of the *Stile brillante* repertoire.

Georges Mathias, as a former pupil of Frédéric Chopin and a much-respected teacher at the Conservatoire from 1862 to 1893, played a key role in the dissemination of the latter's teaching methods to the succeeding generations of pianists. Of particular significance was his advice as received from Chopin on matters relating to touch and the appropriate application of rubato demonstrated in the following remarks:

Mould the key with a velvet hand and feel the key rather than striking it.⁸⁰

[...] the left hand playing the accompaniment should maintain strict time while the melodic line should enjoy freedom of expression with fluctuations of speed.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Paris: G. Hartmann, 1870. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cat. No. VM12-19592.

⁷⁹ Timbrell, *French Pianism*, p. 186.

⁸⁰ Eigeldinger, *Chopin, pianist and teacher*, ed. Roy Howat, p. 31.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Mathias's twenty-four *Études spéciales de style et de mécanisme* (1862) reflect his Conservatoire affiliations with each study bearing a generic title including 'les arpèges', 'le legato' and 'le cinq doigts'. The technical and musical demands fall far short of Chopin trailblazing *Études*, and de Bériot's *Thirty-Six Studies of Transcendental Difficulty*. As James Methuen-Campbell observed, 'Mathias had been a pupil of Friedrich Kalkbrenner before he came to Chopin, and the piano studies composed by him reflect this training rather than Chopin's'.⁸² Regrettably the *Allegro symphonique* is very much in the mould of a mannered salon piece where cantilena melodies are clothed in clichéd accompanimental textures of arpeggios and broken chords, with well-trodden harmonic progressions.

A final glance at the piano works Ravel studied with de Bériot over this four-year period reveals a distinct lack of contemporary repertoire, despite Ravel's voracious appetite for new music outside the Conservatoire walls. What was de Bériot's opinion of Ravel's piano works and did Ravel perform the *Sérénade grotesque* for his piano professor? Paul Loyonnet was able to shed some light on de Bériot's response to contemporary French music:

De Bériot held monthly public classes that concluded with a performance from one of his ex students, often Viñes. Always he played the so-called ultra-moderns, Debussy and Ravel, and I remember how de Bériot would listen to this music with the same indulgent smile that one would show when a child misbehaved! He didn't really understand this music, and never under him did we play a single really modern work.⁸³

This apparent lack of empathy and intransigence on de Bériot's part towards new musical developments as witnessed in the music of Ravel and Debussy is confirmed to a degree by his harmonic treatise, *Gymnastique harmonique et lecture au piano* that dates from 1899 in which he explores seventh chords and augmented sixth

⁸² James Methuen-Campbell, 'Chopin in Performance', in Jim Samson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 195.

⁸³ Reproduced in Timbrell, *French Pianism*, p. 187.

chords that invariably yield to outmoded tonal progressions and cadences.⁸⁴ Such harmonic configurations had already lost their allure for Ravel and his contemporaries, as is reflected in Ricardo Viñes' diary entry from 15 August 1892 where he states that he and Ravel spent virtually the entire day at the keyboard, 'experimenting with new chords'.⁸⁵ A year later, with his first solo piano work the *Sérénade grotesque*, Ravel had embraced unresolved seventh chords and by the time he wrote the *Pavane* in 1899 his extended chords had achieved an independence and stability that threatened the very existence of tonal harmony.

There is no record of Ravel having studied Chabrier's *Bourrée fantasque* (1891) with de Bériot, but Landormy's reference to it as Ravel's musical calling card in 1894 means that it merits exploration at this point. It is impossible to underestimate the lasting impact Emmanuel Chabrier had on Ravel's music, and for Francis Poulenc 'the whole of Chabrier is to be found in the *Bourrée fantasque*'.⁸⁶ In this, his final piano work, Chabrier went back to his native roots, and in his words the *Bourrée* 'rings with the stamp of my Auvergnat clogs'.⁸⁷ Roger Nichols notes that the 'whole tone chords, consecutive sevenths and ostinato figurations that permeate Ravel's *Sérénade grotesque* owe much to the *Bourrée Fantasque*'.⁸⁸ Chabrier's score is full of vibrant pianistic sonorities, brisk repeated note patterns, glissandi, cross rhythms aplenty, hand-crossing passages, and a dynamic range that pushes the boundaries at both ends, from *ppp* to *fff*. The abundance and precision of the notation even exceeds that of Chabrier's most substantial collection of piano pieces,

⁸⁴ Paris: Rouhier, 1899.

⁸⁵ Sourced in Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, p. 16.

⁸⁶ Francis Poulenc, *Emmanuel Chabrier* (Geneva: La Palatine, 1961). English trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1981), p. 64.

⁸⁷ 'Je rythme ma musique avec mes sabots d'auvergnat'. Roger Delage, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, p. 12. For a comprehensive and outstanding study of Chabrier's piano works, see Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (2009), pp. 83-109 and pp. 187-97.

⁸⁸ Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 15.

the *Pièces Pittoresques* (1880-1), that for Poulenc were ‘as important for French music as Debussy’s *Preludes*’, adding that ‘at this time, neither Saint-Saëns nor Fauré had gone so far in their search for new sound textures’.⁸⁹

Chabrier himself describes the *Bourrée* with characteristic humour in a letter to the dedicatée Édouard Risler, who gave the first performance (attended by Ravel and Viñes) at the Société Nationale de Musique on 7 January 1893: ‘I have written a short piano piece for you that I think you will find amusing and in which I have counted as many as 113 different sounds’.⁹⁰ The parallels with Ravel’s arguably most flamboyant and colourful piano work, ‘Alborada del gracioso’ from *Miroirs* are unmistakable and it is interesting to note that both composers transcribed these pieces for orchestra (Chabrier’s orchestration of the *Bourrée* was left incomplete at his death in 1894), although for Risler orchestral sounds permeated the very core of Chabrier’s solo piano version: ‘c’est l’orchestre à rendre par le piano!’⁹¹

In conversations with Alfred Cortot, Édouard Risler confirms Chabrier’s obsessively detailed approach to dynamics and tempo changes in the *Bourrée fantasque*: for example, he insisted that the sforzandi stand out whatever their context and urged Risler to differentiate between a *rallentando* and a *ritardando*.⁹²

Vincent d’Indy recounts an amusing anecdote regarding a rehearsal of the *Trois valse romantiques* with Chabrier, where he was chided for playing as if he was:

[...] a member of the *Institut*. There then followed a lesson in playing alla Chabrier with contrary accents, pianissimi that evaporate to nothing, sudden detonations in the middle of the most exquisite tenderness, accompanied by some obbligato miming, lending the whole body to the musical interpretation.⁹³

⁸⁹ Poulenc, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, p. 37.

⁹⁰ ‘Je vous ai fabriqué un petit morceau de piano que je crois assez amusant et dans lequel j’ai compté près de 113 sonorités différentes’. Letter from Chabrier to Risler, 12th May 1891, reproduced in Roger Delage, *Emmanuel Chabrier* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), p. 583.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 584.

⁹² Alfred Cortot, *La musique française de piano*, Vol. 1, p. 202.

⁹³ Roger Delage, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, pp. 267-8, translation by Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, pp. 319-320.

Such meticulous attention to detail strikes a chord immediately with Ravel's instinctive feel for keyboard sonority and one need look no further to see the source of inspiration for the kaleidoscopic palette of colours in all his piano works than the *Trois valse romantiques* which Ravel and Viñes performed for Chabrier in February 1893 and the *Bourrée fantasque* that Poulenc hailed as 'full of pianistic innovations as Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*'.⁹⁴

Ravel's depth of understanding and affection for the music of his fellow countryman can be felt and heard in his short piano piece, *À la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier*, described by Roger Nichols as a 'pastiche of Chabrier making a pastiche of Siebel's aria 'Faites-lui mes aveux' from Gounod's *Faust*'.⁹⁵ Whereas Gounod's ardent young lover conveys his message with an air of urgency about him, Ravel recasts the melody with a lingering melancholy, marked *Rubato* and *avec charme* on its first appearance in bar 10. In texture and shape both the melody and accompaniment bear a striking resemblance to the opening material of the central section of the *Bourrée* (from bar 74 onwards). Snippets of Chabrier's themes appear deftly disguised throughout *À la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier* as do many of his trademark textural devices, including the growling ostinato bass lines characterised by leaps and semitonal shifts (Examples 1.11a and b) and melodies played an octave or two octaves apart (Example 1.12a and b).

⁹⁴ Poulenc, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, p. 63.

⁹⁵ Preface to Nichols' edition of *À la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier*, Peters, No.7372.

Example 1.11

a) Chabrier: *Bourrée fantasque*, bars 335-338

335 *sempre molto risoluto*
pp

b) Ravel: *À la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier*, bars 31-32

31 *pp subito*

Example 1.12

a) Chabrier: *Bourrée fantasque*, bars 272 -274

272 *sf ff marcatissimo*
 (Ped. col il canto)

b) Ravel: *À la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier*, bars 22 - 24

rall. . . A tempo
 [m.d.] *pp* 3
p
 un peu en dehors

According to Poulenc, Ravel often remarked that the premiere of Chabrier's opera *Le roi malgré lui* (1887) had changed the direction of harmony in France.⁹⁶ In bars 15-22 of *À la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier* Ravel captures this exquisitely nuanced harmonic language in a nutshell. The suspended arpeggiated ninths, D9 in bar 15 and E9 in bar 17 are relaxed and improvisatory in feel, until Ravel introduces an ascending countermelody in the tenor register at the F sharp second inversion chord (bar 19). This resolves onto a C sharp7 chord (bar 20) whose E sharp is enharmonically changed into an F natural that with a G in the bass (bar 21) directs the harmony back to the tonic with a deceptively simple perfect cadence (V9/V7 - I).

Post-Conservatoire Piano Studies: Santiago Riera (1895-97)

Ravel's failure to win further prizes at the Conservatoire after his third attempt spelt automatic dismissal from de Bériot's piano class and an end to his formal pianistic studies. From July 1895 onwards little is known about Ravel's piano studies other than this brief reference by Arbie Orenstein:

It was possible at this juncture that piano lessons were continued privately with Santiago Riera. In an unpublished diary Ricardo Viñes noted that Riera had taught several good students amongst them Maurice Ravel and Lemaire. Although the diary is undated, it is known that the lessons extended over a period of two years, and they undoubtedly included a wide variety of Spanish music.⁹⁷

The Catalan pianist, Santiago Riera (1867-1959), a former student of Georges Mathias, later taught an advanced piano class at the Conservatoire from 1913 to 1937. A review published in *Le Menestrel* of a recital he gave in 1904 describes Riera's performance of Chopin's Twelve Études Op. 25 as demonstrating 'an

⁹⁶ Poulenc, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, p. 54.

⁹⁷ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, pp. 15-16.

incredible variety of touches'⁹⁸ (his programme reflected a degree of eclecticism, with additional works by Beethoven, Liszt, Schumann, Alkan, Dubois, Fauré and Tchaikovsky). Orenstein's mention of Spanish music playing a prominent role in Ravel's lessons with Riera sits very well with a description of Riera's teaching style by his student Daniel Ericourt:

His emphasis was very much on interpretation - colour, emotion, dash, and the overall effect of the work. He had a hot Latin temper and no patience with unprepared students.⁹⁹

There is no record of the works that Ravel studied or performed during this period, and excepting his exploration of Chabrier's orchestral masterpiece, *España* in a piano reduction format (according to Jean-Michel Nectoux the score preserved in Ravel's library at Montfort l'Amaury contained many fingerings),¹⁰⁰ no mention of any Spanish solo piano works in Ravel's performing repertoire. Likewise the absence of any of Franz Liszt's piano works is astonishing considering Ravel's acknowledgement of Liszt's influence on his pianistic style of composition (to be addressed further in Chapter 2). Riera was a keen advocate of Liszt's music, a fact corroborated by Germaine Mounier, who studied with him in the 1930s:

He taught a lot of Liszt and gave us fingerings that he had received from Emile von Sauer. This repertoire was good for my large hands, but I must say that I didn't feel much rapport with Riera.¹⁰¹

He also edited several volumes of Liszt's piano works for Durand that were published between 1917 and 1920. Ravel's library contained many important works by Liszt in French (possibly the Riera edition), German and Italian editions although there is no reference to any annotations in these scores.¹⁰² It is hard to imagine,

⁹⁸ '[...] une incroyable variété de moyens'. Henri Heugel, *Le Menestrel*, May 1 1904, p. 144.

⁹⁹ Daniel Ericourt, interview with Charles Timbrell, reproduced in *French Pianism*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁰ Nectoux, 'Maurice Ravel et sa bibliothèque musicale', *Cahiers Maurice Ravel*, No. 3 (1987) pp. 53-62.

¹⁰¹ Germaine Mounier, interview with Charles Timbrell, reproduced in *French Pianism*, p. 208.

¹⁰² Information supplied by Jean-Michel Nectoux, *Maurice Ravel et sa bibliothèque musicale*. *Cahiers Maurice Ravel*, No. 3, pp. 53-62.

given Ravel's studies of some of the most demanding works of the Romantic period (by Chopin, Schumann, and Mendelssohn), that Liszt's pianism was beyond his technical and interpretive grasp, except that he might have felt his hands were too small to negotiate Liszt's bravura textures (see Mounier's comment above regarding her large hands). Nevertheless in the absence of any reference to Liszt's vast output in his repertoire at this time, one must assume that Ravel assimilated his influence through a detailed study of the texts accompanied by much tinkering at the piano, rather than through the act of concerted technical and interpretive study with a view to public performance.

Ravel's supposed period of study with Santiago Riera is thrown into further confusion by information supplied by the great niece of Ricardo Viñes, Nina Gubisch-Viñes, in an article published in the *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* in 2011.¹⁰³ She comments upon Viñes and Ravel's first meeting at the Cours Schaller on 29 October 1888, and goes on to state that:

Santiago Riera taught Ravel here between 1888-91, not 1895-97 as previously thought. Riera was de Bériot's assistant at the Cours Schaller and subsequently succeeded de Bériot at the Paris Conservatoire in 1914.

The period mentioned by Nina Gubisch-Viñes coincides with Ravel's lessons with Émile Décombes and Eugène Anthôme that culminated in his competition successes in 1890-91 and his subsequent acceptance into de Bériot's advanced piano class in July 1891. Thus it is conceivable that Ravel's studies with Riera date back to this period and that the latter's teaching philosophy as outlined above by Daniel Ericourt (the emphasis on interpretation, colour, emotion, dash, and the overall effect) contributed to Ravel's prizewinning performances.

¹⁰³ 'Ravel, Viñes, les années des formations: goûts croisés, curiosités partagées'. *Cahiers Ravel*, Issue No. 14 (2011), pp. 16-42.

Conclusion: Ravel and Pianistic Genealogies

The picture that emerges from the information explored in this chapter confirms Ravel's pianism as having evolved from a rich pedagogical gene pool extending back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French keyboard practices. The preponderance of solo and concertante works by classically orientated early Romantic composers (Moscheles, Mendelssohn, Chopin and Herz) in Ravel's repertoire points to the foundations of his pianism being rooted in the *Stile brillante* with secure, even finger technique promoting clarity of touch (often in fast tempi), the cultivation of a singing tone, and an acute sensitivity to pedalling. Ravel's accumulation of pianistic knowledge was informed directly by the pedagogical practices of Chopin (through his students Descombes and Mathias), Thalberg (through his student de Bériot), and Mendelssohn (via Kufferath and de Bériot). Robert Schumann's pianism paved the way for Ravel to explore thematic, harmonic, rhythmic and textural possibilities within classical forms and incorporate elements of Schumann's piano techniques in his piano compositions. That Ravel's advanced piano teachers - Descombes, Anthiôme and de Bériot - were steeped in the somewhat restrictive pedagogical traditions and practices of the Paris Conservatoire doesn't seem to have prevented him from exploring a more progressive repertoire in his spare time in the company of Ricardo Viñes. The liberating influences of Emmanuel Chabrier (and Santiago Riera) opened Ravel's ears to new harmonic, textural and coloristic combinations on the piano, as did the elegant, coruscating pianism of Camille Saint-Saëns. Finally, Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot's critiques of Ravel's performances give credence to his abilities to engage with the Romantic

spirit, and Ravel's subsequent interest in the pioneering pianism of Franz Liszt played a central role in shaping his concept of compositional and pianistic virtuosity in his works for piano. How Ravel implemented these techniques and crafted his idiosyncratic pianistic style as composer, performer and teacher will become evident in the ensuing chapters.

CHAPTER 2

‘Les grands pouces’: Ravel’s ‘Strangler’ Thumbs in his Solo Piano Works

Ravel was once asked how he went about composing, how he sketched his works, how ideas came to him and how he put them to good use. He responded as follows: ‘I don’t have ideas. To begin with nothing forces itself upon me.’¹

Undeterred, his questioner pursued the point: ‘But if there’s no beginning how do you follow it up? What do you write down first of all?’ Ravel replied:

A note at random, then a second one and, sometimes, a third. I then see what results I get by contrasting, combining and separating them. From these various experiments there are always conclusions to be drawn; I explore the contents and developments of these. These half-formed ideas are built up automatically; I then range and order them like a mason building a wall. As you see, there’s nothing mysterious or secret in all this.²

This last statement seems contradictory when compared with comments made by Alexis Roland-Manuel, one of Ravel’s composition students and his amanuensis, in *À la gloire de Ravel*:

He composed in the greatest secrecy. Everything had to be done – or seem to be done – by a miracle. His piano and his study bore no trace of his work and gave no evidence of preliminary drafts. Nothing in the hands or the pockets: the conjuror juggled away even the apparatus of his tricks. Things were accomplished as though the piano keys manipulated the printer’s dies at a distance.³

Roland-Manuel, together with Manuel Rosenthal and Maurice Delage, formed the nucleus of Ravel’s composition class, an exclusive group of young French composers informally referred to as the *École de Montfort*, that met and worked with Ravel at his home in Montfort l’Amaury during the 1920s. According to Rosenthal, Ravel always composed at the piano, which seems perfectly natural when one

¹ Ravel in conversation with Mme Andre Bloch, reproduced by Edmond Maurat in *Souvenirs musicaux et littéraires* (Saint-Etienne, 1977). English translation by Roger Nichols, *Ravel Remembered* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 55.

² Ibid.

³ Alexis Roland-Manuel: *À la gloire de Ravel* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1938). English edition: *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1947), p. 133.

considers that the piano had been central to his musical life from the age of seven.

Rosenthal provides an illuminating commentary on Ravel's relationship with the piano and specifically his physical connection with the instrument:

As he no longer practised he had become accustomed to a rather unconventional posture at the piano: he sat very low, with his hands held flat and close to the keys. One consequence of this unorthodox posture is the relative absence of octave passages in his piano music. On the other hand he made great use of his thumbs which Roland-Manuel, Maurice Delage and I used to call the **strangler's thumbs**. He had in fact, knotted tapering fingers – not at all the hands of a pianist – with powerful thick thumbs, connected very high on the palm and at some distance from the other fingers. This anatomical peculiarity imparted a rare agility to his thumbs and one can see this in action in the piano works as the thumbs pass freely under the other fingers to play a melody (thus seen in 'Ondine' from *Gaspard de la nuit*).⁴

Plate 1. Maurice Ravel at the keyboard c. 1928



⁴ 'Comme il ne le pratiquait plus, il était alors gêné par une mauvaise position dont il avait pris l'habitude: il se tenait un peu au-dessous du clavier si bien que ses mains se trouvaient à plat et non point au-dessus des touches. Une conséquence de cette position vicieuse est qu'il n'y a pour ainsi dire pas des traits en octaves dans sa musique pianistique. Par contre, il se servait beaucoup de son pouce, ce pouce que Maurice Delage, Roland-Manuel et moi appelions son « pouce d'étrangleur ». Il avait, en effet, des doigts très noueux - pas du tout des « mains de pianiste » -, [sic] avec des pouces très puissants, très gros, attachés très haut sur la paume et très éloignés des autres doigts. Cette particularité anatomique conférait une rare agilité à ses pouces, qui, dans ses œuvres pianistiques, glissent volontiers sous les autres doigts pour créer la mélodie (ainsi dans Ondine de *Gaspard de la nuit*). Marcel Marnat (ed.), *Ravel, Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal, recueillis par Marcel Marnat* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), p. 36.

Delage made the following observation: 'Of particular significance is the fact that Ravel's thumbs could move freely around the central joint and cover two keys simultaneously'.⁵

Rosenthal's comments regarding Ravel's posture at the keyboard are reflected in several still images of the composer at the piano (for example, see Plate 1), but of more significant value is a short film of Ravel, dating from January 1928, in which the composer performs a fifteen second extract from an unknown work.⁶ Despite the absence of sound, this tantalizingly brief view of Ravel the pianist in mid-performance reveals a remarkable confidence and dexterity. Ravel maintains a still upper body posture, and his eyes are focussed on the score with only brief glances at the keyboard. From this centred position Ravel's arms move in smooth arcs, his long thumbs traverse the keyboard with ease and he demonstrates considerable flexibility and elasticity in the controlled deployment of his finger joints and wrists. Ravel is seen to employ a variety of attacks, sometimes striking the keys from close-by, using supple wrist movements to draw the fingers down to the key-bed, and at other times releasing the keys by sliding the fingers towards his upper body. In a brief close-up one gets a hint of concise articulate fingerwork. However, these are only visual observations and thus it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions regarding the actual sounds created nor what Ravel is playing.

The remarks made by Roland-Manuel, Rosenthal and Delage, coupled with this short film footage pose the question how might Ravel's physicality at the keyboard, and specifically his idiosyncratic thumbs, influence the way in which he

⁵ Roger Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 89. French original: Maurice Delage, *Maurice Ravel*, incomplete lecture script in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Rés. Vmb. Ms.44).

⁶ *Maurice Ravel playing the piano in January 1928* (silent film). <https://youtu.be/9SjD1m4fQUY> [Accessed 20 August 2016]

sets out to compose for the piano? What part did these thumbs play in what Émile Vuillermoz described as Ravel's 'long solitary conversations with the instrument, collecting sonorous harmonies like butterflies',⁷ and to what extent is this purely a question of digital techniques and tricks as opposed to a more fundamental one where the thumbs assume a central role in creating the core building blocks of Ravel's solo piano works.

Few Ravel scholars refer to the strangler's thumbs in their published research. The most significant contribution to this discussion comes from pianist and musicologist Roy Howat in *The Art of French Piano Music* (2009), a comparative study of four of France's most innovative pianist-composers, Emmanuel Chabrier, Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy and Ravel. Within a chapter titled 'Body Language and the Piano' Howat devotes a subsection to 'The Prehensile Hand and Thumb', where he discusses Ravel's strangler thumbs and identifies instances of Ravel playing what he terms 'thumb games' in the solo piano works.⁸ He pinpoints an upbeat appoggiatura figuration in bar 8 of the *Pavane pour une Infante défunte* (1899) as encapsulating Ravel's quintessential hand layout: 'a naturally falling thumb, lateral wrist flexibility and (in this particular context) a nimbly accented fourth finger to mark the theme'.⁹ Howat also highlights selected examples within specific solo piano works where Ravel utilises the thumb to effect particular sonorities, including the evocation of bells in the final three bass notes of 'La vallée des cloches' from *Miroirs* (1904-5), and the spicing up of thematic and harmonic material using 'thumb

⁷ 'Il aimait les longs entretiens solitaires avec l'instrument, collectionnant comme des papillons les harmonies sonores'. Quoted in Yves Milon et al., *Maurice Ravel à Montfort l'Amaury*, p. 30.

⁸ Roy Howat, 'Body Language and the Piano: The Prehensile Hand and Thumb' in *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 297-299.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

dyads'¹⁰ where the thumb is extended across two adjacent notes, as in 'Scarbo' (beginning at Bar 448) from *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), 'Alborada del gracioso' from *Miroirs* and the first and fifth of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911).

This chapter expands on Howat's findings with the first comprehensive investigation into the deployment and evolution of thumb techniques in a selection of Ravel's major piano works, namely *Jeux d'eau* (1901), *Sonatine* (1903-5), *Miroirs* (1904-5) and *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908). By conducting this research chronologically it has been possible to follow the continuous development in Ravel's use of his thumbs not only to create novel sonorities and colour the harmonies with chromatic shifts and slides, the 'slithering seconds' as observed by Howat,¹¹ but also to articulate thematic motifs, harmonic textures and rhythmic movement. The thumb's role as initiator of particular hand shapes, fingering patterns and motivic cells that recur throughout Ravel's piano writing will be examined. Ravel's observations regarding his piano works as set down in the 'Autobiographical Sketch'¹² have been referenced to underline his compositional intentions with each successive work, together with the interpretive advice he proffered to a group of young French pianists during the 1920s, including Henriette Faure, Robert and Gaby Casadesus, Vlado Perlemuter, Jacques Février and Yvonne Lefébure. As will be demonstrated, the extent to which Ravel placed his thumbs in the driving seat when writing for the piano had a much greater impact on his compositional style than has been previously acknowledged.

¹⁰ Term coined by Howat. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹² Alexis Roland-Manuel, 'Une Esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel', *La Revue musicale* (December 1938), pp. 17-23. English trans. Dennis Collins, 'An Autobiographical Sketch of Maurice Ravel', in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, pp. 29-33.

Jeux d'eau (1901)

In a conversation recorded by Roland-Manuel in October 1928, Ravel described his first major solo piano composition, *Jeux d'eau*, as ‘marking the beginning of all the pianistic innovations which have been noted in my piano works’.¹³ From the outset thumb activity is much in evidence and one can picture Ravel at the keyboard trying out various figurations for his opening right-hand motif with the thumb acting as a pivot. Despite having a small hand, the wide span between Ravel’s thumb and first finger seems to have been a starting point for him to explore extensions between the remaining fingers, using lateral wrist movements to negotiate the stretches with fluidity. Consequently the majority of the right-hand patterns in the first section of *Jeux d'eau* exceed the interval of an octave, as in the opening right-hand sequence an ascending tenth and a descending eleventh (Example 2.1).

Example 2.1. *Jeux d'eau*, bars 1-4

The musical score for Example 2.1 shows the first four bars of *Jeux d'eau*. It is written for piano in 3/4 time, key of A major. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 144, and the dynamics are 'Très doux' and 'pp'. The right hand has a complex melodic line with wide intervals, including an ascending tenth and a descending eleventh. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment of chords. The score includes dynamic markings like 'pp' and '1 corde', and fingering numbers (1, 5, 5, 4) are shown at the bottom of the second system.

¹³ Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: lettres, écrits, entretiens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989). English edition: *A Ravel Reader, Correspondence, Articles, Interviews*, translation by Dennis Collins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 30.

By bar 9 the patterns are phrased across a two-octave span with further extensions in bar 11 introducing the interval of a twelfth in alternating configurations of dyads and arpeggios (both fingered 1-2-3-5). When the arpeggiated movement is transferred to the left hand in bars 21-25, Ravel takes further advantage of the wide stretch between his thumb and first finger and distances the thumb at an interval of a fifth from the rest of the hand (bars 24-25, Example 2.2a), bringing added breadth to the harmonic colouring. This thumb note together with the preceding two notes form an ascending pattern consisting of two intervals, a (major) second followed by a (diminished) fifth, a motif of great significance from a structural perspective as it appears at pivotal moments in all the subsequent piano works. Its most prominent appearance comes in the first bar of 'Scarbo' from *Gaspard de la nuit* as a (major) second and (perfect) fifth and its ensuing transformation into a (minor) second and (major) seventh at bar 32 prompted Ravel to assign to it the trisyllabic phrase 'Quelle horreur!' (Ex. 2.2b).¹⁴

Example 2.2.

a) *Jeux d'eau*, bars 24-25

The musical score for Example 2.2a shows two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The piece is marked 'subito pp' and '1 Corde'. The right hand plays a series of chords and dyads, while the left hand plays a complex arpeggiated pattern with a wide interval between the thumb and the rest of the hand. The score includes fingerings and slurs for both hands.

¹⁴ Henri Gil-Marchex, 'Les Concertos de Ravel', *La revue musicale*, 19, no. 187, (Paris: 1938), [p. 89].

b) 'Scarbo', bars 1 and 32

The constant interaction between black and white note patterns in *Jeux d'eau* adds to the gymnastic hurdles facing the thumb. Not only is it often playing a crucial role as an anchor from which the remaining fingers negotiate the various stretches but in the absence of a melodic line it also provides a focus for the harmonic movement. A close inspection of the first four bars reveals that if the right-hand thumb notes are picked out, a countermelody emerges, and it is possible to read this opening section as a three-part texture consisting of left-hand chords (in quaver movement), right-hand thumb melody, and flowing arpeggiated figurations played by the right-hand fingers (Example 2.3). The recording of *Jeux d'eau* by Bach specialist, Yvonne Lefébure, demonstrates this polyphonic approach perfectly.¹⁵

Example 2.3. *Jeux d'eau*, bars 1-4 (right hand, edited)

¹⁵ Yvonne Lefébure, *Ravel*, rec. 1975, CD, Solstice FYCD 018 (1986).

One rare instance of Ravel notating a specific fingering in the autograph score to highlight the thumb appears in bar 4. As the left hand moves down through a series of harmonic sevenths Ravel marks the top note of each seventh to be played with the thumb thereby enabling the smooth execution of the bass line using 4-5-5-4 fingering (Example 2.1).

Evidence of melodic and textural interplay between the thumbs can be seen at bar 19 (Example 2.4) where Ravel introduces two new motifs: an octave melody confined to the black notes of the keyboard which is played by the left hand with the thumb acting as the leading voice. Underneath this, the right hand plays an undulating ostinato consisting of major seconds played using the fingering 5-4 and 2-3 with the thumb extended across two adjacent notes, a technique developed by Ravel in the later piano works (henceforth referred to as the thumb dyad technique). The notes of the dominant chord, B and F sharp (the D sharp is absent) are combined with A and E, and together with the C sharp from the left-hand melody, produce the seventh, ninth and eleventh harmonies that are central to Ravel's language. In the closing bars of *Jeux d'eau* this figuration is extended to cover two octaves (see Example 1.9c) and in bars 53-54, 57-58 and 77 thumb extensions are added to spice up the diatonic chords with sevenths.

Example 2.4. *Jeux d'eau*, bar 19

There are two moments in *Jeux d'eau* where the dynamic level reaches *fff* and on both occasions the thumb is harnessed for its power, albeit in two very different

contexts. At bar 48, the climax of the development section, Ravel inserts a tremolo followed by a five-octave descending glissando, directed by the right-hand thumb with the weight of the hand behind it (Example 2.5a). In bar 72, the heart of the cadenza Ravel calls for a massive crescendo from *ppp* to *fff* in the space of five rapidly moving septuplet groups played between the hands. The bitonal harmony at this point (the black note triad of F sharp major pitted against the white note triad of C major) sees the alternating thumbs articulating the semitonal conflict between C sharp and C natural as the music hurtles towards the F sharp major triad, marked *fff* midway through bar 72 (Example 2.5b).

The absence of any of Franz Liszt's piano works in Ravel's performing repertoire from his formative pianistic studies at the Paris Conservatoire was noted in Chapter 1, and yet the piano techniques and textures found in *Jeux d'eau* recall Liszt's innovative piano writing and in particular his water-inspired creations. In 'Au bord d'une source' from the first cycle of *Années de Pèlerinage* S.160, Liszt explores the upper registers of the piano and his harmonic language is infused with

Example 2.5

a) *Jeux d'eau*, bar 48

b) *Jeux d'eau*, bar 72 (extract)

Très rapide

72

(ppp)

3rd Cordes
(3 Cordes)

fff

suspended seconds and appoggiaturas. His musical portrayal of fountains, ‘Les jeux d’eau à la villa d’Este’ from the third cycle of *Années de Pèlerinage* S.163, opens with cascades of unresolved arpeggiated seventh and ninth chords and the piano writing takes on an orchestral dimension with tremolos, glissandi, and multi-layered textures that require additional staves. The significance of such techniques for Ravel can be clearly felt throughout *Jeux d’eau* but what sets him apart from Liszt is the way in which he begins the act of composition by addressing his own physical contact with the keyboard. Ravel’s thumbs play a vital role in this process, with analysis and experimentation having elicited a profusion of touches and articulations that combine to create textures of radiant luminosity. In Roland-Manuel’s words: ‘The composer of *Jeux d’eau* takes up, extends and surpasses Liszt’s experiments, giving them something of the light and fluent clarity of a spiritual son of Domenico Scarlatti’.¹⁶ That this was only the beginning of Ravel’s exploration of thumb techniques in his piano writing becomes clear in due course.

¹⁶ Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly, p. 118.

***Sonatine* (1903-5)**

Ravel's next piano work, *Sonatine*, composed over a three-year period, inhabits a very different sound world from that of *Jeux d'eau*. With its roots in the three-movement classical sonatina the scope of the writing is more concise and consequently the application of the thumbs is less physically demonstrative. Nevertheless thumb articulation plays a key role with regard to the delineation and nuancing of thematic material in all three movements.

At the beginning of the first movement, 'Modéré', the first subject is presented in octaves by the outer fingers of both hands with an inner accompaniment, a tremolo figuration played principally by alternating thumbs, giving clarity and acuity to the texture (Example 1.2b).¹⁷ This configuration recalls similar techniques used by Mendelssohn in his Piano Concerto in D minor Op.40 and Schumann in the outer movements of the Sonata in G minor Op. 22, works that Ravel knew intimately having studied and performed them in his student days (discussed in Chapter 1). Ravel's deployment of the first subject material as melody and bass in the opening bars implies equal weighting to both voices but at its subsequent appearances during the development section and at the start of the recapitulation he makes subtle adjustments that focus the attention onto the lower voice, using the left-hand thumb to articulate the entries. In both cases Ravel adjusts the shape of the first subject by inserting an expressive appoggiatura before the first note. In the development Ravel precedes this appoggiatura with a grace note flourish that

¹⁷ The technique of doubling up thematic material as melody and bass simultaneously was used extensively by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) in his operas. Since *La bohème* (1895-6) had reached its hundredth performance at the Opéra-comique in March 1903 and as Arbie Orenstein mentions 'Ravel and Les Apâches actively participated in the Parisian musical scene at this time' (*Ravel: Man and Musician*, p. 30) it is possible that Ravel copied Puccini's model, for example to effect a sense of breadth and nostalgia to the second subject material in the first movement (bar 55 onwards) of the String Quartet (1903-4) and in bars 57-69 of the 'Toccata' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17).

launches the first subject on a C sharp played by the left hand thumb (Example 2.6a). Conversely the return of the first subject at the recapitulation is preceded by a chromatic ascent over seven bars executed by the left-hand thumb from F natural to G sharp over a pedal 'E' with offbeat accents, a powerful dynamic surge and a reduction in tempo before the left-hand thumb reaches the G sharp appoggiatura in bar 59 (Example 2.6b).

In both cases this highlighting of the lower voice makes an effective contrast in nuance with the passages that follow. From bar 37 onwards Ravel goes on to explore the upper registers of the keyboard where the first subject material, marked '*f*' is allocated to the treble line, and at bar 61, he retains the expressive marking as in the exposition, '*pp subito*', again favouring the treble line. The majority of recorded performances by Ravel's pianistic disciples demonstrate a preference to emphasize the upper line of the first subject throughout their interpretations. It is Samson François, a pupil of Alfred Cortot, Yvonne Lefébure and Marguerite Long, in his 1967 recording of *Sonatine*, who taps into this multi-layered conception thereby capturing these textural subtleties.¹⁸

Example 2.6. *Sonatine*: 'Modéré

a) bars 34-35

¹⁸ Samson François, *Ravel, l'oeuvre pour piano seul*, rec. 1967. CD, Warner Classics 5099967831 (2012).

b) bars 51-60

The image shows a musical score for two systems of piano music, bars 51-60. The first system (bars 51-55) is marked 'Animé' and 'passionné'. It features a right hand with chords and a left hand with a rhythmic accompaniment. Dynamics include *f* and *ff*. The second system (bars 56-60) is marked '1er tempo très expressif'. It features a right hand with a melodic line and a left hand with a rhythmic accompaniment. Dynamics include *dim - - e*, *rall - - -*, and *mp*. The score is in 2/4 time and G major.

In the final movement, 'Animé', Ravel harnesses the thumb's energy and power of attack to create the appropriate sonority for the offbeat semiquaver (accented and marked *f* and '*très marqué*') in the main theme (Example 2.7).

Example 2.7. 'Animé', bars 4-10 (right hand)

The image shows a musical score for the right hand of 'Animé', bars 4-10. It is in 3/4 time and G major. The score is marked 'très marqué' and *f*. The right hand plays a series of accented offbeat semiquavers. The score is in 3/4 time and G major.

However, Ravel reserves his most subtle application of the thumbs in *Sonatine* for a pivotal moment in the work, the central section of the 'Mouvement de Menuet'. He sets aside the rhythms and nuances of the 'Menuet' explored in the opening section and reaches back into the first movement, 'Modéré', to recall the first subject material (bars 1-3, Example 1.2b). At bar 39 (Example 2.8) the right hand introduces the theme in the upper register of the piano (playing quavers and

Example 2.8. 'Mouvement de menuet', bars 39-46

semiquavers); the left hand thumb begins a quaver beat later, two octaves below, and plays the same material at half speed (crotchets and quavers) atop a series of arpeggiated chords. Ravel underpins this two-part texture with a sustained pedal 'E' in the bass. By superimposing two independent pulses onto the same thematic material over a static bass line coupled with a complete change of tessitura, dynamic shading and pedalling from the preceding passage, Ravel taps in to the potent ability of cyclic techniques to conjure what Michael J. Puri described as 'a state of reverie and nostalgia'.¹⁹ The feeling of reminiscence is preserved in the ensuing bars that form a bridge to the return of the 'Menuet', expressed eloquently by Puri:

Underscoring the pull of memory, the recollection lingers after its moment has passed, with a version of its head motive [led by the left-hand thumb] continuing to flow in an undercurrent beneath the reprise of the opening theme.²⁰

As with *Jeux d'eau*, Ravel's harmonic progressions in *Sonatine* are often directed from the thumbs at key moments in the structure. The final cadences of

¹⁹ Michael J. Puri, *Ravel the Decadent - Memory, Sublimation and Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

both outer movements hinge upon semitonal shifts implemented by the thumbs: the slide from A to A sharp by the right-hand thumb in the modal cadence iii - I9 at the end of 'Modéré' and the use of both thumbs in succession to highlight the major/minor ambiguity (A natural/A sharp) in the final flourish of 'Animé' (Examples 2.9a and b). It is in the central movement, the 'Mouvement de menuet',

Example 2.9.

a) 'Modéré', bars 86-87

b) 'Animé', bars 171-72

that Ravel uses thumb dyads to spice up the seventh and ninth harmonic colouring with examples occurring in bar 8 where the thumb is extended across a black and white minor second and at bars 45-52 where both thumbs combine to form a three note cluster, C sharp in the left hand against the right-hand D and E natural dyad,

within the centre of the texture (see bars 45-46, Example 2.8). Delage referred to these as the ‘extraordinary appoggiaturas that fell naturally under [Ravel’s] hands’.²¹

Kenneth Hamilton has suggested that the *Sonatine in A minor* Op. 61 by the composer and virtuoso pianist Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888) could have been a model for Ravel’s *Sonatine*, in particular citing the adoption of light pianistic textures by both composers.²² Whilst the ‘Scherzo-Minuet’ from Alkan’s *Sonatine* and the final movement of Ravel’s *Sonatine* both explore fast moving *moto perpetuo* passagework with the principal thematic material being passed from hand to hand, the question of Alkan’s influence on Ravel must remain speculative as it is not known whether or not Ravel played or studied any of Alkan’s works.²³

***Miroirs* (1904-5)**

Ravel completed the last two movements of *Sonatine* in August 1905, at a time when he was also engaged upon another composition for solo piano, the five- movement suite *Miroirs*. As the title implies, Ravel was back in the world of imagery and suggestion, something he confirmed in an unpublished addendum to his

Autobiographical Sketch:

The title *Miroirs*, five pieces for piano composed in 1905, has authorised my critics to consider this collection as being amongst those works which belong to the Impressionist movement. I do not contradict this at all, if one understands the term by analogy. A rather

²¹ Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered* (1987), p. 89.

²² Kenneth Hamilton in conversation with the present author, Cardiff, January 28 2017.

²³ Ronald Smith in *Alkan: The Man/The Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2000) identifies possible compositional links between the two composers. These include an extraordinary moment in the first of Alkan’s *Recueil de Chants* Op. 38 which takes as its model the first of the *Songs without Words* Op. 19 by Mendelssohn, a composer whose links to Ravel have been explored in Chapter 1 of this dissertation and earlier on in this chapter. In Op. 38 No. 1, Alkan interrupts the soaring lyrical melody and arpeggiated semiquaver accompaniment before the final statement, ushering in a short modulatory passage (bars 76-78) which Smith describes as a ‘pedal bell-effect above chromatic shifts’, and likens to a similar sequence in Ravel’s ‘Le Gibet’ from *Gaspard de la nuit* (bars 21-22 and also 24-25). However, Smith ends with the following observation: ‘It seems fascinating that two such similar passages, [...] should, according to their contexts, convey such dissimilar moods’. Smith, Alkan: *The Man/The Music*, p. 53.

fleeting analogy, what's more, since Impressionism does not seem to have any precise meaning outside the domain of painting. In any case the word 'mirror' should not lead one to assume that I want to affirm a subjectivist theory of art. A sentence by Shakespeare helped me to formulate a completely opposite position....' the eye sees not itself But by reflection, by some other things' (*Julius Caesar Act 1 Scene 2*).²⁴

In an essay titled 'City of Light: The French Musical Milieu', Caroline Rae and Caroline Potter highlight the unease felt by French composers, including Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at being linked with Impressionism:

The word 'impressionism' was associated with negative connotations of the vague and blurry; composers and painters labelled in this way were in fact concerned with the opposite – precision – albeit a different kind of precision from their predecessors. [...] Debussy's music, like that of Ravel, is anything but vague, all details of harmony, melody, rhythm and form being precisely constructed.²⁵

This last sentence encapsulates the very essence of Ravel's approach to composition as witnessed in *Jeux d'eau* and is reflected in the composer's own words in his

Autobiographical Sketch:

This piece, inspired by the sound of water and the musical sounds made by fountains, cascades and streams, is based on two themes, like the first movement of a sonata, without however submitting to the classical tonal scheme.

Marcel Marnat in his biography of Ravel reflects upon the change in the latter's musical persona as witnessed in *Miroirs*:

At this point begins a maturity that is lucid, consistent and deliberately aggressive, despite its still somewhat precious surface reflecting the distant stance Ravel uses to isolate himself from the mob.²⁶

Roger Nichols refers to Marnat's assessment in the Preface to his 1995 performance edition of *Miroirs*, adding that 'there is no abrupt break on the technical

²⁴ Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader* (1990), p. 35, n. 17.

²⁵ See 'City of Light: "The French Musical Milieu"', Caroline Rae and Caroline Potter, (2015). www.philharmonia.co.uk/paris/essays/8/city_of_light. For further information on the Impressionist/Symbolist roots of Claude Debussy's musical aesthetic, see Stefan Jarocinski, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism*, translated by Rollo Myers, (Mainz: Eulenberg, 1976).

²⁶ 'Commence ici une maturité lucide, étale, volontiers conquérante, malgré des dehors encore légèrement précieux, reflets du caractère distant par lequel Ravel continue de s'isoler des foules'. Marcel Marnat, *Maurice Ravel* (Paris: Fayard, 1986), p. 174.

front',²⁷ and goes on to quote Burnett James: 'the linear classicism of the *Sonatine* is in *Miroirs* applied to different ends: it is underlying rather than predominant, implicit more than explicit'.²⁸ Nichols's reference to technical processes is interesting when placed alongside Ravel's views on his role as an artist: 'My objective is technical perfection. I can strive unceasingly to this end, since I am certain of never being able to attain it. The important thing is to get nearer to it all the time'.²⁹ The exotic and intriguing mix of characters and scenes in *Miroirs* that includes moths, birds, a boat on the ocean, a Spanish serenade and bells, gave Ravel the opportunity to explore texture and sonority on an orchestral scale, giving rise to a profusion of novel colours and nuances with those thumbs firmly at the helm.

The 'mirrors' in the title are brought into focus at the very outset of 'Noctuelles'. The bitonal clashes evoking 'nocturnal moths, launching themselves clumsily into flight as they circle around the beams'³⁰ are created from two distinct patterns, both initiated from the thumb, the interval between the thumbs forming augmented, major and minor seconds respectively (Example 2.10). In the left hand Ravel presents a series of descending arpeggiated dominant sevenths, led by the thumb, moving in tonal steps between A flat, G flat and F flat. Conversely the right-hand thumb traces an ascending sequence of F-G-A-B, thus both versions of the whole tone scale appear simultaneously. The unusual right-hand configuration, an alternating thumb-dyad pattern that slips and slides semitonally, has been previously linked in Chapter 1 to similar figurations found in Schumann's *Andante*

²⁷ Burnett James, *Ravel* (London: Omnibus, 1987) quoted in Roger Nichols' Preface to *Miroirs*, Maurice Ravel (London: Peters, 1995), p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Alexis Roland-Manuel, *Lettres de Maurice Ravel et documents inédits*, *Revue de Musicologie*, 38 (1956), p. 53. English trans. Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musicians* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 118.

³⁰ 'Les noctuelles des hangars partent, d'un vol gauche, cravater d'autres poutres'. Léon-Paul Fargue, 'La petite gare aux ombres courtes' from *Poèmes* (1905). Modern edition (Charleston: Nabu, 2011).

and Variations Op. 46 and Balakirev's *Islamey* (see Examples 1.1a-c), both works well known to Ravel and importance sources of reference when he was looking to push the boundaries of pianistic pyrotechnics in *Gaspard de la nuit*.

Example 2.10: Ravel: 'Noctuelles', bar 1

The image shows the first bar of the piano piece 'Noctuelles' by Maurice Ravel. The music is written for piano in 3/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat major). The tempo is marked 'Très léger' with a quarter note equal to 128. The right hand part is highly chromatic, featuring many beamed notes and slurs. The left hand part includes triplets and slurs. The dynamic marking 'pp' (pianissimo) is indicated in the left hand.

In Vlado Perlemuter's recollections of his studies of 'Noctuelles' with Ravel, he reiterates the latter's 'insistence upon the little crescendo and diminuendo hairpins returning to their starting point'.³¹ At bars 23, 26, 107 and 110, the crescendi go from 'pp' to 'f' in a single bar which H el ene Jourdan-Morhange notes "foreshadows the outbursts of 'Scarbo' ".³² Ravel, according to Perlemuter, wanted these bars 'to sound like a gust of wind between the other bars which are expressive and sustained'.³³ However Perlemuter's recording of 'Noctuelles' alongside others by Ravelian disciples fail to capture this effect and it is not only the sudden crescendi alla 'Scarbo' that are missed but more significantly the articulation of the 'Quelle horreur!' motif in the left-hand material at each of these moments. The majority of pianists focus on the chromatic contrary motion between the hands to drive the crescendo (at bar 23, repeated in bar 26, C-C flat-B flat in the right hand, F-F sharp-G

³¹ Vlado Perlemuter and H el ene Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'apr es Ravel* (Lausanne: Editions du Cervin, 1957; 5/1970). Augmented re-edition: *Ravel d'apr es Ravel, suivi des Rencontres avec Vlado Perlemuter*, ed. Jean Roy (Aix-en-Provence: Alin ea, 1989). English edition (from the 1970 volume): *Ravel according to Ravel*. English trans. Frances Tanner, ed. Harold Taylor (London: Kahn & Averill, 1990), p. 19.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

in the left), whereas the 'Quelle horreur!' motif, in this case F-F sharp and D flat, can be projected effectively with a weighty thumb on the D flat (Example 2.11).

Example 2.11. 'Noctuelles', bar 23

Throughout the central section of 'Noctuelles', the thumb is assigned to countermelodies that slide chromatically through seventh and ninth harmonies. Ravel juxtaposes passages that require agility and flexibility where the thumb-dyad pattern as at bars 63, 67 and 72 is intermingled with smooth passage played by the thumb within melodic fragments (bars 64-66, 68-70) and all executed in whispered tones (Example 2.12). The sudden crescendo that heralds the climax at the point of recapitulation in bars 84-85 sees the left-hand thumb announcing another of Ravel's trademark motifs, the descending perfect fourth, referred to as the 'Ma-man' motif,³⁴ marked '*f*', accented and 'en dehors' (Example 2.13).

Example 2.12. 'Noctuelles, bars 63-65

³⁴ Cited in Chapter 1, footnote n. 37.

Example 2.13, 'Noctuelles' bars 84-86

The image shows a musical score for 'Noctuelles' bars 84-86. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. Bar 84 starts with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The right hand plays a melodic line with a slur, and the left hand plays a bass line. Bar 85 features a forte (*f*) dynamic and is marked *f en dehors*. It contains complex textures with triplets and chords in both hands, including a chromatic scale in the right hand.

In the final flourish of 'Noctuelles' (bars 126-131) Ravel seems to bring order to the disparate right-hand thumb-dyad pattern of the opening, now presented as alternate chords between the hands with a chromatic scale at its centre that ascends three octaves. Although it is quite plausible to finger the scale using various combinations of thumbs and first fingers, the sole use of thumbs at this point ensures a constancy of attack and an evenness of sound. Additionally if the pianist lightens the finger action on the outer notes it is possible to control the '*pp*' dynamic and effect a hazy sonority around the inner core. The final three notes of this ascending flourish as played by thumbs reproduce a version of Ravel's 'Quelle horreur!' motif with a minor 2nd followed by a minor 7th, A-B flat-A flat, that is eloquently answered by the final downward flourish of E flat, D flat and A flat (Example 2.14).

Example 2.14. 'Noctuelles' bars 130-31

Très léger ♩ = 128

The musical score for 'Noctuelles' bars 130-31 is written for piano. It is in 3/4 time and has a key signature of three flats. The tempo is marked 'Très léger' with a quarter note equal to 128. The score shows a right-hand part with a prominent thumb (finger 1) and a left-hand part. There are slurs, a 'pp' dynamic marking, and various fingering numbers (1, 3) and slurs. A '8va' marking is present at the beginning of the right-hand part.

The association of the thumb with a specific thematic cell is perhaps nowhere more apposite than at the beginning of 'Oiseaux tristes', with the haunting call of the blackbird, two B flats intoned in a slow iambic rhythm followed by an arabesque-like flourish describing a seventh chord that ends on a long held note (Example 2.15). Both segments are announced by the thumb, the first accented with a drop of the wrist, the second with a fluid lateral motion from the wrist, tracing an arpeggiated pattern reminiscent of the opening right-hand figuration of *Jeux d'eau*.

Example 2.15. 'Oiseaux tristes', bars 1-3 (right hand)

Très lent ♩ = 60
Très doux

The musical score for 'Oiseaux tristes' bars 1-3 (right hand) is written for piano. It is in 3/4 time and has a key signature of three flats. The tempo is marked 'Très lent' with a quarter note equal to 60. The score shows a right-hand part with a prominent thumb (finger 1) and a left-hand part. There are slurs, a 'pp' dynamic marking, and various fingering numbers (1, 3) and slurs. The marking 'Très doux' is present.

Ravel advised Vlado Perlemuter to play this figure 'not strictly in time but more briskly' adding 'If you play strictly it loses character'.³⁵ Gradually other birds join the conversation, each with their own independent cadences and inflections, supported by the lethargic undulating rhythm of the forest floor. The textural counterpoint asks for subtle and consistent voicing; fortunately the thumb fingerings for the blackbird

³⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

motif can be applied throughout the piece (there is only one instance, at bars 23 and 24, where this is physically not possible).

As in previous works Ravel taps into the thumbs' expressive versatility at key moments in the structure, something which he demonstrates to great effect in his own recording of 'Oiseaux tristes' (discussed in Chapter 3). Three such occasions deserve special mention. The first comes at the dynamic outburst towards the centre of the piece where the birds, lost in the oppressiveness of a very dark forest, are suddenly disturbed. Both thumbs become engaged in a semitonal squabble with the other fingers radiating outwards supplying harmonic support (Example 2.16).

Example 2.16. 'Oiseaux tristes', bar 15 (extract)

Gradually the rhythmic activity subsides leaving only the tied note ostinato of the forest floor to provide a link to the return of the opening material. At the change of key from E major to F major the ostinato discreetly morphs into the 'Quelle horreur!' motif of A - B flat - F sharp (Example 2.17). All three notes are marked with accents and Ravel marks the first two notes to be played by the right-hand thumb with the third note assigned to the left-hand thumb. The third and final example occurs in the cadenza where the right hand ascends in a series of broken chords led by the thumb and first finger moving semitonally and harmonized by an A flat7 pedal in the left hand (Example 2.18).

Example 2.17. 'Oiseaux tristes', bars 19-21

Au mouvement

mf

p [m.g]

2 Ped.

Example 2.18. 'Oiseaux tristes', bar 25 (extract)

Lent
presque ad lib.

25

ppp

Ped.

The rising quaver countermelody created by the thumb and first finger movement is marked legato and '*ppp*'. Ravel told Perlemuter that the '*Lent- presque ad libitum*' marking at this point only referred to the A flat dyad at the beginning of the bar and that the remainder of the cadenza should be played quite briskly.³⁶ Maintaining a smooth passage of the thumb is not easy at this point but as Rosenthal commented Ravel's quirky thumbs could often surmount such tasks with ease.³⁷ This passage gives way to a sequence of capricious figurations reminiscent of the blackbird's motif at the opening, harmonised by a quasi-cadential V-I accompaniment in the left hand. The right-hand figurations call to mind the thumb-led arpeggiated patterns, that

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁷ See Rosenthal quote above that refers to Ravel's 'thumb curls [sic] under the hand to play a melody while the remaining fingers play the accompaniment', n. 4.

feature so prominently in the bravura passagework of Frédéric Chopin's Ballades and in particular No. 4 in F minor Op. 52 that Ravel studied and performed at the Paris Conservatoire (see Examples 1.10a and b in Chapter 1).

At the centre of *Miroirs* sits 'Une barque sur l'océan', a vast symphonic poem in which Ravel conjures up the image of a small boat on the ocean using extremes of sonority. The barque is depicted by dyads cloaked in a languid rhythm against the might of the sea, portrayed by extensive arpeggiated patterns 'très enveloppés de pédales'. This two-part texture, tracing the harmony of F sharp⁹ is replayed across the first three bars and calls to mind the opening bars of *Jeux d'eau*, but it is not long before Ravel begins to reveal a much more intricate and expansive conception. In the fourth bar he introduces a third strand to the mix, a two-note figure resembling an inverted version of the 'Maman' motif. This is picked out by the alternate thumbs and evolves into a melodic fragment using elements of the 'Quelle horreur!' motif in inversion as in bars 84-86 of 'Noctuelles' (Example 2.19).

Example 2.19. 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 8-10

D'un rythme souple [$\text{♩} = 58$ environ]
Très enveloppé de pédales

Roger Nichols makes a perceptive comment regarding what Olivier Messiaen termed the 'orchestral kind of piano writing' that permeates 'Une barque', and specifically regarding the opening phrase:

[...] the piece looks totally orchestral on paper but depends in fact on the interaction of different registers inside the same sound box so that the thumb phrase draws its strength from the sounds on either side of it, and neither oboe, cor anglais nor muted trumpet can match the resonance of the original timbre.³⁸

The virtuosic nature of the arpeggio passagework throughout this piece means that the thumb is invariably at the centre of activity, providing a fulcrum from which the other fingers radiate. Take for example bars 29-37 where the scoring traverses the entire compass of the keyboard. As the right hand descends in extended arpeggios with the fifth finger carrying the melodic line, the left hand ascends with a rich chordal texture with the thumb articulating the voicing at the centre of the piano whilst also executing the B flat pedal notes in the bass. Halfway through the section,

³⁸ Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 74.

in bar 33, the hands seamlessly swap roles. Passages such as the last two beats of 43 and bar 45 (Example 2.20) where the thumb articulates cross-rhythms within the metre, and ostinati patterns such as those in bars 82 -103 that demand accuracy of execution in the wide-stretching arpeggio patterns both depend upon rock solid thumb placements.

Example 2.20. 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 43-45

Compounding the difficulties are Ravel's dynamic markings, '*pp sans nuances*', at bars 83-85, followed by a massive crescendo beginning at bar 86 tracing a four-octave descent, from '*pp*' to '*f*', only to ascend five octaves to return to '*pp*' at 89. The whole process is immediately repeated in bars 89-96. At bar 98 (Example 2.21), further harmonic intensification adds to the technical demands in that the plaintive motifs heard in the left hand at bars 83-85 (derived originally from the thumb melody in bars 4-10) are now reworked within a chordal (octave) texture. Such an

accumulation of technical hurdles calls to mind Ravel's admonishment to a student: 'Don't interpret my music, just play it, and believe me, that in itself is difficult enough!'³⁹

Example 2.21. 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 97-98

The electrifying impact of 'Alborada del gracioso' which follows 'Une barque sur l'océan' can be clearly felt in these statements by two of Ravel's closest musical collaborators, the violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange and pianist Vlado Perlemuter:

In *Miroirs* after 'Noctuelles', 'Oiseaux tristes', and 'Une barque sur l'océan', 'Alborada del gracioso' arrives like a meteor with its lashing accents and earthy rhythms'.....
Jourdan-Morhange

It's a quite unique piece in Ravel's works and perhaps the most difficult because of its precision and its technical demands.⁴⁰
Perlemuter

The Spanish context for this piece enabled Ravel to tap into an idiomatic musical language that explored rhythm, texture, and colour on the piano in a totally different way from anything he had composed for the instrument since the *Habanera* for two

³⁹ 'Ne m'interprétez pas, jouez-moi seulement, et croyez-moi, c'est déjà bien assez difficile!'. Uttered by Ravel to a student in a masterclass at the École Normale de Musique in 1925 and recalled by Marguerite Long. Reproduced by Janine Weill in *Marguerite Long - une vie fascinante* (New York: Juilliard, 1969) p. 91.

⁴⁰ Perlemuter/Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel*, p. 24.

pianos from 1895. The incisive rhythms and dry accentuations of flamenco leap off the page from the outset. There is no introduction, just straight in with the alternate thumbs punching out the theme in single notes for the left hand and arpeggiated chords in the right hand. The Moorish flavour of the opening theme gains much energy and vibrancy if played wherever possible with the thumb, including the thumb dyads on the triplet semiquaver rhythm at bar 6.

Example 2.22. 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 1-6

Assez vif ♩ = 92
sec
les arpèges très serrés

The musical score for 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 1-6, is presented in two systems. The first system contains bars 1, 2, and 3. The second system contains bars 4, 5, and 6. The left hand plays a rhythmic pattern of single notes, while the right hand plays arpeggiated chords. The right hand in bar 6 features a triplet semiquaver rhythm with a '1-1 3' fingering. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*, and performance instructions like *Assez vif*, *sec*, and *les arpèges très serrés*.

Even in seemingly straightforward harmonic contexts such as the B flat chords at Bars 26-7, the Spanish flavour can be intensified if the right-hand thumb scratches the low F as though plucking a gut string on an acoustic guitar. For the sudden *ff* low B flat in bar 30, nothing accomplishes the effect of a huge bass drum more acutely than the freefall descent of the left-hand thumb onto the note with the weight of the arm behind it.

During my own studies of 'Alborada del gracioso' with the French pianist Cécile Ousset⁴¹ I was introduced to a French pianistic gesture called 'élan', a form of musical punctuation, which involves literally taking a short breath accompanied by a relaxed flick of the wrist to articulate a musical motif or phrase that begins from the thumb. This can be applied during a short rest, for example in bar 11 (Example 2.23),

⁴¹ The author has studied with Cécile Ousset since 1989.

where the right-hand upbeat gains energy and impact if the first D played by the thumb is preceded by an *élan*.

Example 2.23. 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 10-12

It is particularly effective in the passage immediately following the low B flat at bar 30, and from bars 30-42 and 43-57 where the thumb drives the musical trajectory, providing additional colour and bite to the cross-rhythm, and setting the semitonal shifts into relief. Patterns such as the notoriously tricky triplet semiquaver groupings in bars 31 and 37 can be articulated briskly if the weight of the hand is slanted towards the thumbs with a light flick towards the other fingers. In bar 31, it is possible to focus upon the internal counterpoint created by the thumbs: B flat-A-F sharp in the right hand, B flat-D-E flat in the left hand, whilst making a swift rotary motion to effect the flamenco triplet rhythm. (Example 2.24).

Example 2.24. 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 30-31

Regarding the execution of the demanding repeated note passage at bars 43-57, Ravel told Perlemuter not to worry unduly about the clarity of each note but prevailed upon him to begin each triplet group with the thumb to provide a strong rhythmic impetus, hence the fingering 1-3-2 marked in his working score (Example 2.25).⁴²

Example 2.25. 'Alborada del gracioso', bar 43

Perlemuter added 'Ravel wanted me to play this passage lightly, like a flautist',⁴³ a point reiterated by Gaby Casadesus: 'he wanted these repeated notes soft - he was not a virtuoso but he did play these repeated notes very well.'⁴⁴ A comment Ravel made to Henriette Faure provides further light on the use of repeated note patterns in his piano works: '[...] it is only a pretext; a pretext to a kind of vibration, that, even here [referring to 'Alborada del gracioso'] is articulated in the initial tempo and it must not be allowed to compromise the rhythm of the leaping left hand chords'.⁴⁵

Ravel also emphasised the need for balance and moderation at all times in

'Alborada':

[...] the incisive and exuberant character of 'Alborada' excludes any hint of rushing nor must it lose its liveliness and become leaden. Aside from a smidgen (oh! très limitée) of freedom in the nostalgic recitative of the central section you must be mindful to maintain the opening

⁴² Maurice Ravel, *Miroirs*, Microfilm first edition, Bibliothèque nationale de France Vma. 2967(4).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁴ Interview with Dean Elder, *Pianists at Play* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1986), p. 75.

⁴⁵ Henriette Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel* (Paris: A.T.P., 1978). '[...] elle n'est que prétexte; prétexte à une sorte de vibration, qui, ici même s'inscrit dans le mouvement initial, ne nuisant pas à la supériorité rythmique des légers bondissements de la main gauche...', p. 76.

tempo with an iron discipline, exactly as I have written in the score: 'no slowing down or speeding up'.⁴⁶

In the central section the distant murmurings of flamenco dance rhythms (marked *pp*) are harmonised with rich diatonic chords and octatonic extensions. Gradually Ravel introduces the thumb dyads to intensify the Moorish ambience with minor and major seconds, most arrestingly at bar 97 with an F sharp major/minor seventh. This is reduced over eight bars to a single F sharp pedal (played by left hand at 105) but immediately destabilised by the F natural/G natural thumb dyad in the right (Example 2.26).

Example 2.26. 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 97-105

The musical score for 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 97-105, is presented in two systems. The first system (bars 97-100) is marked '1er Mouvt' and 'pp'. It features a right hand with complex chords and a left hand with a steady bass line. The second system (bars 101-105) is marked 'ppp' and 'f'. It shows the right hand playing a series of chords and the left hand playing a single F# pedal point. The score includes dynamic markings like *pp*, *ppp*, and *f*, and performance instructions such as [2 Ped.] and [enlevez la sourdine].

The most quirky application of the thumbs in 'Alborada' occurs in the double-note glissandi at bars 175, 177 and 179 (Example 2.27), a technique in which,

⁴⁶ 'Le caractère incisif et bondissant d'Alborada exclut toute idée d'une exécution trop rapide, mais le mouvement quand même doit être vif et sans lourdeur. Mise à part la liberté (oh! très limitée) dans la mélodie nostalgique du milieu de la pièce, vous devez veiller à une discipline de fer à ne jamais dépasser ou ralentir le mouvement initial comme d'ailleurs je crois l'avoir indiqué sur la partition *sans presser ni ralentir*'. Ibid., pp. 75-76.

according to Perlemuter, Ravel's skill was prestigious.⁴⁷ Gaby Casadesus found them difficult to play and when she performed this piece for the composer in preparation for a concert at the Salle Gaveau in 1920, Ravel said: 'I don't care how you play them. Play them in single notes or with your nose if you want. I want the effect of glissando!'⁴⁸ In the same interview, Gaby Casadesus also mentions an idiosyncratic fingering that Ravel advocated for the last four notes of bar 170, an upward triplet flourish accompanied by a crescendo marking. The most obvious option would be extended thumb[1]-2-3-4-5, but instead Ravel advocated extended thumb[1]-3-1-2-5, thereby using the thumb twice to gain clarity and power (Example 2.27). This fingering would seem ideal for the light, shallow action of Ravel's preferred choice of piano, the Érard, (as opposed to the heavier action of a Steinway or Pleyel piano), although as Roy Howat points out, Ravel's 1908 Érard grand piano, preserved at the Musée Maurice Ravel in Montfort l'Amaury 'in its present condition, has a normal modern key drop and weight'.⁴⁹

Robert Casadesus also mentions the double note glissandi in an interview he gave to Dean Elder in 1975 referring to Ravel's uncanny ability to play them with ease adding that his stiff wrist and fingers might facilitate their execution.⁵⁰

Casadesus goes on to comment on Ravel's playing in general:

[...] his playing was stiff. He tried to play his *Sonatine* for some friends; it was impossible for him to play with a nice touch.

Gaby Casadesus' adds weight to her husband's comments as follows:

I don't think his thumbs were especially long. [...] He was, however very stiff in his piano playing. His stiff mechanism was strange considering that you need a very supple wrist to play the *Sonatine*, for example.⁵¹

⁴⁷ 'Ravel était prestigieux dans le glissando en double notes, cela tenait probablement à la forme de son pouce!' Perlemuter/Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel*, p. 29.

⁴⁸ Elder, *Pianists at Play*, p. 75.

⁴⁹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, p. 311.

⁵⁰ Elder, *Pianists at Play*, p. 33.

⁵¹ Gaby Casadesus in conversation with Dean Elder. Elder, *Pianists at Play*, p. 73.

The Casadesus' observations regarding Ravel's piano technique seem strikingly at odds from a visual perspective with the flexible and relaxed movements that the latter demonstrates in the short silent film footage ('Maurice Ravel playing the piano in January 1928') discussed and analysed at the beginning of this chapter.⁵²

Example 2.27. 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 170-175

The musical score for 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 170-175, is presented in three systems. The first system (bars 170-171) begins with a piano (*p*) section in the right hand featuring a triplet of eighth notes, while the left hand has a triplet of eighth notes. This is followed by a forte (*f*) section with a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand. The second system (bars 172-173) continues with piano (*p*) sections, each featuring a triplet of eighth notes in both hands. The third system (bars 174-175) starts with a forte (*f*) section with triplets in both hands, followed by a piano (*p*) section with a glissando and an 8va marking in the right hand, and a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand.

For the final piece of *Miroirs*, 'La vallée des cloches', Ravel utilizes the thumbs in an extensive exploration of bell-like sonorities. The announcing of the three bells at the outset is assigned primarily to the left-hand thumb, and according to Perlemuter, Ravel wanted the bells to 'superimpose themselves with differing

⁵² See p. 85 and n. 6.

sonorities'.⁵³ In order to achieve this Ravel requested a different dynamic and articulation (*pp*/no accent, *p*/un peu marqué, and *mf*/accented) to each bell. (Example 2.28).

Example 2.28. 'La vallée des cloches', bars 1-6

Très lent ♩ = 50

m.d.
pp

m.g.
pp

très douce et sans accentuation

un peu marqué
p

mf

p

⁵³ 'Elles doivent se superposer dans une sonorité différente, chacune ayant son caractère propre'. Perlemuter/Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel*, p. 30.

Of equal significance was Ravel's recommendations to Perlemuter and Faure on how to execute each bell from a technical/physical perspective. He specified that the high G sharp octaves of the first bell should be played 'without using the wrist which would overink the sketch'.⁵⁴ The second bell, a sighing two dyad figure was to be executed by dropping the thumb onto the key followed by a smooth lateral wrist movement. The third and most sonorous bell, a single E sharp that clashes semitonally with the tonic of E, elicits an accelerated descent of the thumb backed up with a wrist movement that rebounds off the key. How Ravel himself realised these exacting nuances in performance will be addressed in an analysis of his roll recording of 'La vallée des cloches' in Chapter 3.

'Gaspard de la nuit' (1908)

Ravel's most comprehensive and ingenious deployment of his idiosyncratic thumbs, and their physical anomalies is to be found in his triptych *Gaspard de la nuit*, which he himself described as 'three romantic poems of transcendental virtuosity'.⁵⁵

According to the critic Henri Gil-Marchex: 'The thumb takes control - especially in *Gaspard de la nuit*, which contains some of the most characteristic discoveries of his supreme technique'.⁵⁶ The pianist and pedagogue Alfred Cortot also voiced his unreserved admiration for Ravel:

These three poems enrich the repertory of our time by one of the most astonishing examples of instrumental ingenuity ever contrived by the industry of composers.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ 'Ce plané de l'octave aiguë bannit toute participation du poignet dont la flexion ne ferait qu'empâter la pose'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, p. 79.

⁵⁵ 'trois poèmes romantiques de virtuosité transcendante'. Alexis Roland-Manuel (ed.), 'Une esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel', *La Revue musicale* (December 1938), pp. 17-23. Reproduced in Orenstein, *Maurice Ravel: lettres, écrits, entretiens* (1989), p. 45. English trans. Orenstein, 'An Autobiographical Sketch', *A Ravel Reader* (1990), p. 31.

⁵⁶ Henri Gil-Marchex, 'La technique du piano', *La Revue musicale* 6:6 (1 April 1925), pp. 38-45.

⁵⁷[...] Ces trois poèmes - enrichissent le répertoire pianistique de notre époque de l'un des plus surprenants exemples d'ingéniosité instrumentale dont ait jamais témoigné l'industrie des

All the previous honing of Ravel's compositional craft and endless experimentation at the keyboard coalesce to create works of intricate complexity that never lose control of the musical structure or textural clarity. Virtuosity, it seems, has turned in on itself with Ravel opting for intense inward expression that explores a myriad of dynamic extremes and mercurial transformations. Every single note demands scrupulous nuancing and grading within the ever-changing sonorities.

Both Roger Nichols and Arbie Orenstein refer to the connection between the first of the set, 'Ondine' and the earlier water pieces, *Jeux d'eau* and 'Une barque sur l'océan'. Nichols observes that 'arpeggios are the basic material and the fast rippling of demisemi-quavers within a heavily pedalled texture serves as an ostinato'⁵⁸ and Orenstein that in 'Ondine' there is 'even greater virtuosity and opulent iridescence'.⁵⁹ The profusion of appoggiaturas and semitonal shifts that colour the harmonies, coupled with rhythmic and metrical flexibility across barlines in 'Ondine', also recall the fleeting gossamer-like textures of 'Noctuelles' from *Miroirs*. As a natural consequence the thumb continues to take the lead on arpeggiated patterns in the right hand with many instances of grace-note up-beats that demand an alert response. The deft execution of accompanimental ostinati as in bar 14 and 70 (Example 2.29a and b) involves the right hand thumb moving rapidly between consecutive black and white keys as part of a demisemi-quaver thread that weaves in and out of the principal themes 'A' and 'B', played by the left hand thumb ('A' played in octaves in bar 14 and 'B' in double octaves in bar 70).

compositeurs'. Alfred Cortot, *La musique française de piano* (Paris: Quadrige/Presse Universitaires de France, 1932), p. 253.

⁵⁸ Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 101

⁵⁹ Orenstein, *Ravel: Man & Musician*, p. 171.

Example 2.29. 'Ondine'

a) bar 14

(Lent ♩ = 58)

14

toujours *pp*

b) bar 70

70

p

8va

Ped.

Barlines are almost superfluous to needs such as the fluidity of the writing and the first fifty bars of 'Ondine' remain locked within the most intimate of sound worlds. It seems that Ravel's thumbs have been absorbed into the fabric, playing their part within a multifaceted technique that eschews outward virtuosity by its very nature. This approach is reflected in Ravel's advice to Henriette Faure on aspects of sonority in 'Ondine':

Work at the silkiness of your sounds, their fluidity, their smoothness, including the demisemiquaver patterns of the right hand which should evoke a kind of rippling on the surface of a lake that extends into oblivion. Adjust the heaviness of your thumbs. What you do is too real. Refer to the works of Liszt e.g. *Feux Follets*.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ "Travaillez la soierie de vos sons, leur fluidité, leur legato, et aussi toutes vos brisures en triple-croches de la main droite qui doivent évoquer une sorte de risée sur un lac et se dérouler dans l'immaterialité. Corriger la lourdeur de vos pouces. Ce que vous faites est trop réel. Tenez, travaillez des Liszt, par exemple les "Feux Follets" ". Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, p. 57.

From bar 55-66 Ravel unleashes a series of swirling crescendi and diminuendi in each bar and as in *Miroirs* and the earlier works the thumb takes charge, launching the grace-note arpeggio (right hand) in bars 55 and 56 and projecting the melody (left hand) in bars 57-61 (Example 2.30a). Concurrently the right hand descends in a sequence of double-note patterns, led by the thumb, that recall Franz Liszt's 'Feux Follets' and Chopin's Étude Op. 25 No. 6 (cited in Chapter 1). Even at bar 62 (Example 2.30b), the grace-note figuration at the beginning of the bar ends on a thumb on the bottom E sharp and implies voice-leading from the bass line (as opposed to the upper line) that adds breadth to the build-up towards the climax at bar 66.

Example 2.30. 'Ondine'

a) bars 55-57

The musical score for Example 2.30, 'Ondine', bars 55-57, is presented in three systems. The first system (bars 55-56) shows the right hand with a grace-note arpeggio (mf) and the left hand with a descending double-note pattern (mf). The second system (bar 57) shows the right hand with a descending double-note pattern (mf) and the left hand with a descending double-note pattern (mf). The third system (bar 57) shows the right hand with a descending double-note pattern (mf) and the left hand with a descending double-note pattern (mf). The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf*, *f*, and *pp*, and fingering numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) for the fingers. The time signature is 3/4.

b) bars 62-65 (right hand)

At bar 66 the second theme, 'B', is recalled in a blaze of colour at the centre of a flurry of arpeggios that traverse the whole keyboard. Since its first appearance in bars 32-36, where the smooth execution of 'B' posed little technical challenge (Example 2.31a), Ravel reconfigures the accompanimental textures that surround it and with each successive statement the challenges increase, involving much hand-crossing and unusual fingering configurations to maintain the line as at bars 37-40 (Example 2.32b) and bars 52-56 (Example 2.32c). The textural complexity reaches its apex in bars 66-71 (Example 2.31d), where the melody notes are picked out amidst a frenzy of activity, using the thumb and fifth finger in bar 66, then as a thumbed phrase in bar 67, a fifth finger phrase in bar 68 and eventually in double octaves (three voices) in bar 70-71. In bars 69-71 the melody moves to the top and bass, played at a two-octave distance in bar 69 (by the fifth fingers), then a central voice is added by the left-hand thumb in bars 70-71. The continuous stream of arpeggiated patterns weaves a harmonic thread, and all the while the tessitura is changing. Each of the four statements has its own unique dynamic colouring highlighting Ravel's extraordinary deftness and originality and demonstrating once

more the way in which he 'takes up, extends and surpasses'⁶¹ the treasure-trove of technical tricks he inherited from Franz Liszt.

Example 2.31. 'Ondine', fingering configurations for theme 'B'

a) bars 32-36 (left hand only)

b) bars 37-40 (edited)

c) bars 52-56 (edited)

d) bars 66-71 (edited)

⁶¹ The words of Roland-Manuel quoted in the section on 'Jeux d'eau' in this chapter. See n. 15 above.

Ravel's interpretative thoughts on the final section (from bar 80 onward) of 'Ondine' as imparted to Henriette Faure encapsulate his exacting approach to the expressive components of touch, nuance and imagery:

'For myself, I insist on a particular style; don't let the rhythm sag, follow the mood of the poem, especially on the last page (he turned the score), sustain a delicate magical pianissimo; then clothe the bare melody in a white diaphanous tone... He turned over the page: and here a complete contrast, arpeggios hurtling up the keyboard executed with a joyful and unbridled passion (he let out a burst of laughter) and then the last two lines executed in a very smooth and elegant curve with a controlled decrescendo to the end disintegrating into cascades of water....'⁶²

In 'Le Gibet', Ravel reconnects with the bell-like sonorities of 'La vallée des cloches'. However, the technical demands in 'Le Gibet' far outweigh those of the earlier work not least due to Ravel's explicit instructions to maintain an unwavering tempo and to play the piece without expression with the *una corda* pedal depressed throughout.⁶³ The tolling octave B flat that sits at the very heart of the texture demands a constancy of attack from both thumbs throughout. Additionally the thumbs take the lead (by default together with the fifth finger) in the chordal melodies that surround the ostinato bell (Example 2.32a). These melodies are harmonised in a variety of ways, for example, in bars 12-14 and the corresponding passage at bars 17-19 where the left hand explores a diverse array of seventh chords against the right hand's diatonic chords in octaves (Example 2.32b).

Ravel's deployment of long pedal notes throughout 'Le Gibet', coupled with the ever-shifting chromatic harmonies, means that the thumbs must articulate with absolute precision to preserve the thematic line through the constant half- and

⁶² 'Moi, j'insiste sur le style; sans aucun amollissement rythmique, épousant de très près la trame du poème, dans la dernière page notamment (il feuilleta la partition), tenez, un glissant dans l'extrême pianissimo genre magique, suggéré; puis après, ici, la mélodie nue dans une sonorité blanche, diaphane...Il tourna la page: en contraste ceci, arpegges dévalant le clavier et le remontant dans un emportement joyeux et déchaîné (poussa un éclat de rire) et les deux dernières lignes dans une courbe très égale élégante et un decrescendo progressif jusqu'à la fin et s'évanouit en giboulées qui ruisselèrent.....'. Henriette Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, pp. 57-58.

⁶³ 'Sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin' and 'Sourdine durant toute la pièce'. Ravel's instructions at the beginning of the printed score of 'Le Gibet' (Durand, 1909).

vibrato-sostenente pedal changes. At bars 20, 23 and 40 where the texture is at its most expansive, with extended chords that move in contrary motion across the whole range of the piano, Ravel calls for the most muted and legato of sounds in (*ppp très lié*), despite the fact that the thumbs must also attend to the resolute tolling bell at the centre (Example 2.32c).

Example 2.32. 'Le Gibet'

a) bars 1-3

Très lent ♩ = 69
 Sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin

pp *un peu marqué*

Sourdine durant toute la pièce

This musical score shows the first three bars of 'Le Gibet'. It is in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The tempo is 'Très lent' with a metronome marking of ♩ = 69. The instruction 'Sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin' is written above the staff. The music features a complex texture with many overlapping notes and slurs. The dynamic is marked *pp* (pianissimo). The instruction 'un peu marqué' is placed above the right hand in the third bar. A note at the bottom of the page reads 'Sourdine durant toute la pièce'.

b) bar 12

P *p*

This musical score shows bar 12 of 'Le Gibet'. It is in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats. The dynamic is marked *P* (piano) at the beginning of the bar. The music features a complex texture with many overlapping notes and slurs. The dynamic is marked *p* (piano) at the beginning of the bar.

c) bars 20-21

Ravel's deployment of thumb techniques is at its most advanced and pioneering in 'Scarbo', the final movement of *Gaspard de la nuit*. According to Vlado Perlemuter Ravel's objectives when composing 'Scarbo' were threefold: firstly, to write an orchestral transcription for the piano,⁶⁴ secondly 'to write a piece that was more difficult than Mili Balakirev's oriental fantasy 'Islamey',⁶⁵ and thirdly to experiment further with Lisztian piano techniques.

Ravel's pursuit of orchestral sonorities is effected from the very outset, as, according to Perlemuter, the opening three-note motif and the tremolo figuration that immediately follows it are to be interpreted as though played by a contrabassoon and a side drum respectively (Example 2.33a).⁶⁶ A note in Robert Casadesus' working edition adds a direction to play the tremolo like a muffled drum (not clearly repeated) which ties in with Ravel's advice to Faure's regarding the interpretation of the same passage at the beginning of the recapitulation (bar 395-

⁶⁴ 'J'ai voulu faire une transcription d'orchestre au piano!'. Perlemuter/Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel*, p. 38.

⁶⁵ 'J'ai voulu faire une œuvre plus difficile qu'*Islamey*!'. Ibid., p. 36.

⁶⁶ 'Comme un c-basson' and 'Comme un tambour'. Notated by Ravel on Perlemuter's working edition and mentioned in *Ravel d'après Ravel*, p. 35.

6): 'I don't want to hear all the notes, just a blurred, velvety atmosphere'.⁶⁷ With this in mind Cécile Ousset advised the present writer to execute the tremolo using a cluster of thumb and first and second fingers with a loose wrist motion, never allowing the key to return to the surface, as opposed to a fingered approach such as 3-2-1 that she felt would over-articulate the tremolo. Ousset studied 'Scarbo' with Marcel Ciampi (1891-1980), a student of Louis Diémer, who had also worked closely with Claude Debussy. Fellow Ciampi student Nancy Bricard also recommends this effective fingering in her published edition of 'Scarbo'.⁶⁸ Another percussive sonority is advocated at the climax of the development section (bar 367) where Ravel asks for the accented semiquavers, played by the alternate thumbs, to be 'comme des timbales'.⁶⁹

Ravel's ever-changing panoply of orchestral colours in 'Scarbo' makes enormous technical demands upon the performer, whose hands are in constant flux traversing vast areas of the keyboard at breakneck speed. At the centre of this activity sits Ravel's strangler thumbs, directing and co-ordinating every aspect of the musical discourse. With each of the principal themes, Ravel employs the thumbs to articulate the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic components as demonstrated in Table 2.1. (the letter names for each motif are adopted from Roy Howat's analysis of 'Scarbo').⁷⁰ The subsequent role of the thumbs in shaping and developing this thematic material is summarized in Table 2.2.

⁶⁷ 'Je ne veux pas entendre de notes, mais une atmosphère, sonore, floue et feutrée'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, p. 66.

⁶⁸ Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit*, ed. Nancy Bricard (Van Nuys: Alfred, 1990), p. 40.

⁶⁹ Perlemuter, *Ravel d'après Ravel*, p. 38.

⁷⁰ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel Fauré, Chabrier* (2009) Table 4.2, p. 49.

Table 2.1: Thumbs as motivic motivators in ‘Scarbo’ (Bars 1-121)

Bar(s)	Motif	Description (Dynamic/Articulation)	Role of thumbs
1	<i>a</i>	Ascending three-note motif, a semitone followed by perfect fifth. (<i>pp</i> with diminuendo/legato)	Thumb set apart from other fingers at outset.
32	<i>a'</i>	Figure ‘ <i>a</i> ’ adjusted to semitone and major seventh, doubled at the octave and harmonized. Dubbed the ‘Quelle horreur!’ by Ravel. (<i>mf</i> - <i>ff</i> - <i>mf</i> - <i>ff</i> / legato)	Thumb articulates inner melodic line.
52	<i>b</i>	Brisk repeated note motif with one downward shift of a tone. (<i>p</i> , un peu marqué, staccato)	Thumb attack on first note drives the pattern through.
65-67	<i>c</i>	Parallel triads - hemiola effect in right hand, tremolo in the left - shifting semitonally, derived in part from ‘ <i>b</i> ’. (<i>pp</i> to <i>f</i> /legato)	Thumb providing rhythmic and harmonic stability at the core of the texture.
80	<i>d</i>	Expansion of ‘ <i>c</i> ’ - swirling octatonic scale pattern in right hand (one bar’s duration then answered in inversion, and developed by repetition and sequencing to bar 90. (<i>pp</i> reaching <i>f</i> by 90/legato)	Right-hand thumb absorbed into even ‘ <i>pp</i> ’ texture, left-hand thumb at the head of the dry, sharp, punctuating chords.
94	<i>e</i>	Repeated note pattern derived from ‘ <i>b</i> ’, extended by inversion, repetition and variation. (Terraced dynamics - <i>pp</i> , <i>p</i> , <i>mf</i> , <i>cresc</i> to <i>ff</i> / detached).	Thumb facilitates execution of pattern (see ‘ <i>b</i> ’ above)
121	<i>F</i> ⁷¹	Offbeat two-chord patterns where second chord can be short or long. (<i>pp</i> /staccato and/or held)	Both thumbs utilized in fast sidestepping movements on all chords.

⁷¹ Howat’s use of a capital letter for this motif reflects his view of its importance as ‘a second theme proper, presenting a contrast to motifs *a-e* whose close relationship forms a very extended first group rounded off by the return of *a'* at bar 110’. Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, p. 49.

Table 2.2. Ravel's use of thumb techniques in 'Scarbo'

Type	Function of thumbs	Examples (Bars)
Orchestral	Producing orchestral sonorities on the piano	367 and 411
Harmonic	Forming dyads that enrich the harmonic colouring	55-57, 264-66 (left hand)
	Acting as the fulcrum of the hand in widely spaced arpeggio figurations	168-213 (left hand)
Melodic	Combining with the fifth finger in octave melodies and octave displacements within particular thematic motifs to add breadth and range to the textures.	325-365
	Ravel's ground-breaking technique where thumb dyads are used in a melodic context for the first time	448-476
Rhythmic	Articulating repeated note patterns and fast moving passagework	2-6 and 256-312
Textural	Both thumbs used alternately to articulate the thematic material in dense harmonic contexts, for example when building towards climactic moments.	309 and 362-365

Thumb dyad patterns make their appearance early on in 'Scarbo'. The opening three-note motif, 'a', contains the leading note, tonic and dominant of G sharp minor. However the V pedal (D sharp) tremolo in bar 2 played by the left-hand thumb is compromised by its semitonal neighbours, the C double sharp and E natural dyads played by the right- hand thumb (Example 2.33a).

Example 2.33. 'Scarbo'

a) bars 1-2

The image shows a musical score for the first two bars of 'Scarbo' by Maurice Ravel. The tempo is marked 'Modéré'. The key signature is G sharp minor (three sharps: F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/8. The score is written for piano, with a bass clef. In bar 1, the left hand plays a three-note motif (G#4, A4, B4) marked 'pp' and 'sourdine'. The right hand has a whole note chord (D#5, E5, F#5) marked 'x' and '1-1'. In bar 2, the left hand plays a tremolo on D#5, marked 'très fondu en trémolo' and 'x'. The right hand plays a series of dyads (C#5-E5, D#5-F#5, E5-G#5, F#5-A5, G#5-B5, A5-C#6, B5-D#6, A5-G#5, F#5-E5) marked 'x' and '3-2-1'.

b) bars 32-36

Au Mouvt (Vif)

This three-note cluster sits at the centre of the ‘Quelle horreur!’ motif in bars 15-22 as it evolves into an energetic scamper ascending over six octaves, culminating in a spine-tingling tremolo (G sharp-D sharp-F double sharp and C double sharp-E-G sharp). At bar 32, Ravel transforms motif ‘a’ into an exuberant melodic surge doubled at the octave in the right hand, with the left hand driving through cascades of arpeggios (Example 2.33b).

Even this early on in the piece, the dynamic character hinges upon surges of sound involving crescendi and diminuendi that invariably return to a base dynamic of *piano* and *pianissimo*. As pianist and pedagogue Dominique Merlet puts it, ‘Scarbo is a piece written *pianissimo* with multiple outbursts’.⁷² These left-hand arpeggios reach their apex with a strong thumb and wrist accent in bars 33 and 36.

Motif ‘b’, announced at bar 52 (Example 2.34a) presents the performer with the challenge of executing it *un peu marqué* but within a *pp* dynamic as notated by Ravel. With the right-hand thumb leading on the pattern, the fingering 1-3-2-1-3 is advocated by Vlado Perlemuter and for two very good reasons. Firstly the thumb can be thrown on to the key using the *élan* technique to rattle off the figuration and

⁷² Merlet, ‘Conseils pour interpreter Ravel’, *La lettre du musicien: Piano 20* (2006-7), pp. 89-91.

secondly, from a long-term perspective this fingering works later in the piece when 'b' is developed to incorporate octave displacements as in bar 73, where the first note is doubled at the octave ⁷³ with an ascending leap of a ninth on the last note (Example 2.34b). Once more the extended thumb pattern at bars 55-56 undermines the B major tonality, in a black versus white note conflict; this is further endorsed in the connecting bars 57, 64 and 78-79 with a four-note cluster against the B pedal (Example 2.34a).

Example 2.34. 'Scarbo'

a) bars 52-57

52 *un peu marqué*

1 3 2 1 3

1-1 1-1 1-1

1-1 1-1 1-1

1-1 1-1 1-1

pp

b) bars 73-74

73

pp

2 3

3

At bar 73 Ravel reconfigures motif 'b' involving brisk open and closed hand movements that are always focused upon articulating the thumb. This technique is also used to develop motif 'e' from 94 -108 with three statements that grow in intensity in line with the dynamic surge from *pp* to *ff*: single notes in bars 94-98,

⁷³ Roger Nichols omits the thumb note at this point in his 1991 Peters edition of 'Scarbo', on the basis that it is missing in both the autograph and first editions, although it is added in Ravel's corrected copy of the first edition.

octave displacements in bars 98-102, and additional harmony notes in bars 102-108 (Example 2.35). This process undergoes many transformations as the piece proceeds, where the role of the thumb becomes decidedly more prominent.

Example 2.35. 'Scarbo', bars 94-104 (right hand)

All the thematic material up to this point can be traced back to the first three notes of the piece. However at 121, a contrasting, harmonically conceived motif, 'F',⁷⁴ makes its appearance (Example 2.36). This key motif acts as a kind of second subject, taking the form of a series of stuttering two-chord progressions in iambic rhythm where the thumb has to make a detached motion at lightning speed. Where the second chord is sustained using the pedal, both thumbs and fifth fingers must engage in a cross-hand exchange marked 'very mellow and with an even sound',⁷⁵ posing yet another challenge in controlling quiet sonorities. Ravel's low seating position at the keyboard and his fluid connectivity with the keys as demonstrated in the silent film footage⁷⁶ could be a telling factor in ascertaining how he expected performers to achieve the appropriate blend.

⁷⁴ Regarding the capitalization, see n. 65 above.

⁷⁵ 'très fondu et bien égal de sonorité'.

⁷⁶ <https://youtu.be/9SjD1m4fQUY> [Accessed 20 August 2016]. See also Chapter 2 p. 85 and n. 6.

Towards the end of this passage (from bar 156 onwards), Ravel inserts his trademark ‘explosive hairpins’⁷⁷ and motif ‘F’ appears doubled at the octave in the right hand with the thumbs providing clarity and agility at the core of the texture. The development of ‘F’ from bars 168 - 214 continues in this mode, while the left

Example 2.36. ‘Scarbo’, bars 121-133 (reduction)

The image displays a musical score for 'Scarbo', bars 121-133 (reduction). The score is in 3/8 time and consists of two systems. The first system shows bars 121-133, with a dynamic marking of 'pp' and a performance instruction 'PPP très fondu et bien égal de sonorité'. The second system shows bars 134-135. The right hand features a melodic line with a 'flying thumb' motif, while the left hand plays a rhythmic ostinato with a 'flying thumb' motif.

hand directs the rhythmic flow with a series of gradually widening arpeggiated ostinati that incorporate the ‘flying thumb’.⁷⁸ It is interesting to note that the semiquaver upbeat of ‘F’ always coincides with a thumb note in the left hand; thus both hands engage simultaneously in a swift lateral movement articulated by the thumbs (Example 2.37). Snippets of motif ‘b’ punctuate these left-hand ostinati precipitating some deft finger staccato movements catapulted from the thumb. At the first climax (bar 204) the extended thumb (straddling B sharp and D natural) reappears to blur the harmony (F sharp major).

⁷⁷ Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 36. ‘[...] les soufflets, toujours très éclatants.’ *Ravel d’après Ravel*, p. 37.

⁷⁸ Term coined by present writer.

Example 2.37. 'Scarbo', bars 168-73

The image shows a musical score for Example 2.37, 'Scarbo', bars 168-73. The score is in 3/8 time, key of B-flat major, and marked 'pp'. It consists of two staves: a right-hand staff and a left-hand staff. The right-hand staff features a melodic line with a 1-1-1-1 fingering. The left-hand staff features a complex arpeggiated figure with a 5-3-2-1 fingering in the first measure and a 5-3-1-4-3 fingering in the second measure. The score is annotated with bar numbers 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, and 173.

The highly individual nature of Ravel's piano technique is often reflected in the idiosyncratic ways in which he constructs his arpeggiated figurations. A prime example of this occurs at bars 232-234 and 253-255 where the ascending left-hand arpeggios defy a smooth legato fingering (Example 2.38). In the Peters Edition Roger Nichols reproduces the fingering from Ravel's corrected copy of the first edition, 5-3-2-1. This is a particularly awkward hand placement, impossible to play with finger legato, as the thumb lands on a G sharp and has to regroup on the A a semitone above with the fifth finger. The only way this fingering can create the illusion of a legato is by using a swift hand motion known as 'déplacement' where the whole hand remains in the 5-3-2-1 position and is 'pasted' onto the next pattern. Cécile Ousset offers a much neater solution, replicated by Nancy Bricard in the Alfred edition of 'Scarbo', by adopting 2-1-4-3, thus the thumb-fourth finger crossing is negotiated smoothly across two black notes. This latter option works particularly well if the pianist follows Ravel's example with regard to keyboard posture by adopting a low seating position, and keeping the palms of the hand flat allowing the thumbs to slide underneath to negotiate the irregular patterns with fluidity and evenness.

Example 2.38. 'Scarbo', bars 232-234. Fingering options (left-hand arpeggios)

At bars 256-276, Ravel explores textural possibilities using motif 'e' where both hands often inhabit the same area of the keyboard. Ravel's decoration of 'e' is reminiscent of his method at bar 94 in that there are three four-bar units, each more dense than the previous one (Example 2.39). The first is in single notes where the thumb is propelled with grace-note additions (bars 256-9), the second with octave displacement involving the thumb and fifth finger (bars 260-3), and a third statement where the leaps extend across two octaves (bars 264-7) and the harmony is at its most chromatic with G and A natural dyads played by the thumb that mask the F sharp (dominant) and A sharp (leading note) of B minor.

Example 2.39. Textural development of motif 'e' in 'Scarbo', bars 256-265

Short interjections by motifs '*b*' (bar 268), '*a*' (bar 271) and '*F*' (bar 276) voice-led by the right-hand thumb, form a link to further development of motif '*e*' in bars 277-313. This section also breaks down into three statements, the first two consisting of fourteen bars that break down into 4 + 4 + 4 + 2 bar units, whereas the third and final statement is reduced to nine bars of 4 + 4 + 1 bar units as Table 2.3 demonstrates.

Table 2.3. 'Scarbo', bars 277-313. Development of motif '*e*' - breakdown of bar numbers

Statement 1	277-280 + 281-284 + 285-288	289-290
Statement 2	291-294 + 295-298 + 299-302	303-304
Statement 3	305-308 + 309-312	313

Bars 285-288, 299-302 and 309-312 consist of fast-moving chords alternating irregularly between the hands, with a melodic thread derived from '*e*' leading the way in the treble line. Although the thumb is constantly in use alongside the other fingers, it is in the third and final appearance (bars 305-313) where the dynamic surge needs to be greatest, that the thematic thread is articulated at the centre of the texture (now involving more complex harmonies using chromatic inflexions in both hands) principally by the thumbs (Examples 2.40).

From bar 314 to the climax of the development section at 366, the thumb plays a significant part in the tussle between the romantic and neoclassical elements. The former is manifested in the rhapsodic utterances of motif '*a*' (as at bar 32), with the latter realized with dry detached statements of motifs '*b*', '*e*' and '*F*'. Both elements are bathed in cascades of arpeggios that traverse the whole keyboard and explore wide stretches especially between the thumb and first finger.

Example 2.40. 'Scarbo', bars 305-313 (bracketed notes to be played by left-hand thumbs as recommended by the author)

This means that the hand positions are constantly changing and consequently the articulation of the theme is shared between disparate fingers as in bars 325-9 (Example 2.41) where the arpeggio figurations descend and ascend across a six-octave range. The first two notes of motif 'a' (E sharp and F sharp) played by the right-hand thumb and first finger respectively must match up seamlessly with the ensuing C sharp, assigned to the left-hand thumb at the beginning of bar 326.

Example 2.41. 'Scarbo, bars 325-329

With increased dynamic activity, Ravel once more employs his thumbs to develop and project the thematic material, as Table 2.4 demonstrates.

Table 2.4: Thumbs' role in projecting motivic material in 'Scarbo', bars 335-366

Bars	Motif	Dynamic	Thumb activity	Textural details
335-337	<i>e</i>	<i>f dim to p</i>	Motif ' <i>e</i> ' assigned to alternate thumbs at centre of texture with.	Tessitura and octave doublings adjusted with each statement.
339-340	<i>e</i>	<i>mf</i>	As at bars 335-7	
343-344	<i>e</i>	<i>f</i>	As at bars 335-7	
345-352	<i>a e</i>	surges from <i>mf</i> to <i>ff</i>	Intervallic sweep of ' <i>a</i> ' reduced to tonal/semitonal shifts played by thumbs surrounded by motif ' <i>e</i> ' with octave displacements.	Combination of romantic surge of ' <i>a</i> ' with neoclassical tautness of ' <i>e</i> '.
353-356	<i>a</i>	<i>p to mf</i>	' <i>a</i> ' in reduced intervallic form assumes the character of ' <i>b</i> ' - detached offbeat 4-note semiquavers patterns.	Both hands inhabit the same area of the keyboard
356-358	<i>a</i>	<i>mf to f</i>	Octave doublings added on certain notes. ' <i>a</i> ' now an octave higher.	
358-361	<i>a</i>	<i>f to ff</i>	Thumbs articulate ' <i>a</i> ' at centre of alternate octaves.	Hands move apart to accommodate alternate octave texture.
362-266	<i>a</i>	<i>mf to ff</i>	Ascent to climax driven by scalic thread played by alternate thumbs.	Octave doublings throughout
366	<i>F</i>	<i>ff</i> + accents	Extended thumbs	

With such an active and volatile development section it is no surprise that Ravel opts for a hushed ambience for the opening section of the recapitulation. Motif 'a' enters in bar 395 doubled in sevenths and octaves at the very bass of the keyboard. Interspersed between statements of 'b' at bar 431 and 'c' in bar 437, Ravel revisits a textural device he explored in bars 68-9, a tremolo between the hands followed by a swift arpeggiated descent. On this occasion he replaces the tremolo with a trill that explores thumb dyads alternating with 2-3 fingering patterns (bar 439-40, Example 2.42).

Example 2.42. 'Scarbo', bars 439-40

At bar 448, Ravel's thumb dyads make their first appearance in a thematic/melodic context. Motif 'd' which did not feature in the development section reappears, transformed into a double-note passage in major seconds using the extended right-hand thumb in tandem with the other fingers (Example 2.43a). It is accompanied by a succession of parallel chords played by the left hand, underpinned by long pedals. This figure rises and falls chromatically with Ravel building up the tension by increasing the speed and dynamic until the music bursts into a dance-like furore at 460 (Example 2.43b) before finally plunging down six octaves at 472-476 (Example 2.43c). Once more Ravel's own physicality at the keyboard provides the answer as to how one might execute this passage. As Maurice Delage noted: 'the necessary agility comes from great suppleness in the wrist, the fingers held flat on

the keyboard and the player sitting very low.⁷⁹ Gaby Casadesus, in an interview with Dean Elder, expressed her belief that Ravel thought of the fingering first when composing this passage, adding that whereas ‘with Debussy, the pianist is required to solve technical problems that arise out of compositional experiments, Ravel starts with the instrument and the player’s technical capacities and builds his music around these considerations’.⁸⁰

Example 2.43. Thumb dyads as motivic material in ‘Scarbo’

a) bars 448-9

b) bars 460-1

c) bars 472-3

⁷⁹ Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered*, p. 90.

⁸⁰ Gaby Casadesus, *Pianists at Play*, ed. Dean Elder, p. 33.

From this point (bar 477) Ravel embarks upon the most gripping musical trajectory within Scarbo that resonates tellingly with the fourth stanza of Aloysius Bertrand's poem: 'Do I think him vanished then? The dwarf grows between the moon and me like the belfry of a gothic cathedral, a golden bell shakes on his pointed cap!'.⁸¹ The dynamic level is reduced to a minimum (*ppp*) as the left-hand ostinato rumbles menacingly at the bass of the keyboard on a dominant pedal destabilised by the relentless E sharp appoggiatura reiterated on every bar line. Hushed utterances by motif 'F' add to the uncertainty and as before the thumbs are busy at work within the centre of the texture.

For the next forty-four bars the dynamic surges remain veiled, and it is not until bar 521, where the bass line settles upon an F minor pedal, that the textural breadth begins to mirror the second of Bertrand's phrases quoted above. At this point motif 'F' continues to dominate the texture, although the ostinato 'E's of bar 122 are now transformed into two bars of ascending chromatics with a leap between the last two notes echoing a 'filled in' version of the 'Quelle horreur!' motif played by all the fingers (Example 2.44a). The dynamic swells from *ppp* to *mf* drive the music forward and from bars 543 to 555 Ravel looks to the power and agility of his thumbs to propel the action towards the *fff* at the climax at bar 563 (Examples 2.44b and c). Table 2.5 outlines the overriding responsibility given to the thumbs to steer the performer through this most tempestuous of passages.

⁸¹ 'Le croyais-je alors évanoui? le nain grandissait entre la lune et moi comme le clocher d'une cathédrale gothique, un grelot d'or en branle à son bonnet pointu!'. Aloysius Bertrand, 'Scarbo', *Gaspard de la nuit - Fantaisies a la Manière de Rembrandt et de Callot* (Paris: Labitte, 1842).

Table 2.5: Thumbs as Motivic Articulators in 'Scarbo', bars 523-577

Bars	Dynamic	Texture	Thumb activity
523-24 528-29	<i>ppp-mf</i>	Chromatic surge across two bars	Thumb absorbed into default fingering patterns
534-35 539-40	<i>pp-mf</i>	Chromatic surge, perfect fourth higher than previously	
543	Level set at <i>mf</i>	Left-hand arpeggios expanded to span two broken octaves	Thumb and fifth finger acting as anchors.
544	<i>p cresc</i>	Chromatic surge harmonically enriched - chords in right hand and octave in left hand (tenor register)	Alternate thumbs articulate chromatic version of 'a'
547-48	As at 543-44	Chromatic surge in treble register to effect a more strident dynamic swell.	As at 543-44
554-55	<i>p cresc</i>	Chromatic surge over two bars, covering four octaves. Alternate chordal octaves.	Thumbs directing the chromatic line.
556-60		Intervallic expansion of chromatic surge - bass line descent.	Flying thumb (left hand) on sixth semiquaver articulating the crescendo through each bar. Right-hand thumb articulating octave ascent.
561-62	<i>cresc - fff</i>	Semitones of chromatic surge expanded to minor ninths	Left-hand thumb energised with rotary movement of wrist to effect the crescendo
563 567-8	<i>fff/ff</i>	Hands united at the climax with motif 'F' in octaves	Extended thumbs destabilising B major tonality.
564-66 567-69	<i>mf cresc ff</i>	Three-bar ascent in broken octaves	Thumbs projecting chromatic version of 'a'
574-77	<i>p cresc ff</i>	Four-bar ascent in octaves	

Example 2.44. 'Scarbo'

a) bars 521-4: ascending chromatics played by all fingers

521

pp

ppp

mp

b) bars 543-8: ascending chromatics projected by thumbs alone at the centre of alternate chords (544) with octave displacements (548)

543

mf

p

mf

c) bars 552-556: ascending chromatics over two bars with increased harmonic activity

552

p

p subito

Even at this point, Ravel's *fff* interjections are short-lived, with surging crescendos pulling the dynamic back to *mf* and even *p* for the third and lengthiest of them (bars 574-577). Ravel phrases each crescendo in one sweep, a gesture that can be realised effectively by the thumbs at the centre of the chordal octaves (Example 2.45).

Example 2.45. 'Scarbo', bars 573-578

As the dynamics subside during the coda of 'Scarbo', the thumbs continue to pick out the brief thematic interjections from the turbulent arabesque figurations.

Conclusion

Ravel did not perform or record *Gaspard de la nuit*, and yet the evidence presented points unequivocally to the fundamental role played by Ravel the pianist and his 'strangler thumbs' in the evolution of this seminal work. Roland-Manuel noted that in *Gaspard de la nuit* 'Ravel had simply aimed at the solution of a technical problem', and identified that problem as 'virtuosity'.⁸² What is clear is that

⁸² Roland-Manuel: *À la gloire de Ravel*. English edition: *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly, p. 54.

Ravel expanded the term to embrace every aspect of musical composition and performance and that it is possible to trace this uninterrupted development from *Jeux d'eau* to *Gaspard de la nuit*.

In his last two major works for solo piano, *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911) and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-1917) Ravel's mode of expression turned away from the expansive and extrovert toward the concise and reserved. With the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* Ravel was aiming for 'a markedly clearer kind of writing that crystallizes the harmonies and sharpens the profile of the music'.⁸³ That the thumb dyads play a vital role in this vibrant and fresh harmonic language will be discussed in relation to Ravel's piano roll recording of *Valses nobles et sentimentales* in Chapter 3. In *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17) the process of refinement goes even further as Ravel turns to the eighteenth-century dances and the keyboard techniques of his French forbears. Here Ravel's emphasis from a technical perspective is on clarity and even execution, and for the most part the thumb takes its place alongside the remaining fingers. It is in the final 'Toccata' that the *puissance* and energy of the thumbs is harnessed as will be explored in Chapter 4.

In her monograph *At the Piano with Ravel* pianist and pedagogue Marguerite Long referred to Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* as 'a renewal of piano technique that had been asleep since the days of Liszt'.⁸⁴ Furthermore, in her treatise on piano technique, *Le Piano*, Long ascertained that for Liszt's hand the third finger played a pivotal role in the cultivation of thematic material based on particular fingering permutations as for example in the opening ostinato figurations of the *Étude de Concert*, 'Waldesrauschen' (Example 2.46). For that other great Romantic piano technician,

⁸³ 'An Autobiographical Sketch of Maurice Ravel'. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 31.

⁸⁴ Marguerite Long, *Au piano avec Maurice Ravel*, ed. Pierre Laumonier (Paris: Julliard, 1971). English edition: *At the Piano with Maurice Ravel*, trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: Dent, 1973), p. 64.

Frédéric Chopin, it was the second finger that took the lead, as demonstrated in the *Étude* Op. 25 No. 2 (Example 2.47).⁸⁵ With Maurice Ravel it is the thumb that acts as head prefect of the hand not only within a technical context but more significantly and tellingly as a vehicle for the shaping, defining and nuancing of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic building blocks within his piano works.

Example 2.46. Liszt: *Deux études de concert* S. 145, 'Waldesrauschen' (1862-63), bars 1-5 (right hand)

Vivace

pp dolcissimo

Ped.

Example 2.47. Chopin: *Étude* Op. 25 No. 2 (1835-37), bars 1-5

Presto

p molto legato

⁸⁵ Marguerite Long, 'Introduction', *Le Piano*, (Paris: Salabert, 1959), p. 4.

Chapter 3

Ravel as Pianist and Recording Artist (1895-1928)

His playing was polished, infinitely whimsical, yet remote and preoccupied, as though he were gazing with wonder upon what he had done and puzzling vaguely whether he could ever do it again.¹

Chotzinoff

He made lots of mistakes - that was because he didn't practise enough. But he gave a very good idea of what he meant.²

Halffter

Ravel's early pianistic training had equipped him with extensive knowledge of the piano's capabilities. Additionally, the solo piano repertoire he studied and performed between 1889 and 1895 demanded a significant degree of technical and interpretive accomplishment, qualities that Ravel had demonstrated incontestably in the internal examinations and competitions at the Paris Conservatoire. We are fortunate that recordings of Ravel playing his own solo piano works have survived from the early twentieth century in the form of five piano rolls recorded from 1913 to 1928 and subsequently realized in LP and CD format during the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Solo piano works recorded on piano roll by Ravel (1913-1928)

Company/Roll no.	Work	Date of recording
Welte-Mignon 2887	<i>Sonatine: first/second movements</i>	1913
Welte-Mignon 2888	<i>Valses nobles et sentimentales</i>	1913
Aeolian/Duo-Art 082	'Oiseaux tristes'	1922
Aeolian/Duo-Art 084	<i>Pavane pour une Infante défunte</i>	1922*
Duo-Art 72750	'La vallée des cloches'	1928*

*Other solo piano works performed by Ravel in the 1922 and 1928 recording sessions that were subsequently attributed to other pianists or not released will be referenced within the relevant subsections of this chapter.

¹ Samuel Chotzinoff, 'Music', *New York World*, February 27 1928. Reproduced in Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011) p. 292.

² Ernesto Halffter, interview for 'France Culture'. Reproduced in Roger Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1987) p. 92.

Unfortunately Ravel's somewhat idiosyncratic approach to interpretation and the technically erratic delivery of his own works in the roll recordings has been met with much scepticism. According to Ronald Woodley, Ravel's fingers do seem to have found their natural limits at what one might charitably call a sub-professional level, despite an apparently exceptional mobility in his thumbs'³, while Roger Nichols notes, 'he did his solo works no favours'.⁴ Angela Hewitt is even more pointed in her assessment: 'Ravel himself was not a very good pianist and knew it.'⁵ Such observations seem all the more extraordinary when one considers that Ravel had been lauded at the Paris Conservatoire for his performances of virtuosic piano works by Chopin, Schumann, Moscheles and Herz. On his dismissal from Charles de Bériot's advanced piano class in July 1895, it is unclear whether or not Ravel undertook any further piano studies and a survey of his performing activities during the period 1895 to 1913, that is from the end of his official piano studies to the first recording sessions for Welte-Mignon, reveals a distinct paucity of solo performances (see Table 3.2).

Evidently, Ravel seems to have felt more comfortable in the fields of accompaniment and the piano duet and duo repertoire making relatively few forays into the solo piano arena. Nevertheless it was during this eighteen-year period that Ravel wrote the majority of his solo piano works, excepting *Sérénade grotesque* (1893) and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-1917), and his predilection for composing at the piano meant that he was constantly applying his pianistic skills

³ Ronald Woodley, 'Performing Ravel: Style and Practice in the Early Recordings', in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 214-5.

⁴ Roger Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 292.

⁵ Angela Hewitt, booklet notes, *Ravel, The Complete Solo Piano Music*, Hyperion CDA67341/2 (2000).

Table 3.2: Ravel as pianist: performing activities 1895-1913 (selected examples)⁶

Date	Description
September-December 1897	Piano duet sessions with Ricardo Viñes playing arrangements of Rimsky Korsakov's <i>Antar</i> , Balakirev's <i>Tamar</i> , and Debussy's <i>Proses lyriques</i>
June - October 1898	Resident pianist at a casino in Granville (Normandy)
January 20 1901	Performed a selection of Chopin <i>Preludes</i> and <i>Waltzes</i> to accompany Isadora Duncan's dancing at Madame de Saint-Marceaux's salon.
April 21 1903	Performed Debussy's <i>Nocturnes</i> in the two-piano arrangement with Viñes (Ravel had transcribed the final movement, 'Sirènes') at the Schola Cantorum.
October 11 1904	First run through of 'Oiseaux tristes' at an Apâches evening (chez Delage)
January 13 1905	Performed 'Oiseaux tristes' and Debussy's <i>D'un cahier d'esquisses</i> at Madame de Saint-Marceaux salon.
February 5 1905	Rimsky Korsakov's <i>Scheherazade</i> with Viñes chez Godebski.
January 12 1907	Accompanied Jane Bathori in the premiere of <i>Histoires Naturelles</i> for the Société Nationale de Musique (SNM) at the Salle Érard.
June 11 1907	Performs <i>Sonatine</i> chez Calvocoressi ⁷
April 20 1910	Gives the first public performance of Debussy's <i>D'un cahier d'esquisses</i> at the first concert of the Société musicale indépendante (SMI).
January 16 1911	Performs three piano pieces by Satie at the SNM: the Prelude to the first act of <i>Les fils des étoiles</i> , the second Sarabande and the third <i>Gymnopédie</i> .
February 29 1912	Plays piano part in French premiere of Vaughan Williams's <i>On Wenlock Edge</i> . ⁸
March 8 1912	Plays <i>Valses nobles et sentimentales</i> chez Mortier.

to the creation of new sonorities, textures and pioneering keyboard techniques with each successive composition, or as Yvonne Lefébure put it: 'With Ravel there was this unflinching determination to renew himself with each successive composition'.⁹

⁶ Information collated from Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader* (1990), Roger Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered* (1987); Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (2009).

⁷ Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 127, n. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

A letter to Léon Vallas, dated Paris, April 8, 1906, following the premiere of the *Sonatine* highlights Ravel's rather indifferent stance on performing his own works:

I am a bit startled by *La revue musicale's* critique of *Sonatine* as being difficult. What will they say about *Miroirs* that I myself cannot manage to play correctly! It is true that I have not practised the piano for a good number of years. Moreover for the time being I am not writing piano pieces, and apart from a concerto,¹⁰ I'm hardly planning anything but symphonic or lyric works.¹¹

When it came to giving the first public performances of this remarkable body of works, Ravel entrusted the responsibility to other pianists and principally to the Catalan pianist Ricardo Viñes as Table 3.3 demonstrates:

Table 3.3: Premières of Ravel's solo piano works (1898-1913)

Date	Work	Performer/Venue
April 18 1898	<i>Menuet Antique</i>	Ricardo Viñes/Société Nationale de Musique (SNM)/ Salle Érard
May 5 1902	<i>Pavane pour une Infante défunte</i> and <i>Jeux d'eau</i>	Viñes/(SNM)
January 6 1906	<i>Miroirs</i>	Viñes/Salle Érard
February 10 1906	<i>Sonatine</i>	Paule de Lestang/Lyon
January 9 1909	<i>Gaspard de la nuit</i>	Viñes/Salle Érard
March 11 1911	<i>Menuet sur le nom de Haydn</i>	Ennemond Trillat/SNM
May 9 1911	<i>Valses nobles et sentimentales</i>	Louis Aubert/SNM
December 10 1913	<i>A la manière de Borodine</i> and <i>A la manière d'Emmanuel Chabrier</i>	Alfredo Casella/Société musicale indépendante (SMI)

It is rather surprising then to find Ravel accepting an invitation from the German firm *Welte* to make the first of several player piano roll recordings in the autumn of 1913. What prompted Ravel to undertake these recordings at this time? It wasn't as though he did not have his hands full with a diverse array of composing

⁹ 'C'est d'ailleurs une constant chez Ravel que cette détermination de faire peau neuve après chaque partition réussie'. Yvonne Lefébure, Sleeve notes, *Maurice Ravel, Le Tombeau de Couperin and other works*, CD Solstice FYCD 018 (1975).

¹⁰ A reference to Zaspak-bat, Ravel's earliest drafts for a piano concerto based on Basque themes. He worked on it over an extended period but eventually abandoned it, incorporating elements into the Piano Trio (1914) and the Concerto in G (1929-31).

¹¹ Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 81.

and arranging projects that, according to Roger Nichols, 'balanced his explorations in the regions of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg with retrospective activities of orchestration and pastiche'.¹² Between March and April Ravel and Stravinsky worked together on the reorchestration of Mussorgsky's opera *Khovanschina* and during the summer months Ravel completed his *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* for voice and chamber ensemble. His only other compositional activities included a short piano *Prélude* commissioned as a sight-reading test for the ladies piano competition at the Paris Conservatoire, and further revisions of the piano concerto based on Basque themes, *Zazpiak-bat*, that he had begun back in 1906 (mentioned in a letter to Stravinsky dated August 28 1913).

Thus, aside from the Mallarmé settings Ravel seems to have struggling to break into new territory and he may have felt an urgent need to reinvent himself and reinvigorate his work for fear of being overtaken by his colleagues, bearing in mind that Debussy's seminal second series of piano *Préludes* had just been published on April 17 and on May 28 Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke* Op. 11 were performed at the SMI, followed by the première of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* on May 29. What better way for Ravel to lay claim to his place at the vanguard of the French musical avant-garde than by following the example of other eminent composer-pianists, including Edward Grieg, Ferruccio Busoni, Camille Saint Saëns and Claude Debussy in recording a selection of his recently composed piano works?

Ravel's recordings were made during the early decades of the twentieth-century when performance practices started to move away from late nineteenth-century attitudes, according to which the performers were encouraged to bring their own ideas to the interpretation, towards the twentieth century's new found respect

¹² Roger Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 160.

for the intentions of the composer and fidelity to the printed text. Ravel's preference for the latter trend was expressed in 1913 in a review he wrote in the *Comoedia illustré* (June 15) of the Paris premiere of Boris Godunov at the recently inaugurated Théâtre de Champs-Élysées on May 22. Speaking of Feodor Chaliapin's interpretation in the title role, Ravel said:

A powerful 'tradition' has taken hold. M. Chaliapin remains the greatest lyric artist of our time, and even though I admire, among other virtues, his manner of interpreting the recitative by almost speaking while fully observing the melodic flow, he is beginning to abuse this technique. In Boris Godunov, there are purely lyrical passages in which singing is mandatory, and in which Mussorgsky's tempos must be respected. There is nothing that necessitates the addition of those sinister sneers or cavernous groans whose effect is so gruff and so unmusical.¹³

Jacques Février recalled Ravel's request for '[...] no rubato, no interpretation, just that which is written; the text and only the text',¹⁴ adding that '[...] Ravel's piano works ask for the minimum of subjective involvement from their interpreters'.¹⁵ Thus for Ravel respect for the printed text was a key factor in producing a credible interpretation and these recordings can provide the means to ascertain how closely Ravel the pianist adhered to the printed notation of Ravel the composer. Did Ravel practise what he preached?

Ravel's piano roll recordings (1913, 1922 and 1928)

The 1913 Welte-Mignon piano rolls are some of the earliest recordings of any of Ravel's compositions and constitute crucial primary source material for identifying historical performance practices in his solo piano works. For Ravel to undertake these recordings he must have had sufficient confidence in his pianistic abilities to

¹³ Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 369.

¹⁴ '[...] pas de rubato, pas d'interprétation, hormis ce qu'il avait écrit; le texte, seulement le texte'. 'Les exigences de Ravel', *La Revue internationale de musique* (Paris: April 1939), pp. 893-4.

¹⁵ '[...] l'oeuvre pianistique de Ravel demandé à ses interprètes un minimum d'initiative personnelle'. Ibid.

convey his interpretations with clarity and conviction. Unfortunately this supposition seems not to have stood the test of time, as Ronald Woodley points out: 'Ravel's own technical limitations as a pianist have long been adduced as a pretext for playing down the interpretative importance of his own recordings'.¹⁶

Listening to Ravel playing Ravel with twenty-first century ears, one is aware of the many stylistic inconsistencies, and imperfections that have led academics and performers to question the validity of these rolls. Conversely one is transported by the myriad nuances, and many moments of illuminating and enchanting piano playing that also reflect the pianistic performance practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This chapter focuses upon these latter qualities to highlight the breadth of Ravel's pianism by analyzing three of his piano roll recordings: *Valses* nos. 1 and 7 from *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Welte-Mignon, 1913), and two pieces from *Miroirs*, 'Oiseaux tristes' (Duo-Art 1922) and 'La vallée des cloches' (Duo-Art, 1928).

To conduct this investigation three CD realizations of the roll recordings have been sourced:

- The Condon Collection by Australian piano historian and collector Denis Condon: *Ravel: Masters of the Piano Roll*. DSPRCD 004 (1992: CD). The roll copies have been recorded from a playback on a new concert grand and in what sounds like a very reverberant acoustic.
- The Caswell Collection by Ken Caswell: *Maurice Ravel, the Composer as Pianist and Conductor*. Pierian 0013 (2002: CD). The Welte-Mignon roll copies were realized by Ken Caswell and the Duo-Art roll audio reproductions were realized by Denis Hall. This recording is reproduced on a restored 1923

¹⁶ Ronald Woodley, *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, p. 214.

Feurich upright that has the string-length of a grand piano in a room with a dry acoustic.

- A CD transfer realized by Denis Hall and reproduced on a restored Steinway Welte and a Steinway Duo-Art grand piano (both dating from the 1920s) in a room with a dry acoustic.

Additionally, an LP recording, *'Maurice Ravel plays Ravel'* (Ember: GVC 39, 1975), reissued on CD in 2009 has been consulted. The only information available regarding the remastering process for this realization states that '[...] the original mastertape recordings were made in 3-track stereo using 3 AKG calibrated omnidirectional microphones'.¹⁷

Denis Hall, a specialist on the technologies of reproducing pianos, has explained his realization process as being from an historically informed approach.¹⁸ According to Hall, Ravel's rolls were probably recorded on a Steinway or Feurich grand piano, thus Hall's Steinway grand comes close to replicating Ravel's performance in terms of early twentieth-century pianistic sonority.¹⁹ Caswell's choice of piano, a Feurich upright, albeit with the string-length of a grand piano, comes over as more limited in its expressive tone colour, while Condon's modern concert grand produces a resonant and weightier sonority more suited to late twentieth-century interpretive practices. However, Hall also points out the difficulties in preserving and maintaining older pianos:

It is not possible to reproduce the exact key and hammer speed on individual notes. You have to do the best you can. [...] If the recording sounds good, all the systems are working well; if not it is more likely that the piano is not working well rather than the system being faulty.²⁰

¹⁷ Sleeve notes, *'Maurice Ravel plays Ravel'* (Ember: GVC 39, 1975).

¹⁸ The author in conversation with Denis Hall, Bromley, February 28 2017.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

A close examination of the four realizations reveals anomalies in the playback relating to accuracy, pedalling, dynamics and tempi that will be discussed during the course of this chapter. This is particularly noticeable on the LP recording '*Maurice Ravel plays Ravel*' from 1975. Ravel's performances of the *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*, and 'Oiseaux tristes' and 'La vallée des cloches' from *Miroirs* are littered with notes that stand out, unbalanced chords, unexpected dynamic surges and a mediocre piano sound. Likewise, the performance of the 'Toccata', erroneously attributed to Ravel but now known to have been performed by Robert Casadesus, is unduly slow (lasting 4' 55") and uneven in execution.²¹ Compare this with the realization of the same performance by Condon, lasting 4' 22", that replicates the fluid technique normally associated with Casadesus' brand of pianism. It is clear that Casadesus' roll recording of the 'Toccata' was played back at an incorrect speed on the 1975 realization. Such issues could have arisen from poorly adjusted mechanisms or from the piano itself not having been set up properly. As Hall stated, several factors need to be in place to ensure a recording that reproduces the performance as it was created in the recording studio: '[...] the rolls have to be played at a particular speed, the recording mechanisms need to be properly adjusted and the pianos (hammers, keys and pedals) must be evenly regulated'.²²

Of the Condon, Caswell and Hall recordings, the first named is the least convincing in that the recording has been produced in a very reverberant acoustic on a very bright piano whose tone is not always even across the keyboard. This recording also reveals some unexpected jolts in rhythm and pulse. Caswell and Hall's realizations are much more successful in all these respects as will be demonstrated.

²¹ For further information on Robert Casadesus' involvement with Ravel in the 1922 Duo-Art recording session, see p. 176 in this chapter.

²² Ibid.

By examining the Hall, Caswell and Condon realizations Ravel's pianism is put under the microscope to investigate his approach to the core components of performance: accuracy, tempo and rhythm, arpeggiation and dislocation, articulation, pedalling and dynamic colouring. The recordings are scrutinized and cross-referenced with Ravel's published scores of *Miroirs* (Demets, 1906) and *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Durand, 1911) together with recordings made by pianists who received advice from Ravel on interpretive issues, namely Robert Casadesus, Vlado Perlemuter, Henriette Faure (recordings of 'Oiseaux tristes' and 'La vallée des cloches') and Yvonne Lefébure (recording of *Valses nobles et sentimentales*). Table 3.4 provides details of these recordings.

Table 3.4: List of recordings discussed by Ravel's disciples

Pianist	Recording Co./No.	Date/Issue date of recording
Robert Casadesus	Sony Masterworks MH2K 63316	December 4 1951 (issued 1952) (CD 1998)
Vlado Perlemuter	Vox Legends CDX2 5507 ²³	1955 (issued 1956) (CD 1999)
Henriette Faure	BnF Collection	January 1 1959 (CD 2014)
Yvonne Lefébure	FYCD 018	January 20-27 1975 (CD 1986)

The Welte-Mignon recording sessions (1913)

Before investigating Ravel's performances of 'Valse 1' and 'Valse 7' it is useful to consider the technology of piano roll recordings in order to properly assess the merits and limitations of the Welte-Mignon recording process. According to Denis

²³ Perlemuter's 1955 recording was consulted for the current study, as opposed to his 1973 recording of the complete piano works (1979), CD, Nimbus NI7713 (1996).

Hall, whose considerable experience in restoring reproducing pianos extends from treating the hammers and setting up the action to rebuilding the mechanisms to play the rolls, the reproducing pianos are capable of replicating the rubato, dynamics and pedalling. Welte was rightly regarded as the first true reproducing piano, in that it automatically replayed the tempo, phrasing, dynamics and pedalling of a particular performance, and not just the notes of the music, as was the case with other player pianos of the time.²⁴ As regards the roll manufacturing process, Hall and the concert pianolist, Rex Lawson said:

The playing was recorded on a roll, more than likely white paper pre-printed with 100 continuous lines, in the position where each pitch was located. Unlike Duo-Art, Welte did not perforate music rolls during the actual performance, but rather with ink or carbon traces rather than perforations. From this original roll, holes were punched out by hand to create the first master roll. Then copies (second masters) were created and the actual production rolls were one to one copies from these.²⁵

One of the major problems to emerge from the roll copying process is highlighted in the following comment made to the author by Hall:

Between the second master and production copies there are considerable errors. You cannot record key strokes from the keys - has to be done from the hammers (when hammer hits string). These systems work from the key movements. They work by constantly defining whether any note or pedal is up or down. The perforation on the roll has to be roughly the same amount in advance of the note going to sound as the beginning of the key stroke.

The incorrect placement of perforations has many implications for the various roll copies of Ravel's recordings as will be seen in the ensuing study of 'Valse 1' and 'Valse 7' from the *Valses*.

Ravel's decision to record the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (henceforth referred to as the *Valses*) in the 1913 sessions makes perfect sense. Firstly this was his most recently composed large-scale piano work, published and first performed in 1911 and subsequently orchestrated in 1912. The *Valses* would also be fresh in Ravel's mind and probably in his fingers from a performance he gave on March 8

²⁴ The author in conversation with Denis Hall, February 28 2017.

²⁵ Ibid. See also 'The Reproducing Piano: Welte-Mignon', www.pianola.org.

1912 (see Table 3.2), and could thus provide a perfect benchmark for analyzing Ravel's performance style in his newly crafted style of pianistic composition which he defined as 'a markedly clearer kind of writing which crystallizes the harmony and sharpen the profile of the music'.²⁶ His particular attachment to the *Valses* is reflected in recollections made by Vlado Perlemuter, H el ene Jourdan-Morhange and Henriette Faure:

I can only be moved when I recall Ravel in his study, near the piano, score in hand, making me work at these Waltzes. I have never seen so much intentness in his look. There was about him such a longing to be understood, to let nothing pass, not only textually, but in the interpretation of this text. Through the desire for perfection in the letter, one automatically made contact with the spirit.²⁷

I can see him so well, sifting through his score, picking out the note or nuance that might have led you astray from the text as it stood. It proves to what extent Ravel was attached to his Valses.²⁸

Then I began to play the Valses for him. At first he was seated, but then he got up, stood by the piano and subjected me an ordeal that still remains with me to this day, stopping continually, poring over every last detail regarding breathing, rests, pedalling, nuances and throughout he maintained an inexorable 1.2.3., 1.2.3., like a clock. It was exhausting having to combine fantasy with rigour and to incorporate vision and elegance within exacting rhythm and meticulous precision. I endured this martyrdom for close to two and a half hours.²⁹

'Valse 1'

Accuracy

Ravel's performance of 'Valse 1' is pretty clean and stands up surprisingly well alongside recordings made by two of his disciples, Robert Casadesus and Vlado

²⁶ Alexis Roland-Manuel, 'Une Esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel', *La Revue musicale* (Paris: 1938), pp. 17-23. English trans. Dennis Collins, 'An Autobiographical Sketch of Maurice Ravel', in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 31.

²⁷ Perlemuter, Vlado and Jourdan-Morhange, H el ene, *Ravel d'apr es Ravel*. (Lausanne: Editions du Cervin, 1957; 5/1970). Augmented re-edition: *Ravel d'apr es Ravel, suivi des Rencontres avec Vlado Perlemuter*, ed. Jean Roy (Aix-en-Provence: Alin ea, 1989). English edition (from the above 1970 volume): *Ravel according to Ravel*. English trans. Frances Tanner, ed. Harold Taylor (London: Kahn & Averill, 1990), p. 43.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ 'Je commen ai alors   lui jouer les Valses. Il  tait assis, il se leva, se tint pr es du piano et m'infligea un supplice qu'un demi-si cle n'arrive pas   me faire oublier, m'arr tant continuellement, me reprenant dans les moindres d tails pour une respiration, un silence, une p dale, une inflexion ... et au fond de tout cela, comme une horloge au fond d'un couloir ses inexorables 1.2.3., 1.2.3.. C' tait  puisant, il fallait int grer la fantaisie dans la rigueur, et donner du r ve ou de l' l gance dans le maximum de rythme et de pr cision. Ce martyre dura pr es de deux heures et demie'. Henriette Faure, *Mon Ma tre Maurice Ravel* (Paris: ATP, 1978), p. 20.

Perlemuter, bearing in mind that the Welte-Mignon performances constitute complete unedited takes, a fact corroborated by information supplied on the Pianola Institute website:

Welte, uniquely amongst the main four roll recording companies, did not encourage its pianists to participate in the editing process. Indeed, there was virtually no editing process: pianists could listen to their rolls once perforated, and if they were unsatisfied with them, they could choose to record them again, but there was no suggestion of the original recordings being alterable in any way.³⁰

Any errors in Ravel's performance seem to be at obvious places and possibly linked to a degree of nervousness, although comments made by Richard Simonton, who had worked closely with Welte, imply that Ravel was very much at ease during the recording process: 'Ravel was very quiet, very tractable and very easy to get on with. He came, performed at a recording session and that was that'.³¹

Table 3.5 lists the note errors that occur on the roll copies used by Condon and Hall. In the roll copy on Caswell's remastering, all these errors have been corrected, excepting the last mentioned at bar 73. On close inspection all four errors comprise notes adjusted by a semitone. For Denis Hall and Rex Lawson this suggests that, rather than being errors made by Ravel in performance, they may be attributable to the notes having been punched on the incorrect side of the original (inked) roll on the copy used by Condon and Hall, with three of these errors being correctly punched or amended on the roll copy used by Caswell. This underlines the crucial point that whilst dynamics, tempi and expression could not be altered post-recording in the Welte process, the notes could be adjusted.

³⁰ www.pianola.org. 'The Reproducing Piano: Welte-Mignon'.

³¹ Richard Simonton, 'A personal experience with Welte' in *Encyclopedia*, ed. Bowers, p. 324. Reproduced by Carolyn Abbate in 'Outside Ravel's Tomb' *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 52 No. 3 (Autumn 1999) p. 495.

Table 3.5: Note errors in Ravel’s roll recording of ‘Valse 1’ from *Valses nobles et sentimentales* as remastered by Denis Condon (1992), and Denis Hall (2017)

Bar	Errors
22	Third beat, left hand: A natural (should be A flat)
37	First quaver, right hand: F natural (Should be F sharp)
38	Last quaver, right hand: C sharp (should be B sharp)
73	Second quaver, right hand: G natural (should be G sharp)

Tempo and Rhythm

He was also anxious that the speed of each waltz should be marked on the programme.³²
Vlado Perlemuter

[...] probably because it expresses the feeling with which each waltz should be interpreted. The first is marked *Modéré - très franc* (moderate - very clear).³³
Hélène Jourdan-Morhange

As Perlemuter states, Ravel’s metronome mark of crotchet = 176 should be adopted as the ideal tempo. However, Ravel’s performance tells another story in that his opening tempo is set at crotchet = 192 with a hike up to crotchet= 216-232 in bar 5 that becomes the basic tempo for the remainder of ‘Valse 1’. The tempo does slow down briefly in passages that correspond to the opening figurations, such as bars 45-48, and there is a slight hesitation in bars 73-74. In an article for the *Pianola Journal* Roy Howat points out that Welte rolls, ‘unlike analogue sound recordings, are basically digital and can be replayed faster or slower without changing the pitch’.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Condon, Caswell and Hall realizations adhere to Ravel’s brisk tempi. Of the three, the Hall and Caswell recordings provide most rhythmically consistent performances; the opening bars of the Condon realization are jerky, and the pulse does not stabilize until bar 5.

The durations of the Condon, Caswell and Hall realizations of ‘Valse 1’ are 1’06”, 1’10” and 1’12” respectively. According to Denis Hall, these slight differences

³² Perlemuter, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 43.

³³ Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 44.

³⁴ Roy Howat, ‘Debussy and Welte’, *Pianola Journal* No.7 (1994), pp. 3-18.

between the various roll copies can be put down to marginal variations in the setting or calibration of playback instruments or in paper thickness between different copies of a roll.³⁵

Ravel's notated crotchet pulse looks logical on paper when aligned with Faure's recollection of his 'inexorable 1.2.3'. However in this 1913 recording there is a forward momentum that seems to cast aside the crotchet pulse altogether. Ravel plays the main rhythmic cell (bar 1) with a sense of one-in-a-bar i.e. a dotted minim pulse, and avoids overplaying the accent on the third beat so that the overall feel is of a full even sound underpinned by carefully judged pedalling. The right-hand quaver passagework in bars 13-15 and 29 onwards drives through the barlines with the bass notes at the beginning of each bar in the left hand providing solid support. At bars 33-34 one can sense a strong-to-weak phrasing across the two bars that reflects the ebb and flow of the chromatic inflections within the harmonies. The recordings by Casadesus, Perlemuter, and to a lesser degree, Yvonne Lefébure, whose overall tempi sit at crotchet = 176-184, don't have quite the same rhythmic drive and feel steady and ultimately more moderate, in line with Ravel's tempo marking, *Modéré*. By using subtle pedalling (discussed separately later on), Ravel manages to retain a sense of the Viennese waltz whilst injecting the rhythm with many cross-accents and irregular phrase shapes. Only at the modulating chordal passages in bars 53-60 do we get a sense of crotchet pulse underlined once more by frequent pedal changes. Ultimately it seems that Ravel plays 'Valse 1' from a composer's perspective, listening to the harmonies and guiding them through with a

³⁵ Information supplied to Roy Howat and sourced from Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 316.

real sense of spontaneity, and in coupling a faster tempo with a barline pulse he conjures a mood of exhilaration that goes way beyond his notated instructions.

Arpeggiation/Dislocation

Ravel employs arpeggiation in a variety of contexts throughout 'Valse 1' as evidenced on the roll copies used by Condon, Caswell and Hall in their realizations. That these are expressive gestures as opposed to any technical difficulties with the widely chordal passages is confirmed by Ravel's ability to strike the ninth chords in bars 17-18 with precision and attack. Vlado Perlemuter, on the other hand, resorts to left-hand spreads at this point but eschews any arpeggiation elsewhere in his performance. These contrary viewpoints between composer and pupil are reflective of changes in attitudes regarding arpeggiation in that it was perfectly acceptable as an un-notated expressive tool in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century performance practices, but then became obsolete as the century wore on (witness its absence in these 1950s recordings of the *Valses* by Perlemuter and Casadesus unless marked by the composer).

In the opening four bars Ravel's attack on the accented third beat right-hand chords carries a slight *arpeggiando* from the top to the bottom thereby projecting the top line of the chordal texture whilst also articulating the harmonic detail. This mode of execution resonates perfectly with Ravel the composer's intentions for the *Valses* as he states in his 'Autobiographical Sketch'. Unlike Casadesus and Perlemuter, but like Ravel, Yvonne Lefébure's recording of the *Valses* from 1975 (she was 77 years of age) looks back to early twentieth-century pianistic practices in her application of arpeggiation to highlight melodic notes and punctuate the beginnings and endings of phrases. However, Ravel ploughs through at a much a faster speed

than Lefébure whose focus is primarily geared toward characterisation with bright dynamic sounds underpinned by long pedals.

Comparing the Condon, Caswell and Hall recordings for evidence of arpeggiation once more underlines the slight discrepancies that occur between the various roll copies. Whereas Ravel's arpeggiations are prominently outlined in the Condon recording, the effect is lessened significantly in the Caswell and Hall versions. Chords are reproduced evenly and there is a strong sense of unity and polarity between the treble and bass, allowing a clear melodic strand to emerge at the top of the chordal textures. These latter performances resonate with a comment Ravel made in a letter to Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1908: 'there is an implied melodic outline in all vital music'.³⁶ Thus the roll used by Condon seems to highlight Ravel's arpeggiations, underlining Ravel's links with nineteenth- and early-twentieth century performance practices whereas those used by Caswell and Hall point to some editorial intervention in the placement of notes that gives the the interpretation a more late twentieth/twenty-first-century sheen.

With the brisk tempo that Ravel sets for 'Valse 1', one would assume that there would be little room for dislocation between the hands. However the Condon version foregrounds a degree of instability in Ravel's technical control manifested by some erratic co-ordination between the hands that is less noticeable in the Caswell and Hall realizations. On this point, Denis Hall has stressed that the quality of the performance depends primarily upon the level of preparation of the reproducing piano: 'the results are only as good as the pianos themselves'.³⁷ The bright treble

³⁶ March 3 1908. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 93.

³⁷ The author in conversation with Denis Hall, Bromley, February 28 2017.

section on Caswell's Feurich piano and Hall's Steinway certainly aid the process of projecting the upper line in the right hand chords.

Both Hall and Lawson concur that even different production copies of the same roll reveal disparities of attack or spread on the same chord, yet again pointing to inexact factory copying. Lawson also notes that there are moments in Ravel's performances of the *Valses* where notes are off-set consistently.³⁸ A particular example of this occurs at the beginning of 'Valse 2', where the texture, comprising melody-dominated chords and octave leaping patterns, is confined to the treble area of the piano (such textures abound in Ravel's piano works, for example in *Jeux d'eau* (bar 19) and the opening section of 'Ondine' from *Gaspard de la nuit*). Reproducing systems differentiate dynamics across two halves of the keyboard thus it is virtually impossible to isolate melody notes from surrounding notes, in this case the top of the right hand chords. It is therefore possible that the editors could have resorted to minor adjustments to the hole punching to produce a staggered effect that sets the melody notes apart from the accompanying harmonies. That the off-sets are consistent would seem to support this line of argument.³⁹

Notwithstanding this, Ravel does use dislocation as an expressive tool to bring his harmonic and polyphonic colouring into relief in 'Valse 1'. In bars 25-29 where the third beats are single notes in each hand, the enharmonic clashes (D sharp against D natural in bars 26 and 28) seem intentionally staggered to soften the dissonant effect. With this in mind it is interesting to note that by ironing out dislocations and arpeggiations in post-production, the Caswell and Hall roll copies lose some of Ravel's idiosyncratic voicings, for example, the modulating chord

³⁸ The author in conversation with Denis Hall and Rex Lawson, Bromley, February 28 2017.

³⁹ Ibid.

sequence in bars 57-60, where the roll utilised by Condon delineates internal chromatic lines with a sharper focus.

Pedalling and articulation

It was the first time Ravel really made me study the pedal. He thought that it was essential for these waltzes. You must not use any pedal for the chord on the third beat, but only on the first beats. In general use short pedals to underline the rhythm.⁴⁰ *Perlemuter*

As the reproducing piano works on the principle that the pedal is either up or down, the operating mechanism was less effective in recording more nuanced applications such as half-pedals and vibrato pedal. Nevertheless, an examination of Ravel's use of the sustaining pedal in the opening section of 'Valse 1' reveals his exacting approach regarding the articulation of his harmonic and rhythmic textures, and is yet another reminder of his intentions in the *Valses*: 'to crystallize the harmony and sharpen the profile of the music' (Table 3.6).

Table 3.6: Pedalling techniques employed by Maurice Ravel in his recorded performance of 'Valse 1' (bars 1-20)

Bars	Pedalling
1-6	Pedals through bar lifting on third beat
7-8 and 9-10	Pedals across the two-bar units to sustain the bass
11-12	Pedals through the bar lifting on the third beat
13-14	Pedals across the bar
15-16	Pedals across the two bars (Condon remastering)
15-16	Sustains the pedal note A for one bar and proceeds to use legato pedalling on each chord in bar 16 (Caswell remastering).
17-18	Pedals through rests with half-pedal changes on each chord
19-20	Legato pedalling

Condon's recording is hampered by excessive reverberation (possibly added in post-production), making it difficult to gauge the exact points at which Ravel depresses or releases the sustaining pedal and in this regard the Caswell and Hall

⁴⁰ Perlemuter, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 45.

recordings provide a much clearer picture. It is evident that Ravel is concerned with sustaining the pedal notes wherever possible for harmonic purposes without losing the rhythmic impetus, for example, in bars 1-4 the pedal note G lingers underneath the third beat with the pedal release coming half-way through this beat. This technique is also applied at bar 45 and similar instances.

The projection of melody and bass lines is skilfully balanced in Ravel's performance, as is the nuancing of harmonic structures and progressions. In bars 49-50 the ninth chords ring through with excellent tonal balance. Similarly in bars 53-60, not only is it possible to hear the chromatically shifting internal counterpoint but also to experience Ravel the composer's mind at work as he draws out particular notes for attention. Ravel also maintains rhythmic independence throughout allowing for a fluid interplay of duple and triple rhythms between the hands. Perlemuter recalled Ravel's insistence on this point with regard to bars 67-70: 'Ravel made me repeat this passage ten times with hands separate! He was so fussy about getting it right'.⁴¹

Perlemuter is faithful to Ravel's instructions regarding the pedal although his pedal lifts on the third beats of bars 1-4 are earlier allowing for a short gap before the next down-beat. His working edition of the *Valses*⁴² is littered with interpretive details that were added over an extensive period of study (references to public performances date between 1929 and 1991). On the first page indications include 'sans frapper la première note du groupe' and 'égal de son et de rythme' with very specific pedal markings throughout. These are all performance details that resonate throughout both Perlemuter and Ravel's recordings.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴² Bibliothèque nationale de France, Catalogue Number IFN - 55000846.

Robert Casadesus' reading demonstrates more variety of touch and pedal than Perlemuter and Ravel. His opening sound is bold and resonant and he respects Ravel's request regarding the use of no pedal for the chord on the third beat, but only on the first beats to the letter. However from bar 11 onward he employs the pedal very sparingly as though wanting to highlight the neoclassical character of this work. In accumulative four-bar phrases such as bars 11-14 and 71-74 he begins with no pedal and gradually introduces it to intensify the harmonies. Ravel's modulating sequences, bars 55-60 for example, are executed with a dry staccato touch bordering on the percussive and the endings of the first and final sections are also brittle and rather aggressive in approach. Be that as it may, Casadesus' reading is almost a literal reproduction of Ravel's printed score in that each rest is observed, each phrase marking is observed, and where there are no phrase markings he uses a detached unpedalled touch. He also adheres closely to Ravel's dynamic indications, as will be discussed below.

The contrast with Ravel's roll recording is startling and given Ravel's enormous respect for Casadesus' pianism one may ask whether Ravel would have approved of this accurate performance or have preferred his own version that went well beyond the printed page. Significantly, Casadesus seems to have passed on his interpretive ideas to his student Claude Helffer, judging by his recording of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*.⁴³ Helffer's reading is very buoyant and dry with neat pedalling. Once more short staccato chords prevail in the modulating sequences and in his ending he adopts Casadesus' brusque style.

⁴³ Harmonie mundi HM34.922, Geneva (1970).

Dynamic expression

According to Hall and Lawson the method by which Welte recorded dynamics from a performance remains a closely guarded secret:

Somehow they converted them into rows of edge perforations on a replay master; in doing so they had to judge not only how much of what and where but also how far in advance to place each perforation affecting dynamics (and pedalling too) to allow the playback pneumatics just the right amount of time to act. [...] With most other reproducing piano systems, there is often the feeling that the dynamics have been carefully crafted by a roll editor; there is a tendency to use the complete gamut, from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, for every roll, just to prove that the particular system can do it. In the case of the Welte- Mignon, however, there can be astounding realism at some of the most insignificant moments, and on occasions a certain lack of detail when the musical texture becomes too complex - both signs of an automated process.⁴⁴

Ravel uses broad dynamic trajectories to bring out the brisk rhythmic and harmonic colours that drives his interpretation. The first section is sustained at a bold, vibrant *f* with a satisfying balance between the hands. In bars 21-39, Ravel's notation traces a continuous decrescendo from *ff* to *pp*. Compared with the first twenty bars the textures here are marginally less busy, a fact that Ravel takes advantage of in his recording through subtle colouring and pedalling. He does not really begin *ff* or end *pp* but the gradual wind-down is effective. At bar 33 the mood has relaxed enough to allow him to explore the ensuing harmonic progressions by tracing a strong-to-weak pulse across the two-bar units. For the *pp* at bar 39 he gently alludes to the harmonic remoteness and change in tessitura, and it is all achieved with a degree of effortless insouciance. Mention has already been made of his crystalline voicing in the chordal section between bars 45 and 61, although he pays no heed to his own dynamic cutbacks in bars 48, 53 and 57. His alternative solution is to shorten the third beats in bars 54 and 56 thereby allowing time for a brief respiration before the next phrase.

⁴⁴ Denis Hall and Rex Lawson, 'The Reproducing Piano', www.pianola.org.

Once more it is fascinating to compare Ravel's 'looking beyond the score' approach with Casadesus' straightforward reading and especially the latter's perfectly graded diminuendo from *ff* to *pp* in bars 21-39. Perlemuter's trademark sound, lyrical and warm, informs his performance, although the range of dynamics is somewhat limited in character, unlike Yvonne Lefébure whose interpretation brims with brightly coloured nuances and quirky rhythmic idiosyncrasies. Henriette Faure did not record this work but her brief description of 'Valse 1' as she recalled from her lessons mirrors Ravel's scintillating interpretation: '[...] very lively and brilliant, in a steady pulse that juxtaposes the percussive nuances with waves of expressive legato'.⁴⁵

'Valse 7'

That Ravel's persuasive performance of 'Valse 1' is by no means a one-off can be verified by listening to his reading of the exuberant 'Valse 7' in which he displays a comparable sense of confidence, accuracy and a masterful control of the intricate textures. As with 'Valse 1' Ravel demonstrates a robust and secure chordal technique, especially from bar 39 to the end of the first section at bar 66 where the technical demands of the left-hand passagework are most challenging. What is impressive is the ease with which he negotiates the arpeggiated flourishes at bars 54 and 57. Where Perlemuter and Casadesus get trapped into thinking about each note, Ravel conceives the whole figuration in one movement, that is an extension of his forward-thrusting approach to the quaver passagework from bar 39 onwards (a trait also witnessed in similar situations in 'Valse 1'). The nervous energy felt in 'Valse 1'

⁴⁵[...] très vive, brillante, d'un rythme inexorable fait alterner le percutant, et les vagues de legato expressif'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, (1978), p. 39.

is redeployed to underpin the build-up from bars 39-66 and once more Ravel carries it off with control and panache. Perlemuter's reading captures Ravel's expressive nuances but becomes a touch untidy and unclear whereas Casadesus presses through and the result is hurried and eventually also untidy. Once more Henriette Faure encapsulates Ravel's ecstatic performance in her description of this Valse: '[...] a new type of Viennese waltz replete with forward motion and outward expression'.⁴⁶

What Ravel's interpretation underlines is his long-term perspective with regard to phrase structures. Bars 19-21 and 22-24 are played as though each were a 9/4 bar with a placed cross-accent on the second barline. In bars 25-26, 27-28 and 29-30 he then proceeds to exploring duple rhythms across and within the barlines using subtle accents and coloristic effects.

Ravel's very specific notation for the right-hand third beat in bars 19 and 22, a wedge staccato marking with open slurs across the barline, is problematic and something of a paradox. How can one execute this and observe the crotchet rest on the next downbeat whilst retaining the legato through the two-bar phrasing in the accompanying left hand? Once more the various piano roll copies highlight discrepancies in the hole-punching process. In the Condon and Hall transfers, Ravel comes over as being more concerned with preserving the melodic line atop the chords and the pedalling is recorded across the two-bar phrase. This latter point could yet again point to the inability of the pedalling mechanism on the reproducing piano to pick up on Ravel's more subtle applications of pedal (this is surely the case with in bars 17-18 where Ravel would surely have applied half- or vibrato-pedals to the parallel chromatic chord changes instead of one continuous pedal throughout

⁴⁶ '[...] une nouvelle valse viennoise de grande allure et d'expression extérieure'. Ibid., p. 42.

that occurs on all three realizations). Although the third beat of bar 19 is played with a light touch, the sound carries through the ensuing crotchet rest. Conversely, on the roll copy used by Caswell the third beat comes over staccato and unpedalled, followed by a strong left-hand downbeat on the next barline. The melodic line is still preserved in the listener's mind as Ravel achieves a perfect balance between this third-beat chord and its repetition in the next bar. Ravel then alters his pedalling in line in bars 25-26 to accommodate the tied crotchets across the barline in the right hand as in the Condon and Hall roll copies.

Vlado Perlemuter's solution for this is to 'bring out its character by stressing the swell and the staccato crotchet' while Hélène Jourdan-Morhange concurs the third beat must lift off 'à la viennoise'.⁴⁷ Perlemuter in his 1955 recording achieves the perfect blend of staccato wedge, crescendo and realizes the open slurs by letting the pedal overlap for the briefest moment onto the next downbeat (the left hand's two-bar legato phrasing is the only casualty in this recording). However he only maintains this for the first two appearances (bar 19 and 22) resorting to a light staccato lift on the third beat with every subsequent appearance of this phrase, including the reprise. That Robert Casadesus adopts the exact same articulation in the very same places is uncanny.

Equally significant is the way in which Ravel uses arpeggiation once more to delineate melodic shapes. This is most noticeable in the Caswell recording at bars 28-30 where, in addition to some subtle rubato, Ravel picks out the treble melody notes, most markedly in bars 28-29. He continues this practice until bar 39 where he begins the build-up to the climax at 59. The Condon and Hall transfers do not

⁴⁷ Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 54.

highlight these arpeggiations to the same degree and one can barely discern the treble melody at bar 28-9 with the chordal balance leaning towards the thumb. This discrepancy could be put down to the way in which the reproducing pianos were set up, with Caswell's upright Feurich demonstrating a more strident treble section.

As in 'Valse 1', Ravel's adherence to his own dynamic markings is somewhat selective throughout 'Valse 7'. However, when it comes to pedalling and articulation he is invariably consistent. The expansion that begins at bar 39 sees him in full control of the disparate textures from every perspective. The fast-moving harmonic counterpoint is skilfully pedalled and his fingerwork transmits a real sense of exhilaration. In contrast Perlemuter and Casadesus both adopt a *leggiero* character at this point and play the left hand of bars 39-50 lightly and staccato. Only Lefébure in her 1975 recording follows Ravel's notation and hangs on to the pedal As and Ds where marked, adding to the heightened excitement and bravura feel of what Hélène Jourdan called 'the great orchestral waltz. It's Vienna itself!'⁴⁸ Lefébure also adheres to Ravel's third-beat articulation referred to above. Like Ravel she brings a sense of polyphony and depth to the left-hand arpeggio figurations.

For the central trio section, Faure provides further insight into Ravel's concept: 'In this short break from the Valse the small automaton returns; the writing is smooth, delicate and measured with the intention of conjuring the illusion of an out-of-tune musical box'.⁴⁹ This out-of-tune musical box effect that Ravel sought is captured with more immediacy in the reverberant acoustic that Condon favours in

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ 'Nouvel entr'acte, la petite mécanique revient [...] avec un legato délicat et mesuré, faisant bien ressortir l'écriture intentionnelle fausse; une boîte à musique détraquée disait Ravel'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, (1978), p. 42.

his realization, and to a lesser degree in Hall's realization, although presumably in his attempt to convey the mechanical aspect Ravel's tone colour is rather monochrome in both recordings. The dynamic intensification he marks in the score, beginning *pp* at bar 66 and reaching a climactic *ff* at bar 93, fails to register. In complete contrast, Caswell's transfer is barely pedalled, and the resultant sound is dry and notey although Ravel's melody is clearly projected with some sense of phrase shaping. It seems as though this passage has been recorded on the original roll adhering strictly to the note values as written.

Ravel's roll recordings of 'Valse 1' and 'Valse 7' demonstrates a quirky brilliance displaying neat passagework for the most part and no less inaccurate (in fact more accurate) than Perlemuter and Casadesus at the more technically challenging moments, if not quite as assured in terms of sustained expressive pianism. His unrestrained approach to tempo and forward trajectory looks forward to his most effusive essay in the Valse medium, *La Valse* (1919-20) and points to an interpretive conception that often goes beyond the piano to embrace orchestral sonority. It is particularly telling that the orchestration of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* was completed in just fifteen days during March 1912.

The Duo-Art recording sessions (1922 and 1928)

Nine years were to pass before Ravel returned to the recording studio. At the invitation of the Aeolian Company Ravel was contracted to make at least ten recordings of his solo piano works for the Duo-Art player piano. As the Pianola Institute website states in its 'Introduction to the Reproducing Piano':

Unlike Welte-Mignon's recording process, the Duo-Art used a real-time perforator to produce an original roll as the artist played. The recording machine did not record the pianist's dynamics automatically; instead they were created on the roll as the artist played, by two dials and their associated mechanisms, controlled by the recording producer, who

sat to the left and slightly behind the pianist.⁵⁰

Thus the skill and experience of the musical editors was paramount in determining how faithful a particular roll might be. Ravel would also have been able to take part in the editing process although there is no information to corroborate how much actual editing took place.

Two recordings by Ravel were eventually released from this first session on June 30 1922, namely 'Oiseaux tristes' from *Miroirs* and *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*, with a further recording of 'La vallée des cloches' recorded and released in October 1928. Other recordings made in 1922 thought to be by Ravel of the 'Toccata' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and 'Le Gibet' from *Gaspard de la nuit* were subsequently attributed to Robert Casadesus. As Ravel himself explained in a letter to Calvocoressi who was acting as a go-between for the composer and the Aeolian Company:

I'm presently working on five piano pieces (still counting the *Sonatine* as only two), and am busy finding a better pianist than myself for the five others, and will have everything ready for the month of June. I'm not asking Ricardo for 2 reasons: first I think he's supposed to be in Spain about that time; second; I would especially like to have *Gaspard de la nuit* recorded and Viñes never wanted to perform these pieces, in particular 'Le Gibet', according to the composer's intentions. Viñes assured me that if he observed the nuances and the tempo that I indicated, 'Le Gibet' would bore the public. And nothing would make him change his mind.⁵¹

The reasons Ravel cites for not inviting Ricardo Viñes to record *Gaspard de la nuit* once more highlights the importance he placed on building an interpretation that respected the composer's views first and foremost. Viñes' confrontational stance is somewhat surprising considering their longstanding friendship and the fact that he had premiered a large proportion of Ravel's solo piano works up to and including *Gaspard de la nuit*. Instead Ravel chose the young Robert Casadesus to

⁵⁰ Information obtained from the Pianola Institute website. [http://www.Pianola.org/Reproducing pianos/Duo-Art](http://www.Pianola.org/Reproducing_pianos/Duo-Art)

⁵¹ Letter to Michel Dimitri Calvocoressi 24 March 1922. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 219.

record 'Le Gibet', and later paid compliment to him with this telling statement: '[...] you bring out all the harmonies which pianists don't usually do – I can see you are a composer'.⁵²

A comparison between Ravel's musical activities in 1922 and those in 1913 reveal out some fascinating parallels, in particular Ravel's preoccupation with the paring down of his composing style as effected by 1922 in the Sonata for Violin and Cello (1920-22), a work that Ravel described as a turning point in his career: '[...] thinness of texture is pushed to the extreme. Harmonic charm is renounced with an increased return to melody'.⁵³ In the 1913 recordings Ravel's interpretive choices in his performances of the first and seventh *Valses nobles et sentimentales* seem wedded to his compositional intentions to 'crystallize the harmonies and sharpen the profile of the music', as stated in his 'Autobiographical Sketch'.⁵⁴ How Ravel's volte-face to promote melody above harmony in the Sonata for Violin and Cello shaped his interpretation of 'Oiseaux tristes' from *Miroirs* on the 1922 roll recording will be discussed in the following section.

Oiseaux tristes (Duo-Art: 1922)

Ravel first performed 'Oiseaux tristes' to his close friends at a meeting of Les Apâches in October 1904. According to Michel Calvocoressi, it took them quite a while to come to appreciate what he was after and Ravel was 'rather disconcerted to find us indifferent to a piece into which he had put so much of himself'.⁵⁵ For Ravel, *Miroirs* marked a profound change in his harmonic development. As Roland-Manuel

⁵² Robert Casadesus in conversation with Dean Elder, 9 January 1970. Reproduced in Dean Elder, *Pianists at Play* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1986) p. 33.

⁵³ Orenstein (ed.), 'An Autobiographical Sketch of Maurice Ravel', *A Ravel Reader*, p. 32.

⁵⁴ Referenced earlier in this chapter: see footnote n. 17.

⁵⁵ Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered*, p. 183.

recalled, both Ravel and Debussy had been independently pushing the boundaries at this time with regard to musical forms. In Debussy's words:

[...] he was dreaming of a kind of music whose form was so free that it would sound improvised, of works that would seem to have been torn out of a sketchbook.⁵⁶

Viñes had just performed Debussy's *D'un cahier d'esquisses* for the composer and related this conversation to Ravel who confessed that the music he was working on, namely 'Oiseaux tristes', was based on similar principles. Ravel would later perform both these works at a musical soirée in January 1905, and give the first public performance of *D'un cahier d'esquisses* at the inaugural concert of the Société musicale indépendante in April 1910. In addressing Ravel's performance of 'Oiseaux tristes' one may ask how far would he go in his interpretation to effect this sense of freedom and spontaneity and to what extent does his notation provide the clues to unlocking these qualities?

Bars 1-3

The potent image described by Ravel as 'birds lost in the torpor of a very sombre forest during the hottest hours of summertime'⁵⁷ is announced with two intoned B flats followed by an arabesque that evoke a blackbird's song. Ravel was very particular regarding the execution of this simple phrase, borne out in the advice he gave to Vlado Perlemuter:

[...] the arabesque of the sad bird, which [sic] must not be played strictly in time, but more briskly. [...] If you play strictly what's written, it loses character. You must not be afraid of lingering on the long note. As soon as you compress the outline of this arabesque it stands out.⁵⁸

Bars 1 and 3 are indeed played with a degree of flexibility and Ravel cuts the longer notes each time. Despite adopting a much faster tempo for bar 2 he maintains strict

⁵⁶ Roland-Manuel: *À la gloire de Ravel* (Paris, 1938). English edition: *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1947), p. 41.

⁵⁷ Orenstein (ed.), 'An Autobiographical Sketch of Maurice Ravel', *A Ravel Reader*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ Perlemuter, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 21.

time within the bar in that a consistent triplet quaver pulse underpins the intricate arabesque rhythm. Thus it seems that the printed notation in bar 2 does reflect the improvised character that Ravel desired. Also by applying the *élan* technique Ravel injects a certain frisson to the arabesques.

Ravel's articulation of the bird calls in bars 1 and 3 of his recording contradicts the printed notation and is further compounded by the piano roll realizations by Condon and Hall (the latter on the Caswell CD). The discrepancies between the various versions are marked, with the Hall realization coming closest to reproducing Ravel's desired articulation in his performance (Table 3.7).

Table 3.7: 'Oiseaux tristes' (Bars 1 and 3). Articulation issues in the remasterings of Ravel's roll recording

	Bar 1 accentuation	Bar 3 accentuation
Ravel's notation	Strong/weak	Strong/weak
Condon remastering	Weak/strong; Equal	As in Bar 1
Hall/Caswell remastering	Nuanced slightly as notated	Nuanced slightly as notated
Ember LP (CD reissue 2009)	Nuanced slightly as written	Weak/strong

No such doubts apply to Perlemuter's 1955 recording where Ravel's notated accentuation is clearly projected. Like Ravel, he shortens the longer note in bar 1, condensing the relationship to a quaver and crotchet, and his arabesques mirror Ravel's inflexibility and maintenance of the pulse. Ravel was obviously anxious to avoid a static execution of the arabesques, a trap into which Casadesus and Faure fall into with their recorded performances. Casadesus maintains a rock- solid pulse throughout all three bars and observes the accentuations as marked. This measured opening almost literal and unexpressive in approach seems at odds with Ravel's interpretive view. Henriette Faure is similarly measured with her birdcalls although

her overall pulse is considerably freer. Table 3.8 outlines the tempi set by the pianists under discussion. The differences in duration between the two Ravel transfers once more highlights marginal differences relating to the setting up of the rolls and reproducing pianos.

Table 3.8: Tempi adopted in recorded performances of ‘Oiseaux tristes’. Metronome indications in quaver beats.

Bar Numbers	1	4	7	11-12	20	21	26	29	Total Time
Ravel: Condon (1922/1992)	56	48	50		48		144	40	4' 36"
Ravel: Hall/Caswell (1922/2002)	56	54	60		52	56	160	46	4' 11"
Casadesus (1951)	60	66	70		72	68	144	60	3' 51"
Perlemuter (1955)	66	76-80			80	66	144	Rhythm unclear	3' 33"
Faure (1959)	68				54-56	56	104-8	60	3' 55"

Bars 4-9

The transition from a single quasi-improvised thematic strand to a multi layered texture comprising bird-calls, accompanimental ostinati and pedal notes calls for control and balance, especially with regard to maintaining two distinct levels in the texture, as Faure points out:

The bird calls on a high, rather strident level, with rapid arabesques, and by contrast, the sombre stifling atmosphere of the forest on a lower level, rather heavy and muted with a lot of pedal but not much movement.⁵⁹

Ravel's performance is a touch awkward in this regard, compounded by the prevalence of dislocation and a certain flexibility of rhythm that threatens to destabilize the harmonic co-ordination. The triplet quaver ostinato at the centre of the texture is uneven in tone and rhythm, with much arpeggiation and dislocation

⁵⁹ 'Les appels d'oiseaux sur un plan aigu un peu strident, aux arabesques rapides - et d'autre part l'atmosphère étouffante et sombre de la forêt sur un plan grave, un peu lourd et feutré voilé de pédale; sans grande mobilité'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, (1978), p. 71.

within the dyads. The pedal notes and the ostinato are invariably dislocated and in bar 6 this extends to the cuckoo utterances in the treble. By adopting a slower tempo than his opening tempo at bar 4, Ravel's blackbird feels considerably more lethargic than at the beginning. However, in bar 8 he finds a simple solution that allows him to retain the mood of the arabesques at the opening without compromising the accompanying ostinato. Basically the arabesques are executed as at the opening, but Ravel lingers on the B flat (dotted semiquaver) to allow the third triplet quaver to catch up before moving on. Unfortunately the corresponding passage at the recapitulation (bar 22) is not so subtly managed. Ravel's application of rubato involves lingering on the first dyad of the ostinato sighs and is often balanced out by a tendency to undercut tied notes, a trait common to all of Ravel's performances, most noticeably in his 1913 recording of the first movement of *Sonatine*.

Such comprehensive dislocation makes for an unsettled, awkward atmosphere that is strangely effective, given the nature of the images being evoked. Could this then be Ravel deliberately applying dislocation technique to harmonic and rhythmic colour to convey the disjointed and freely improvised nature of the subject matter? If this is indeed the case, then Ravel has once more left the page to project his interpretation, thus going beyond the musical notation.

On the other hand the limitations of the recording system with regard to reproducing Ravel's exacting dynamic nuances and the highlighting of particular notes or thematic strands within closely aligned textures may have necessitated this level of dislocation. Either way, Ravel himself could have been instrumental in making these interpretive choices, as Hall and Lawson observe on the Pianola website:

[...] Duo-Art rolls were without exception edited on the pianos of the time, until they sounded right to the pianists and editors involved [...]

It is interesting to compare this with Ravel's uncompromising stance on rhythm, colour and articulation when discussing a similar passage from 'Le Gibet', the placement of the intoned B flats that represent the tolling bell ('la cloche qui tinte') as related to Henriette Faure:

Just play them with a muffled timbre, keep the accents uniform and maintain a consistent rhythmic flow in the chordal movement.⁶⁰

Perlemuter in his recording sets a faster tempo in bar 4 letting the triplet ostinato flow evenly if a touch predictably when compared to Ravel's slower but equally but evocative reading. His palette of colours is subtly graded at *pp* and *ppp* with his layering of dynamics favouring the treble and central textures. All the birdcalls come into focus and he is careful to observe the inflections in each motif as with the accented D in the cuckoo motif. In his skilful manipulation of the triplet ostinati in these bars Perlemuter demonstrates a refined pianism that sets him apart from Ravel. The triplets in bars 4-6 are even and he is careful to avoid any dislocation, even when placing the B minor chord at the centre of bar 5. Throughout bar 7, Perlemuter allows the triplets to ebb and flow so that they can accommodate the arabesque figurations seamlessly in the next bar without any need for dislocation.

With Casadesus the reading is almost classical in its measured smooth execution, its depth of tone and exacting co-ordination of the thematic strands. It is Faure who feels the need to inject a modicum of emotion into her birdcalls, in that each utterance by the cuckoo is preceded by a slight *ritenuto* and placing of the

⁶⁰ 'Il suffit de la jouer dans une atmosphère un peu sourde, avec une inflexible ordonnance des accents sur l'inflexible ordonnance du rythme des accords'. Ibid. pp. 61-2.

accompanying triplets. Thus the crotchet pulse in bars 4 and 5 sounds as though phrased in units of 3+3 +2, thereby linking them to the triple time in bar 3.

Bars 10-19

Ravel's interpretation of the central section of 'Oiseaux tristes' shows him at his most imaginative and resourceful, drawing upon his idiosyncratic pianism to convey the scene. The birds are suddenly disturbed and thrown into confusion, realized by Ravel the composer with rhythmic intensification, acute harmonic dissonance, and extremes of dynamic and articulation with the writing traversing the whole keyboard. Once more Ravel the pianist shows his striking ability to respond to the sudden changes of mood and the excitement and urgency of the musical trajectory (as in bars 39-60 of 'Valse 7'). That he resorts to techniques and devices that are not highlighted in the score will come as no surprise by now, and despite a certain waywardness in his control, the performance comes alive in ways not achieved by his disciples.

Ravel inserts arpeggiation marks at the beginning of bars 10 and 11 in his score, and then promptly ignores them in his performance. In bar 10 he spreads the right and left hand together, instead of the continued arpeggiation from bass to treble as marked and observed by Perlemuter, and the left-hand arpeggiation in bar 11 is absent. From here onwards Ravel gradually dislocates the texture leading up to the outburst at bars 15-16. He begins by emphasising the tenuto/staccato melody notes in the left hand, playing them ahead of the right-hand dyads which he also arpeggiates. Thus the written-out desynchronisation of the three-part texture in bar 12 emerges naturally from the previous bar. In bar 13 the rhythmic instability arising from Ravel's decision to rush the triplet semiquaver groups and arpeggiate

the dyads within the duplet groups further intensifies the agitation, culminating with the chaotic offbeat outbursts from the birds. Unfortunately Ravel's co-ordination also experiences a moment of chaos at the beginning of 14 as the first right-hand interjection arrives a semiquaver late forcing a slight hold-up between the second and third quaver groups in the left hand. Nevertheless Ravel recovers immediately and his execution of the *Pressez* section at bars 15-17 is clean and bristles with energy. The demisemiquaver groups feel rushed inside but in doing so they turn the spotlight onto the minor second clashes, played by Ravel's ubiquitous 'strangler' thumbs to great effect. Faure also marks out the semitonal dissonances and adds to the vibrant colours by arpeggiating the left-hand chords in a more measured and ultimately less gripping reading than Ravel. Perlemuter by contrast seems to lessen the effect by making the minor seconds feel like unaccented passing notes. The chordal progressions are projected with expressive emotion rather than the dissonant disarray that Ravel engenders in his performance. In bars 17-19 as the music winds down, Ravel seems to be grappling with controlling the triplet groups, resulting in a slightly muddled sonority that is strangely apposite in this context. The focus for Perlemuter and Casadesus, with their more moderate approaches and concern for pianistic clarity, comes down to subtle voicing and the realigning of the three-part texture.

Bars 20-24

Throughout Ravel's recording his marked accents for the blackbird motif (bar 1) and the cuckoo motif (bar 4) feel more like tenuto markings. His touch is decidedly smoother and the diminuendi he inserts between the two notes are invariably minimised in his performance. Casadesus, Perlemuter and Faure all observe Ravel's written inflection for these two-note motifs at every appearance. Only at bar 20 does

Ravel give us anything approaching an accented nuance, namely three weighted accents to outline his thematic thumbprint, the 'quelle horreur!' motif. He attaches much significance to this moment and continues to slow down as notated. However by retaining the slower tempo (quaver = 48 in the Condon realization) at the ensuing *Au mouvement* in bar 21 Ravel runs into difficulties in that his brisk execution of the blackbird arabesque (bar 22) causes the accompanying second triplet quaver to be rushed. In the roll copy used by Hall/Caswell the speed is set at quaver = 56, making the compromised rhythm less noticeable. Faure adopts a similar tempo at this point but her arabesques are more measured and in line with an even triplet quaver movement.

Perlemuter is rather more relaxed here than at the corresponding passage (bar 7), allowing him to use subtle rubato. Bars 21-22 provide a perfect example of his meticulous preparation and eloquent phrasing: in bar 21 he makes a slight extension to accommodate the duplet A against the triplet quavers, thereby giving added pathos to the ninth (A against the G in the bass); he then moves through the bar and delays the second triplet, bringing it closer to the third triplet in each group, which fits neatly against the blackbird arabesque in bar 22; finally the B flat augmented sixth harmony on the second beat is drawn out in an expressive questioning gesture.

Bar 25

[...] *ad libitum* does not as some pianists think mean 'all over the place' (en désordre) - and to keep them on the straight and narrow, I've written *presque ad libitum...*⁶¹
Ravel

The above quotation from Faure's recollections is a reminder that Ravel guarded against the excessive use of rubato, even within this cadenza-like section. After a

⁶¹ '[...] *ad libitum* ne veut pas dire en désordre comme le croient certains interprètes - et pour leur imposer un frein, j'ai indiqué *presque ad libitum...*'. Ibid. p. 74.

slightly uneven ascent through the *Lent - presque ad libitum*, Ravel demonstrates a remarkable degree of fluidity through the Chopinesque figurations at the *Pressez légèrement*. He doesn't focus particularly on the modulating sequences to draw out their harmonic subtleties, preferring in this case to opt for a quicksilver effect. His ability to negotiate such passages where fluid fingerwork, clarity and accuracy are truly put to the test is a constant reminder of his early pianistic training and his thorough grounding in the *Stile brillante* genre of pianism.

Perlemuter's reading of this cadenza section carries more diversity and imagination. With his superior command of tone colour he succeeds in blending the harmonies and the ascent has something of the mercurial about it. He judges his ritardando to perfection, effecting a seamless transition into the *Pressez légèrement*. Casadesus adopts a more moderate approach, focussing on a balanced sonority and fine-tuned dynamics. His overall slower tempo and constant vibrato pedal adjustments allows him to achieve a transparent colour that retreats to a real *ppp*.

Bars 26-32

Ravel's marking of *au mouvement* in bars 26-28 is a rare instance where all four pianists disregard the written instruction and follow the same alternative solution. In bar 26, Ravel (Condon and Hall/Caswell), Casadesus and Perlemuter adopt a tempo of approximately quaver = 144, over double the speed of the opening tempo (quaver = 60), if that is indeed what Ravel means by *au mouvement*. Their tempi seem to follow naturally from the cadenza writing, but this means that all three pianists then have to effect a pronounced *ritardando* across bars 27-28, employing touches of *rubato* within the various rhythmic patterns in order to allow the pulse to stabilize for the *Encore plus lent* at Bar 29. Faure's cadenza section is interpreted with more restraint, hence her slightly slower *au mouvement* tempo of quaver = 104.

In the final four bars, it is the composer alone who observes his *Encore plus lent* to the letter, again assuming that the *Au mouvement* at 26 refers to the opening tempo of quaver = 60. Ravel's tempi of 40 (Condon) and 46 (Hall/Caswell) are remarkably slow but he manages to sustain the mood, sombre and distant. The consistently controlled performance of Casadesus finishes as it started, exactly on quaver = 60.

Ravel's final comment regarding the interpretation of 'Oiseaux tristes' is somewhat confusing. As Vlado Perlemuter explains:

In the last four bars, there are some chords over which accents appear and which are often obscured by the non-chord tones. Ravel wanted the chords to dominate completely. The great problem is that the other notes should nevertheless be sounding in the distance.⁶²

Perlemuter achieves this textural depth by accenting the third-beat chords and using half-pedals on the fourth-beat chords. Unfortunately he has a temporary aberration with regard to rhythm, and turns the triplet crotchet and quaver in the right hand into two even quavers. Ravel, on the other hand, resorts to dislocation and arpeggiation instead of genuine accents to underline the top notes of the chords. The preponderance of tonally unbalanced notes on the Condon remastering (possibly due to the setting up of the reproducing piano) makes it difficult to gauge exactly what is going on, but the Hall realization reveals that each of the three statements is played differently. In bar 29, the top D and C are delayed; in bar 30, they are played before the remainder of the chord; and in the final bar the chord is neatly struck with the final D slightly delayed. Casadesus seems to be more concerned with harmonic clarity and focuses on neat pedalling to avoid blurring the right-hand counterpoint; thus, unlike Perlemuter he highlights the E flat minor to D flat minor progression by repedalling on the fourth beats.

⁶² Perlemuter, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 22.

'La vallée des cloches' (Duo-Art 1928)

Ravel returned to the recording studio for one last time during his concert tour of the United States of America in 1928 where he recorded 'La vallée des cloches' from *Miroirs*. He also put down the *Menuet Antique* and the 'Rigaudon' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, but unfortunately neither recording was released.⁶³

A review of a concert at Anvers in 1923 when Ravel performed 'La vallée des cloches' (alongside the *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*, the 'Menuet' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and *Sonatine*) illustrates his ability to enthral his audience with this piece:

[...] absolute mastery with regard to his rhythmic precision and expressive clarity. 'La vallée des cloches' transforms the tones; he juggles with chords, takes them apart and reassembles them like a magician playing with precious nuances.⁶⁴

One of the trickier aspects of interpreting 'La vallée des cloches' is how to establish an opening tempo that allows the music to unfold naturally and unhurriedly. According to Vlado Perlemuter 'the metronome speed requested by Ravel is very good, but it calls for great independence between the hands'.⁶⁵ However, as Table 3.9 demonstrates, Perlemuter pushes the tempi well beyond Ravel's indication of crotchet = 50 with an interpretation that never feels rushed but is nevertheless fluid. Ravel goes to the opposite extreme in his expansive interpretation, remaining well below his notated marking throughout. With Perlemuter's performance lasting 4' 34" and Ravel's at 6' 04", it is Casadesus who is exemplary in his fidelity to the score at 5' 09".

⁶³ Musical Courier, 19 April 1928. Information sourced in Norman Vance Dunfee. *Maurice Ravel in America*. Unpublished D.M.A. dissertation, University of Missouri - Kansas City, 1980, p. 161. See also Nichols, *Ravel* (2009), p. 293.

⁶⁴ '[...] une maîtrise absolue sert sa précision rythmique, sa netteté expressive. 'La vallée des cloches' ébranle les tonalités; il jongle avec les écarts, les rassemble, les ramène, on dirait d'un magicien jouant avec des timbres précieux'. *Journal d'Anvers* 4/5/23. Reproduced in *Cahiers Ravel* No. 14 (Paris: Séguier, 2001) pp. 53-65.

⁶⁵ Perlemuter, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 27.

All four pianists make subtle tempo adjustments throughout their performances that are not indicated in the score (Table 3.9). This implies that Ravel's indications, including *très doux et sans accentuation* (bar 3), *très calme* (bar 12), *largement chanté* (bars 19-20); and *espressivo calmé* (bar 23-24), have been subconsciously expanded to incorporate gradations of tempo and rubato alongside the habitual elements of nuancing, textural balancing and dynamic grading.

Table 3.9: 'La vallée des cloches': Tempi adopted in recorded performances. Metronome indications in quaver beats.

Bar Numbers	1	3	12	20	24	34	42	49	Total Time
Ravel: Condon 1922/1992	44	48	< 40	40-44		46-50	40-42	50	6' 04" *
Ravel: Hall/Caswell (1922/2002)	44-46	49	< 40	40-44		46-50	40-42	50	5' 55" *
Casadesus (1951)	46	56	50-52		54-56		38-42	50	5' 09"
Perlemuter (1955)	54-56	59-60	50-52	62		62-66	48-50	57	4' 34"
Faure (1959)	50	44-46	44	40		60-62	50	44	5' 37"

* the disparity in duration between these two recordings once again points to issues relating to the variations between rolls and reproducing pianos discussed earlier in this chapter.

Perlemuter's reference to 'great independence between the hands' is certainly a feature of Ravel's performance of 'La vallée des cloches' in that his approach regarding alignment and co-ordination is very flexible. As with the semiquaver ostinati in bar 13 etc, of 'Oiseaux tristes' Ravel seems unconcerned about reproducing the exact groupings from bar 3 onwards. For example, he adds a group at the beginning of bar 4 (the left-hand entry is late) and at the end of bar 9. Bars 3 and 5 are correctly played whereas there is much dislocation and incorrect placement of bells in bars 4 and 6. Further rearrangements are outlined in Table 3.10. These adjustments in performance are all the more extraordinary considering

the draughtsman-like precision of Ravel's manuscript copy,⁶⁶ where every note, every aspect of alignment, the symmetry and organisation of the bars has been subjected to the minutest scrutiny.

Table 3.10: Modifications (not in line with the published notation) made by Ravel in his 1928 roll recording of 'La vallée des cloches'.

Bars	Modifications
16-17	The bass C sharps are played an octave higher than notated
19	The semibreve C is late
21	The tied notes in the melody are cut - a trait common to all Ravel's piano roll recordings.
37	Ravel cuts the third beat, turning this bar into 4/4
47-48	Ravel inserts a very long pause before the bottom E
49-51	The octave bell (centre stave) is late, causing further modifications to the semiquaver ostinato

To suggest that Ravel was indifferent to even the most infinitesimal details in performance makes no sense either. As Madeleine Grey recalled:

Ravel came to my house a few months before his death so that I might sing *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* for him (accompanied by Poulenc). When I had finished he seemed preoccupied, and one might have thought he was hardly aware of what he had just heard. Then he made a very precise observation, correcting a miniscule rhythmic liberty that Poulenc and I had allowed ourselves.⁶⁷

What emerges clearly from Ravel's performance of 'La Vallée des cloches', together with his comments as related to Faure and Perlemuter, is his overriding concern with sonority: the nuancing of the three bells, the textural balance across the three staves and the constant deployment of the sustaining pedal. He was equally particular when coaching Henriette Faure:

Ravel set about making me play, at the beginning, with two very different sonorities: the double note carillon in semiquavers in the right hand and the chiming octave bells in the left hand that project through the texture, and all of this was to be played in a pianissimo that Ravel could execute without losing clarity.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Bibliothèque nationale de France, microfilm Bob. 17682.

⁶⁷ Madeleine Grey, 'Souvenirs d'une Interprète', *La Revue musicale*, 19, no. 187, special issue, Dec. 1938, pp. 367-370 [175-178]. Sourced in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 538.

⁶⁸ 'Ravel entreprit de me faire jouer, dans le début, sur deux plans très différents le carillon de double croches et double notes de la main droite et le 'Plané' des cloches aigues en octaves de la main gauche qui le ponctue le tout dans cette nuance pianissimo dont-il avait le secret pour la faire sans mollesse'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, (1978), p. 79.

Ravel's articulation and dynamic colouring of these bells is carefully judged and, as Perlemuter recalls, 'very soft and unaccented'. Additionally the relationship between the semiquaver ostinato and the bells is finely gauged, conjuring a sense of transparency and depth. As with the previous piano rolls, the more even-tempered realizations by Hall/Caswell, as opposed to Condon and the LP recordings, best illustrates Ravel's atmospheric reading.

Both Perlemuter and Faure seem to have been deeply affected by the central section of 'La vallée des cloches'. For Perlemuter the octave melody from bar 19 represents 'the broadest example of lyricism we can find in Ravel'.⁶⁹ Faure recalls Ravel's demonstration in one of her lessons:

Ravel himself played this passage for me with a calm serenity akin to a religious lyricism, punctuated by the sonorous bells in the bass.⁷⁰

In his recording Ravel's projection of his octave melody, marked 'largement chanté' at bar 19, is subtly achieved using dislocation and arpeggiation coupled with carefully placed agogic accents. Between bars 19 and 23, the upper note precedes the lower note, allowing the treble to sing through. In order to transform the mood to one of '*p, expressif et calme*' from bars 23/24 onwards, the whole texture is slightly dislocated (left hand before right) and arpeggiated toward the treble voice. From bars 28-47, Ravel is at his most expressive, and in these brief moments he seems to communicate his innermost thoughts, such is the profound simplicity and directness of his phrasing.

⁶⁹ Perlemuter, *Ravel according to Ravel*, p. 27.

⁷⁰ 'Ravel m'avait joué lui-même ce passage en l'imprégnant d'une sorte de lyrisme religieux et calme, ponctué par le définitif des quintes sonores de la basse'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, (1978), p. 77.

Conclusion

In a thought-provoking article, Carolyn Abbate traces the history of ‘mechanical players that aspired to capture the playing of great pianists and composers and reproduce it without human intervention’⁷¹ and makes a crucial observation regarding the nature of the information the piano rolls actually provide:

Such reproducing devices were not acoustic recording devices and could not reproduce the sound of Ravel playing the piano. They could instead encode every movement of Ravel’s hands and feet as they touched the instrument, movements that were then rematerialized every time the player was put into action.⁷²

She highlights the limitations arising from the piano roll recording process and likens Ravel’s role in this situation to a ‘well-programmed machine’. This strikes at the very core of what drives Ravel’s personality as a composer - his fascination with machines, toys and automata and their presence in his stage works, *L’heure espagnole* and *L’enfant et les sortilèges*, and the relentless mechanism of *Boléro*. Equally the sense of space between oneself and the actual act of creation is key to Ravel’s pursuit of technical perfection and re-emerges time and time again in his music in the guise of pastiche and/or simulation, be it of birds, bells or the ballrooms of Schubert’s Vienna.

And yet in these player piano roll recordings, it is the human aspect of Ravel the composer that shines forth brightly. His unique interpretations contain invaluable information about style and practice that go well beyond the notation. The brilliance, virtuosity and unalloyed joy he brings to the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, his transcendental evocation of forest life balancing freedom of expression against the precision, order and symmetry of Nature in ‘Oiseaux tristes’,

⁷¹ Carolyn Abbate, ‘Outside Ravel’s Tomb’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 52 No. 3 (Autumn 1999) p. 491.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 492.

and the sonorous bells and moments of quiet introspection in 'La vallée des cloches' all point to Ravel the pianist finding inspiration in the moment to give added meaning to his compositions. Ravel's alert mind at work in these performances combines the draughtsman's exactitude with a febrile imagination that transcends the written notation without ever resorting to cliché or sentiment. This disciplined and measured approach gives these performances the stamp of authority without Ravel ever claiming to have the last word on how to interpret his piano works, as his continued involvement as coach and mentor to the next generation of pianists (Casadesus, Perlemuter, Faure, and Lefébure) attests. Despite all the contradictions and contraventions perpetrated by Ravel against his own indications, his performances emerge as logical, convincing, brave and groundbreaking in their originality. This surely sets him apart from Abbate's 'well-programmed machine'.

Chapter 4

Disseminating Ideas and Defining French Pianism: *Le Tombeau de Couperin* as a Case Study

This chapter identifies Ravel's place within the wider context of twentieth-century French pianism and specifically his role as coach and mentor in disseminating a performance tradition for his solo piano works to succeeding generations of French pianists. The investigation centres upon a selection of recorded performances of Ravel's final composition for solo piano, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17). Eight recordings have been chosen, including six by pianists whose knowledge and understanding of Ravel's practices as composer and pianist were shaped by direct contact with him: Marcelle Meyer (1897-1958), Yvonne Lefébure (1898-1986), Robert Casadesus (1899-1972), Jacques Février (1900-1979) Henriette Faure (1904-1985) and Vlado Perlemuter (1904-2002). Two further recordings have been added to the mix, the first ever recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* made in 1929 by Madeleine de Valmalète (1899-1999) and that of Samson François (1924-1970) from 1957/58. Table 4.1 lists the eight recordings to be discussed, and Table 4.2 the durations of each performance.

The recorded performances are cross-referenced against the published performance editions of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by Durand et Cie. no. 9569 (1918), and the Peters Urtext Edition no. 7376 researched and prepared by Roger Nichols (1995). References to bar numbers throughout this chapter correlate with those in the latter edition. Additionally Ravel's orchestrations of four of the movements, the

'Prélude', 'Forlane', 'Menuet' and 'Rigaudon', completed in May 1919 will be examined to ascertain their impact upon the eight solo piano recordings.¹

Table 4.1: Maurice Ravel: *Le Tombeau de Couperin*: the recordings

Pianist	Recording Co./No.	Date recorded
Madeleine de Valmalète	Arbiter records 144	1929
Robert Casadesus	Sony Masterworks MH2K 63316	4 December 1951
Marcelle Meyer	EMI 2909633	1954
Vlado Perlemuter	Vox Legends CDX2 5507	1955
Samson François	CVC 2054-6 IME-Pathé Marconi	Paris 1957/58
Henriette Faure	BnF Collection (2014)	1st January 1959
Jacques Février	Adès 7041/44	1971
Yvonne Lefébure	FYCD 018	20-27 January 1975

Table 4.2: Maurice Ravel: *Le Tombeau de Couperin*: durations of performances by the eight pianists

Pianist	Movements of <i>Le Tombeau de Couperin</i>						Total
	Prélude	Fugue	Forlane	Rigaudon	Menuet	Toccatà	
Valmalète	2' 34"	2' 39"	4' 45"	2' 58"	3' 26"	3' 50"	20' 12"
Lefébure	2' 42"	2' 49"	4' 52"	2' 35"	3' 35"	3' 52"	20' 25"
Casadesus	2' 49"	3' 18"	4' 54"	3' 10"	4' 22"	3' 56"	22' 29"
Meyer	2' 38"	2' 47"	5' 29"	2' 59"	4' 59"	3' 52"	22' 44"
Faure	3' 03"	2' 56"	5' 38"	3' 11"	4' 38"	4' 01"	23' 27"
Perlemuter	2' 49"	3' 07"	5' 41"	3' 23"	4' 41"	4' 02"	23' 43"
Février	3' 06"	3' 18"	5' 29"	3' 36"	4' 56"	4' 07"	24' 32"
François	2' 50"	4' 20"	6' 00"	2' 50"	4' 55"	4' 05"	25' 00"

The genesis of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-1917)

Le Tombeau de Couperin was composed in fits and starts over a three-year period from 1914 to 1917. The first known reference to the work comes in a letter from Ravel to Cipa Godebski, undated but thought to have been sent in June 1914:

¹ Durand, 1919, reprinted Dover, 2001.

You know that the Pope, whose costume designs are shortly to be exhibited by Maison Redfern, has just promoted a new dance, the forlane. I'm transcribing one by Couperin.²

Further information appears in a letter to Roland-Manuel dated 1 October 1914 in which Ravel mentions beginning not one, but two series of piano pieces:

Firstly a French suite – no it isn't what you think: La Marseillaise will not be in it, but it will have a forlane and a gigue; no tango however. Secondly a *Romantic night*, with spleen, infernal hunt, accursed nun.³

However, in the ensuing two and a half years Ravel underwent life-changing experiences that left him little time for composition. His active involvement in the First World saw him traumatised by the horrific scenes he witnessed as a lorry driver at the Battle of Verdun during 1916, and in early January 1917 his mother died. On 1 June 1917 he was temporarily discharged and went to stay with friends in Lyons-la-Forêt in Normandy, where he recommenced work on *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. In a letter to Jacques Durand dated 7 July, he wrote of having completed the 'Rigaudon' and the 'Menuet'.⁴ All six movements were eventually finished by November 1917, although Ravel, anxious to refute charges that he had been a touch insensitive with regard to the predominantly joyful character of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, had claimed in a letter to Léon Vallas that 'the suite, completed in 1917 after my discharge, was already almost entirely composed in July 1914'.⁵ There may be a grain of truth in this given Ravel's penchant for exploring musical ideas in his

² 'Entre temps je turbine à l'intention du pape. Vous savez que cet auguste personnage dont la Maison Redfern exécutera prochainement les projets de costume vient de lancer une nouvelle danse, la forlane. J'en transcris une de Couperin'. René Chalupt: *Ravel au miroirs de ses lettres - correspondance réunie par Marcelle Gerar et René Chalupt* (Paris: Laffont, 1956), p. 106.

³ Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, Ecrits, Entretiens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989). English edition: *A Ravel Reader, Correspondence, Articles, Interviews*. English trans. Dennis Collins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), Letter No. 122. Ravel also mentions having abandoned three other major compositional projects, namely a piano concerto on Basque themes, *Zazpiak-Bat*; an opera, *La cloche engloutie*; and a symphonic poem, *Wien* that would eventually become *La Valse*.

⁴ 'Le temps passe incroyablement vite, quand on est au travail. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* s'élève. Le Menuet et le Rigaudon sont achevés. Le reste se dessine'. Chalupt, p. 150.

⁵ Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011) p. 204.

head and trying them out at the piano before actually committing them to manuscript. As he stated:

In my own work of composition I find a long period of conscious gestation, in general, necessary. I may thus be occupied for years without writing a single note of the work - after which the writing goes relatively rapidly.⁶

Le Tombeau de Couperin (1914-17) represents a curious amalgam of eighteenth- and early twentieth-century structures and techniques, described succinctly in the following statement by Emile Vuillermoz:

The fluid clarity of Couperin, the delicious elegance of his writing, the coquettishness of his filigree and ornamentation and the timbre of his harpsichord are returned to us in a harmonic and pianistic language that is quintessentially Ravelian.⁷

The six movements comprise a 'Prélude', 'Fugue', 'Forlane', 'Rigaudon', 'Menuet' and 'Toccatà' that Yvonne Lefébure sees as displaying as a whole a unity of form that makes the work comparable to a sonata in three sections: a prelude and fugue, three dances, and a grand finale.⁸ For Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* represented:

a new style of keyboard writing in the form of snapshots of human character that embrace modality, the France of old, forgotten dances, popular themes, simple songs, and sad tales. The piano writing was also ground-breaking in its repeated note techniques, ornamentation and a diverse array of articulations.⁹

Each movement is dedicated to the memory of one of Ravel's fallen companions in the First World War.

⁶ Observation made by Ravel during his lecture for the Rice Institute, Houston, Texas, April 7 1928, quoted in Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, p. 46.

⁷ 'L'élocution volubile de Couperin, l'élégance délicate de son écriture, la coquetterie de ses broderies et de ses ornements, les résonances de son clavecin nous sont restitués dans un langage harmonique et pianistique foncièrement ravélien'. Emile Vuillermoz, *Ravel et moi*, Manuscript copy (1939), [n.p.]. Accessed Fonds Emile Vuillermoz, Médiathèque Musicale Mahler, 2015.

⁸ Yvonne Lefébure, booklet notes to her recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Solstice, FYCD 018 (1975).

⁹ 'Un nouveau style d'écriture du clavecin avec cette idée originale de petits tableaux peignant les caractères des gens. L'écriture du clavier était nouvelle aussi avec ses notes répétées, ses ornements, ses attaques diverses. La modalité, la vieille France, danses oubliées, thèmes populaires, chansons naïves et histoires tristes'. Olivier Messiaen et Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, *Ravel: analyses des oeuvres pour piano de Maurice Ravel* (Paris: Durand, 2003), p. 85.

French Pedagogical Genealogies: An Introduction to the Eight Pianists

Le Tombeau de Couperin marks the beginning of Ravel's working partnership with Marguerite Long (1874-1966), who gave the first performance in a concert for the Société Musicale Indépendante at Salle Gaveau on 11 April 1919, with the composer in attendance. Regrettably, Long did not record *Le Tombeau de Couperin* despite her interpretations of this work eliciting many favourable responses, including the following from her student Aldo Ciccolini and the composer Francis Poulenc respectively:

Only one person can really play these pieces ... You! Your miraculous interpretations of Ravel.... you possess the secret.¹⁰

Once more the Ravel was perfect. Why haven't you recorded *Le Tombeau*, a work that you have performed so often in concert?¹¹

Long, together with the Swiss pianist Alfred Cortot (1877-1962), was amongst the most influential pedagogues in France during the first half of the twentieth century. Six of the eight pianists under discussion here, namely Meyer, Lefébure, Février, Perlemuter, Faure and François worked with either one or both of them. Table 4.3 outlines the principal teachers of all eight pianists.

Table 4.3: List of the Pianists and their Teachers (including Maurice Ravel)

Pianist	Teachers
Madeleine de Valmalète	Isidor Philipp
Robert Casadesus	Louis Diémer, Maurice Ravel
Marcelle Meyer	Marguerite Long, Alfred Cortot, Ricardo Viñes
Vlado Perlemuter	Moritz Moszkowski, Alfred Cortot, Maurice Ravel
Samson François	Yvonne Lefébure, Marguerite Long/Jacques Février, Alfred Cortot
Henriette Faure	Louis Diémer, Marguerite Long, Maurice Ravel
Jacques Février	Marguerite Long, Maurice Ravel
Yvonne Lefébure	Marguerite Long, Alfred Cortot

¹⁰ 'Il n'y a qu'une personne pour jouer ces morceaux.... Vous! Le miracle de vos interprétations de la musique de Ravel ... vous possédez le secret'. Letter from Aldo Ciccolini to Long from New York, 16 January 1953. Fonds Marguerite Long, Médiathèque Musicale Mahler, Paris.

¹¹ 'Le Ravel était une fois le plus inimitable. Pourquoi n'avez-vous jamais enregistré le Tombeau qu'on a joué à longueur de récital?'. Letter from Poulenc to Long, 30 August 1950, after Poulenc had attended Long's recital in Edinburgh. Fonds Marguerite Long, Médiathèque Musicale Mahler.

Long belongs to a genealogy of French pianistic pedagogy that extended back to the very dawn of French pianism at the end of the eighteenth century. One of the earliest manuals on French piano pedagogy, Louis Adam's *Méthode ou principe générale du doigté pour le forté-piano*, which dates from 1798 promoted a technical regime that followed on directly from the harpsichord practices of François Couperin in *L'art de toucher de clavecin*¹² and Jean-Philippe Rameau in *Code de musique pratique*.¹³ Adam focused on the cultivation of tone using finger pressure alone, supported by a supple wrist and motionless arm. This approach to piano technique became the official method at the Paris Conservatoire and was promulgated and disseminated throughout the nineteenth century by influential pedagogues including Camille Saint-Saëns, Antoine-François Marmontel and his son Antonin (Long's principal teacher), Louis Diémer, and Long herself. Attaining finger independence was a primary concern together with the development of strength, precision and lightness in both hands. As one of Long's students Jeanne-Marie Darré explained:

Madame Long always said that the fingers should articulate from high up when practising slowly, and close to the keys when playing rapidly.¹⁴

Under Long's fingers each note was perfectly placed, her tone colours were even and balanced and she was hailed as a consummate exponent of the 'jeu perlé' technique.¹⁵ This fluid method of playing provided Long's students with a solid technique and was ideally suited to the shallow, light actions of the Érard and Pleyel pianos. Long became a leading advocate for Ravel's piano music and her reminiscences were recorded in her monograph *Au piano avec Maurice Ravel*.¹⁶

¹² Paris, Chez Foucaut, 1716.

¹³ Paris, L'imprimerie Royale, 1760.

¹⁴ Interview with Long student, Jeanne-Marie Darré. Timbrell, *French Pianism*.

¹⁵ Comments from past students including Gabriel Tacchino and Pierre Barbizet. Cécile Dunoyer, *Marguerite Long, A Life in French Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 160-1.

¹⁶ Paris: Julliard, 1971. English trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: Dent, 1973).

At the other end of the pedagogical scale was Alfred Cortot, performer, teacher, editor, transcriber and author of several pianistic treatises and co-founder of the *École Normale de Musique* in 1919. In an interview for the *Piano Quarterly* in 1984, Cortot's student Magda Tagliaferro outlined his teaching methodology, which contrasted drastically with that of Marguerite Long:

As a teacher he wasn't interested in technique per se. His interest was in interpretation and the images he conjured up for us were absolutely visionary. Even in the fastest hardest passages the sense of the music was always his first concern. He didn't like the technique of his teacher Louis Diémer. At that time Diémer and the Marmontels had firmly established the notion of fast super-articulated playing; light transparent sounds produced with minimal wrist and arm motion. The fingers were high, but they never really felt the bottom of the key bed. Long inherited that and passed on the style: fast digital playing that was semi-legato and without much pedal. The sound was thin and uninteresting. With Cortot one used more arm, and more legato.¹⁷

For Yvonne Lefébure, Cortot was a technical innovator who advocated pressing down the keys instead of striking them.¹⁸ Both Lefébure and Vlado Perlemuter used the expression 'leaving an impression in the keys', to describe Cortot's approach, achieved by combining firm fingers with relaxation and mobility concentrated in the wrists and arms.¹⁹ As Perlemuter stated, Cortot didn't have just one technique; he would constantly adapt it to suit the needs of the music.²⁰ That this was a concept he passed on to his students is clearly felt in the colourful and distinctive interpretations of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by Lefébure, Perlemuter, Marcelle Meyer and Samson François. Cortot himself did not record *Le Tombeau de Couperin* but he had plenty to say about his interpretive vision of the work in his treatise *Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*.²¹

¹⁷ Charles Timbrell, 'Alfred Cortot: his Life and Legacy'. *The Piano Quarterly*, No. 127, 1984, pp. 19-31.

¹⁸ Thomas Manshardt and Laurence Amundrud, 'Understanding Cortot', *Aspects of Cortot* (Hexham: APR, 1994).

¹⁹ Timbrell, 'Alfred Cortot: his Life and Legacy', p. 19-31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Alfred Cortot in Jeanne Thieffry (ed.), *Alfred Cortot: cours d'interprétation recueilli et rédigé par Jeanne Thieffry*; (Paris: Legoux, 1934). English edition: *Alfred Cortot's Studies in Musical Interpretation*, trans. Robert Jacques (London: Harrap, 1937 reprinted 1989).

In Chapter 3 Ravel's roll recordings of his piano works were assessed alongside recorded performances made by three pianists who worked closely with the composer, Henriette Faure, Vlado Perlemuter and Robert Casadesus. Faure and Perlemuter both undertook intense periods of study of the complete solo piano works with Ravel at his home in Montfort l'Amaury during the 1920s in preparation for landmark public performances. Faure gave the first all-Ravel recital which took place at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 12 January 1923 and in 1929 Perlemuter performed the complete solo piano works in two consecutive recitals with Ravel in attendance. The interpretive advice they both received from Ravel has been preserved in two detailed monographs, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*,²² and *Ravel d'après Ravel*.²³

Robert Casadesus won a Premier Prix in piano performance at the age of fourteen whilst a student in the class of Louis Diémer at the Paris Conservatoire. Gaby Casadesus spoke of her husband's early involvement with Ravel:

My husband met Ravel for the first time when he played *Valses nobles* and *Gaspard* in a concert of modern music at the Vieux Colombier in Paris in 1922. Ravel was so enthusiastic that he asked my husband to make some piano rolls of his music in London.²⁴

Casadesus shared the concert platform with Ravel on several occasions, and was entrusted by the composer with the task of performing the more challenging solo pieces including *Gaspard de la nuit*, the 'Toccata' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and

²² Henriette Faure, *Mon maître Maurice Ravel* (Paris: ATP, 1978).

²³ Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel* (Lausanne: Editions du Cervin, 1957; 5/1970). Augmented re-edition: *Ravel d'après Ravel, suivi des Rencontres avec Vlado Perlemuter*, ed. Jean Roy (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1989). English edition (from the above 1970 volume): *Ravel according to Ravel*. English trans. Frances Tanner, ed. Harold Taylor (London: Kahn & Averill, 1990).

²⁴ Gaby Casadesus, *Memoirs of Ravel*. Published in *Pianists at Play*, ed. Dean Elder, p. 72.

the final movement of *Sonatine*.²⁵ In a series of interviews with Dean Elder, Casadesus outlined the essential qualities that defined his pianism:

First comes the sound, not the technique, and then, the legato; don't make the piano too percussive. And *égalité* is very important.²⁶

Casadesus alludes to the subtle differences between himself and other French pianists of his generation, including Perlemuter and Cortot, but goes on to cite their united fondness for 'la touche', touch and the importance of good pedalling.²⁷ He also advocated playing close to the keys with not too much articulation, distancing himself from the playing style of Marguerite Long of whom he remarked: 'She played very well but very drily – the contrary of legato – her playing was brilliant but not *artistique*'.²⁸

The earliest surviving recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* comes from a pianist who did not belong to Ravel's inner circle, nor did she study with Long or Cortot. Madeleine de Valmalète won a premier prix in the class of Isidor Philipp, a distinguished colleague of Long and Cortot at the Conservatoire. According to Jeanne-Marie Darré, Philipp's teaching methodology was 'in line with Madame Long's with less arm and shoulder than Cortot taught'.²⁹ In an interview with the pianist and writer Charles Timbrell, Jacqueline Blancard, who also studied with Philipp, talks of his 'real genius for teaching suppleness, firmness, rhythmic exactitude and articulation'; these qualities resonate throughout Valmalète's recording, as will be demonstrated.³⁰

²⁵ Robert Casadesus: 'Ah yes, I knew Ravel between 1922 and 1930. We played together on tour in Spain, Switzerland, and France, starting the program [...] always with *Ma Mère l'Oye*'. Ravel played the top part and I played the bass'. Robert Casadesus in conversation with Dean Elder, 9 January 1970. Dean Elder, *Pianists at Play* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1986), p. 33.

²⁶ Robert Casadesus in conversation with Dean Elder, 9 January 1970, pp. 27-34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Timbrell, *French pianism, a historical perspective* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1999), p. 81

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Le Tombeau de Couperin: The Recordings

'Prélude'

Ravel opens his suite with a brilliant 'Prélude' that is characterized by changing-note patterns alternating between the hands in moto perpetuo textures using imitation, sequence and repetition techniques. The tonality hovers between E minor and G major although both leading notes (D sharp and F sharp respectively) are consciously avoided lending a modal flavour to the harmonic colour. Ravel immediately taps into a sense of memory and recollection from the outset, making a subtle connection, both thematically and texturally with the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, his previous major work for solo piano. The right- hand figuration traces the same intervallic shape as the opening theme of 'Valse 3'. Additionally the accompanying 'E' pedal notes recall the music box effect conjured in 'Valse 3' (Example 4.1).

Example 4.1

a) *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, 'Prélude', bars 1-2

The musical score shows the first two bars of the 'Prélude'. It is written for piano in 12/16 time, marked 'Vif' with a tempo of quarter note = 92. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The right hand plays a continuous eighth-note pattern in a moto perpetuo texture, starting with a half note G4 and a quarter note A4. The left hand plays a similar eighth-note pattern, starting with a half note E3 and a quarter note F#3. The piece begins with a piano (pp) dynamic.

b) *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, 'Valse 3', bars 1-2

Modéré

The musical score shows two staves. The top staff is the right hand, and the bottom staff is the left hand. Both are in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'Modéré'. The dynamics are 'pp léger'. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over the first two bars. The left hand has a bass line with a slur over the first two bars. Arrows point to the first notes of both hands in each bar.

The expressive parameters of the 'Prélude' reflect the eighteenth-century performance practices of clarity of touch, evenness of execution and subtle dynamic contours using a narrow keyboard range in line with that of the harpsichord. According to Marguerite Long, Ravel's principal concern was that all the notes should be clearly audible to achieve a satisfying synthesis of clarity and fluidity.³¹ Long also recalls Ravel advising other pianists not to play the 'Prélude' as quickly as she did as only she could be relied upon to 'play all the notes'.³² Regrettably there is no recording by Long to verify these assertions and much of her commentary in *Au piano avec Maurice Ravel* smacks of more than a hint of self-mythologizing, especially when she discusses *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and the Concerto in G. The published tempo recommendation of dotted crotchet = 92 provided in both the Durand and Peters editions is taken from the marking Ravel gave for his orchestral version of this piece (Durand, 1919), although according to Roy Howat the metronome indications for all six movements of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in the solo piano version were later additions to the post-1950 prints (Durand), reportedly at the instigation of Long.³³

³¹ Marguerite Long, *Au piano avec Ravel*, pp. 141-7.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009)

In his orchestration of the 'Prélude' Ravel assigned the majority of the figurative writing to the woodwind instruments, and predominantly to the reedy tones of the oboe, cor anglais, clarinet and bassoon (the flute is sparingly used at climactic moments) which implies that he was looking for a rich focussed sound. To emulate this the pianist needs to adopt a weighty finger touch by playing deep into the key bed. Jacques Février's performance is to the contrary, reflecting much of Long's teaching in its hyper-articulate, light-fingered, and sparsely pedalled qualities. It is also slower than most performances lasting over half a minute longer than the fastest tempo set by Madeleine de Valmalète (see Table 4.2). His detached fingerwork compromises the fluidity that many of the other performances achieve through a more legato approach. By contrast, Samson François who also studied with Long demonstrates fluid even passagework of supreme clarity in a tempo that captures Ravel's marking *Vif*. François subsequently worked with Alfred Cortot and the hallmarks of the latter's interpretive practices are also reflected in François's performance of the 'Prélude' with exquisite touches of rubato and dislocation at bars 61-70 that never lose sight of the melodic line.

In his *Cours d'interprétation*, Cortot advocates 'a lively tempo without being too rapid' and clarifies this by referring to Ravel's choice of time signature 12/16 which he suggests implies the semiquaver has beat value.³⁴ Yvonne Lefébure reflects this with her crystalline touch and evenness of tone across the semiquaver groups, whereas another of Cortot's students, Marcelle Meyer emphasises the first of each group of six semiquavers, allowing the remainder to blend into the background.

pp. 259-60.

³⁴ Alfred Cortot, *Alfred Cortot: Cours d'interprétation, recueilli et rédigé par Jean Thieffry* (1934). English edition: *Alfred Cortot: Studies in musical interpretation, trans. Robert Jacques* (1937) pp. 86-89.

In *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, Henriette Faure imparts two crucial nuggets of information regarding the interpretation of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Firstly that Ravel wanted all the grace-notes to be placed on the beat, with the strongest accent on the initial note of the ornament, in accordance with eighteenth-century practices.³⁵ Ravel inserts a footnote in the solo piano score at the beginning of the 'Prélude', 'Forlane', 'Rigaudon' and 'Menuet' to this effect and in the orchestral arrangement he goes one step further, adding accents to the first grace-note each time. Only in the orchestral version of the 'Menuet' does he abstain from including these accents. Faure is very consistent on this point and colours her grace-notes in a variety of ways depending upon the context. In bar 2, they barely register, sounding like accented vibrations, whereas when the grace-notes precede a dotted crotchet as at bar 22, they become more articulate, and at bar 38 they are expanded and integrated into the melodic line. Perlemuter adopts a similar approach although his overall sonority for this 'Prélude' differs widely from that of Faure as will be evidenced below.

It is somewhat surprising to find that Lefébure and Robert Casadesus, both Ravel protégés and habitually picky over notational details, are less precise regarding the placement of the grace-notes. Lefébure begins her performance on track but as she approaches the climactic points at bars 26-28 and 76-80, she intensifies the sound and lengthens the grace-notes so that they sound before the beat. Casadesus focusses on the clarity of articulation of his grace-notes within his mellifluous sonority and his accents fall invariably on the last note of the grace-note group. One of the most faithful interpretations in this respect comes from Madeleine

³⁵ '[...] Il voulait dans chaque pièce sans en déroger les ornements ou gruppentos pris sur le temps'. Faure, *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*. p. 87.

de Valmalète, a pianist much admired by both Ravel and Cortot, although there is no extant information to suggest that she sought Ravel's advice on the interpretation of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. She is consistent in her placing of the grace-notes, combining focus and fluency throughout.

The second instruction imparted to Faure by Ravel was that the pianist should observe the phrase markings by allowing time for short breaths, which he called *respirations* between successive phrases.³⁶ This fact is corroborated by several references to *respirations* in Vlado Perlemuter's working edition of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*.³⁷ Ravel's autograph score provides a rare instance of the composer offering technical advice on how this might be achieved by using effective if unconventional fingering permutations. In bar 7 of the 'Prélude' he marks the final note of the right-hand phrase with a fifth finger, which means the pianist must reposition the hand to play the next phrase, thereby achieving the appropriate punctuation and nuance (Example 4.2). This fingering is reproduced in Roger Nichols' edition for Peters, but omitted in the Durand edition.

One gets a strong sense of these *respirations* in Faure's performance although her interpretation seems more eighteenth- than twentieth-century in scope with sparse pedalling and an evenness of touch coupled with a real clarity to her fingerwork. Faure's tone colours are dry throughout and one can sense the

³⁶ '[...] le respect absolu des respirations'. Ibid., p. 88.

³⁷ Bibliothèque nationale de France, Catalogue no. IFN - 55000857.

Example 4.2: 'Prélude, bars 7-8

over-riding influence of her piano professor at the Paris Conservatoire, Louis Diémer, a pianist once referred to as a 'dry as dust player with a hard rattling tone'.³⁸ Diémer spearheaded the early music revival in Paris during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, performing recitals on both the piano and harpsichord, as well as editing several anthologies of keyboard works by the French *clavecinistes*. As Charles Timbrell notes, Diémer's thirty-two year tenure at the Paris Conservatoire produced a remarkably heterogeneous group of students and teachers. The contrast between Faure's interpretation of the 'Prélude' and that of fellow Diémer student Robert Casadesus (to be discussed below), who were both privy to Ravel's interpretive insights, highlights the intriguing diversity of performance practices that can emerge from the same pedagogical background.³⁹

The versatile pianism of Madeleine de Valmalète captures Ravel's *respirations* with conviction. Despite her brisk tempo of dotted crotchet = 96 she allows plenty of time to breathe and places all her grace-notes on the beat with perfectly judged accents that launch the figurations with playfulness and vibrancy. Her left-hand figurations are executed with harmonic clarity using minimal pedalling.

³⁸ Comment made by pianist Mark Hambourg, *From Piano to Forte, A Thousand and one Notes* (London: Cassell & Co., 1931), p. 162.

³⁹ Timbrell, *French Pianism*, p. 52.

Vlado Perlemuter rejected the dry high-fingered brilliance of French pianistic pedagogy as disseminated through Antoine-François Marmontel, Louis Diémer and Marguerite Long. One can tell immediately from his sound that his pianism is rooted within a different pedagogical school combining the clarity of Moritz Moszkowski with the depth of tone of Cortot:

I am still faithful to the school of playing at the bottom of the keys not on the surface. The touch needed to create all kinds of tone is the one the French call 'enforcer dans les touches' – gently pressing the keys down to the key-bed. By producing a wide range of sonorities, the performance gains in intensity and one is able to communicate the musical intention and the inner élan.⁴⁰

This is much in evidence in his performance of the 'Prélude', which is conceived with a warm, full and even sound, articulate and legato throughout. His dynamics are less marked than Valmalète in that he opts for long, sustained phrases. For Lefébure, to some extent like François, elements of Long and Cortot's teaching inform her interpretation that combines clarity and nimble fingers with bright colours and characterful nuances. She is constantly alive to Ravel's harmonic twists and turns, creating a satisfying balance between melodic projection and polyphonic voicing.

Ravel's score of the 'Prélude'⁴¹ provides only one pedal indication, on the final flourish and tremolo. Nevertheless the phrase markings often allude to a need for constant and varied applications of the sustaining pedal, whether to sustain harmonies as at bars 28-29, or at instances where pedal notes are slurred to reverberate. That Robert Casadesus senses this is reflected in his performance that is the very essence of fluid pianism. For phrased passagework, Casadesus employs finger legato underpinned by light applications of the sustaining pedal. In passagework where Ravel does not indicate phrasing Casadesus resorts to a *non*

⁴⁰ Vlado Perlemuter in conversation with Carola Grindea, *Great Pianists and Pedagogues in conversation* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007), p. 32.

⁴¹ Paris: Durand, 1919.

legato touch, a practice he adopts elsewhere in Ravel's piano works as demonstrated in the 'Valse 1' from the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Chapter 3).

Yvonne Lefébure takes the contrary view, voiced during a television interview where she refers to an occasion when Ravel endorsed her understanding of his phrase marks as 'musical slurs but not legato'.⁴² This was in the context of the opening bars of *Jeux d'eau* where she played the right hand figurations with a light *non legato* touch while underpinning them with vibrato pedal. According to Lefébure, Ravel exclaimed: 'That's it; continue the tradition!'⁴³ Both Lefébure and Perlemuter placed huge importance on pedalling technique in Ravel's piano works. Perlemuter spoke of how during their working sessions Ravel went into painstaking details with regard to the pedalling in the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and Lefébure referred to pedalling as her 'speciality'.⁴⁴

In terms of pedagogical heritage, one of the most eclectic interpretations of this 'Prélude' comes from Marcelle Meyer. Like Lefébure and François, Meyer began her formative piano studies with Long and continued her training with Cortot. A publicity photograph of Meyer at the piano highlights the Longian qualities in her technique in that her knuckles are kept as low as possible, with the fingers raised high up, seemingly poised to strike the keys like hammers.⁴⁵ That this solidly robust technique is then put at the service of an unfailingly fluid line is conveyed in this performance. As Roger Nichols has stated, Meyer brought a Wagnerian range of dynamics to her performances of the solo harpsichord works of Rameau, Couperin and Scarlatti, although the scope of her interpretations was always tempered to the

⁴² 'Ce sont des liaisons musicales mais ce ne sont pas les liaisons pour le legato, mais pour le jeu de piano'. Yvonne Lefébure *teaches how to play Ravel*, St Germain, 1974, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=L06_enYnmBE>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Yvonne Lefébure, Booklet notes to her recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. FYCD 018, (1975).

⁴⁵ Photograph featured in the magazine *Classica-Répertoire*, October 2005, p. 56.

music's needs.⁴⁶ This reference to Wagner makes the telling connection with Meyer's interpretive mentor Alfred Cortot, a staunch Wagnerite who had conducted the French première of *Götterdämmerung* in Paris in 1902. Significantly Cortot singled out his apprenticeship as an assistant conductor at Bayreuth as the period 'during which the instinctive tendency that best explains my nature and aims as an interpreter had developed: my taste for linking the evocation of a masterpiece with its generating principle'.⁴⁷

Meyer pays particular attention to the lyrical qualities of the figurations in the 'Prélude', and in sustaining the musical line throughout. Her execution of the grace-notes does not accord with Ravel's request outlined above as she invariably places them before the beat, but Meyer's practice of lyricising the grace-notes, thus incorporating them into the melody gives her performance a Chopinesque feel, again a link to Cortot's pianism. That is not to say that Meyer's reading is overtly Romantic. Like Perlemuter, she combines rhythmic steadiness and crisp articulation with a warm sound and gently graded dynamic arcs. In an article for *Le Monde*, entitled 'Marcelle Meyer, l'intégrale de rêve', she was described as:

the perfect incarnation and the very quintessence of the French school of pianism that embraced elegance, rigour and poetry.⁴⁸

This remark could equally apply to Madeleine de Valmalète as in their interpretations of this 'Prélude' both pianists demonstrate a dexterity and fluency that is remarkably modern in feel, adopting swift tempi but allowing room for expressive gestures. What makes Meyer's performance more unusual is her skilful

⁴⁶ Roger Nichols, *Marcelle Meyer*. BBC Radio 3 documentary, British Library Sound Archive B/4750/1 (1989).

⁴⁷ 'Le goût de relier l'évocation d'un chef d'oeuvre à son principe générateur'. Bernard Gavoty. Quoted in *A Great French Master: Alfred Cortot*, booklet notes to recording EMI2 C153 - 03090/6. English trans. Dorothy Carrington and Henri-Louis de la Grange.

⁴⁸ 'L'incarnation parfaite de cette école française du piano, dont elle possède la quintessence – élégance, rigueur, poésie'. Marie-Aude Roux, *Le Monde*, 27 November 2007 [n.p.].

use of the pedals that brings an air of transparency and flexibility to her tone colours. Meyer's studies with Ricardo Viñes must have provided her with unique insights into the cultivation of sonorities in the works of Ravel and Debussy. Elaine Brody proposes that Viñes was Ravel's muse from the very beginning and that he played an integral part in the composing and pre-performance processes with each of Ravel's compositions up to 1910, not to mention his pivotal role in premiering Ravel's most virtuosic and groundbreaking scores, including *Jeux d'eau*, *Miroirs* and *Gaspard de la nuit*.⁴⁹ Francis Poulenc, who also studied with Viñes, stated that: 'No one could better teach the art of using the pedals as an essential feature of modern piano music than Viñes'.⁵⁰ Poulenc goes on to talk of luminosity, no blurred edges, fleeting images, delicacy and colour in Viñes' performance.⁵¹

Viñes did not record any of Ravel's piano works but his command of textural clarity and rhythmic control can be heard in his electrifying recording of Claude Debussy's 'Poissons d'or'.⁵² One catches a glimmer of Debussyan tone colour in Meyer's playing of the final flourish of the 'Prélude', a fingered glissando tracing a pentatonic scale that ascends six octaves. Meyer submerges the individual notes in a halo of sound that recalls a similar passage from Debussy's piano Prélude 'Voiles' (bars 42-43).

⁴⁹ Elaine Brody, 'Viñes in Paris: New Light on Twentieth-Century Performance Practices'. *A Musical Offering: Essays in honor of Martin Bernstein*, ed. E.H. Clinkscale and Claire Brooks (New York: Pendragon Press, 1977), pp. 45-62. Referenced in Chapter 1.

⁵⁰ Robert Philip, 'Pianists on record in the Early Twentieth Century'. *Cambridge Companion to the Piano* ed. David Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 79.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Columbia J5645. LP recording (1930-1).

'Fugue'

'Release the Elysian sentiment from these pages'.⁵³

Alfred Cortot

This esoteric but evocative instruction from Cortot resonates with the nature of Ravel's opening material, the fugue subject comprising delicately nuanced motivic fragments. As in the 'Prélude', Ravel refuses to pin himself down to the key of G major or E minor, allowing the harmony to embrace modal and chromatic inflections. The subject and countersubject are subtly contrasted in character and emotion. The former is built up of a series of sighing quaver patterns of tones and triads separated by quaver rests with precise instructions regarding articulation (accents and staccato dots) and shape (phrase markings), while the latter weaves a mellifluous lyrical thread that introduces triplet quaver movement and ties to complement the subject's detached nature. Once a third strand has entered in bar 5 to complete the fugal exposition, Ravel proceeds to develop the contrapuntal textures, using textbook fugal devices, such as imitation, inversion and episodic writing with the tessitura remaining within a narrow four-octave range throughout.

From bar 35 onwards Ravel intensifies the part writing by accelerating the imitative entries using stretto techniques with all three voices engaging in a close-knit dialogue that involves much crossing over of fingers and hands. And yet thanks to the quaver rest *respirations* and articulation points the textures always remain punctuated and aerated. The interweaving of the countersubject material across all three voices at bar 54, followed by the subject's final appearance in stretto at a quaver's distance in the final bars are a final reminder of Ravel's fascination with the intricate internal mechanisms of automata.

⁵³ Alfred Cortot, *Alfred Cortot: Studies in Musical Interpretation* (1937), pp. 86-89.

An intriguing harmonic adjustment by Henriette Faure in her performance deserves flagging up at this point. In bar 43 Ravel's bass line in the published scores descends B-A-G-A-D thus landing momentarily on a V-I perfect cadence. Faure plays B-A-G-F sharp-D, thereby altering the ending to a iii – I modal cadence (Example 4.3). Faure's adjustment seems much more in tune with Ravel's common practice regarding chordal progressions at cadence points, where he invariably eschews tonal (and especially perfect) cadences in favour of more remote possibilities.⁵⁴ Did Ravel himself suggest this change to Faure?

Example 4.3: 'Fugue', bars 43-44

There are other harmonic discrepancies in the 'Forlane' that cannot be errors of the moment as she plays the repeats identically. Marcelle Meyer also makes a harmonic adjustment in the 'Prélude' in bar 28 where she plays a G instead of the notated E, reducing Ravel's eleventh harmony to a ninth. She reproduces this change on the repeat, but plays the eleventh harmony in the corresponding place at bar 80.

Three factors underpin the interpretation of the 'Fugue', namely the articulation of the subject and countersubject, the textural delineation of the three

⁵⁴ Another prominent example of this iii – I cadence occurs at the end of the first movement of the Sonatine.

voices (the counterpoint) and the overall tempo. Dealing with tempo firstly, Ravel marks this piece *Allegro moderato*, and the published tempo advocates crotchet = 84. Février, Perlemuter, Casadesus, Lefébure, Faure and Meyer all adhere to a pulse between 84-90, with their performances reflecting more of Ravel's *moderato* than *Allegro*. By contrast Madeleine de Valmalète captures the *Allegro* and *moderato* with a flowing pulse of crotchet = 108-112. Samson François goes to the opposite extreme evoking a reflective melancholic mood at crotchet = 66 rendering his performance almost 1¼ minutes slower than Valmalète (see Table 4.2).

In *Mon Maître Maurice Ravel*, Faure documents Ravel's vision regarding the articulation for this 'Fugue' in that it was to be played with the fingers with no movement from the wrist. All the phrase endings were to be implemented by lifting the fingers alone. The first Durand edition (1918) and all the subsequent reprints bear no fingering indications for the 'Fugue', but as Roger Nichols points out in his Urtext edition for Peters, Ravel's own score was heavily notated with fingering suggestions to ensure as much finger legato as possible before resorting to the sustaining pedal. Ravel also provides appropriate fingerings at respiration points in the music. A prime example of this can be seen in bars 13-15 where the last two quaver groups in the right hand of bar 13 are both to be played with 2-4 fingering facilitating the lift, whereas for the same sequence in the following bar, where Ravel carries the legato phrase marking over to bar 15, he suggests 2-4 followed by 3-5 (Example 4.4).

Example 4.4: 'Fugue', bars 12-15 (treble stave)

Ravel did not offer any pedalling instructions in the autograph copy, although as will become evident all the pianists used various degrees of pedalling in the pursuit of colour and sonority.

In my own studies of the 'Fugue', I had access to the working score of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli (1920-1995), a pianist renowned for his scrupulous attention to the composer's indications and for his flawless pianism.⁵⁵ Every single note had been fingered, incorporating many re-distributions between the hands in order to preserve Ravel's phrasing, articulation marks and *respirations*. For me this was a huge aid in the memorization process, and I find myself returning to this challenging piece with an almost photographic memory of the finger placements. Marguerite Long seems to have had issues with performing the 'Fugue' from memory and often left it out when performing the complete suite, as verified by a reference to 'twenty minutes duration without the Fugue' in her correspondence.⁵⁶

The finger-based technique that Ravel advocates would seem to resonate with the Long school of playing and it is Long's student Jacques Février who captures Ravel's desired sonority and articulation for this piece in his performance if we are to read the score in a literal sense. Février is meticulous with regard to the quaver rests, his staccati are crisp and he succeeds in preserving the line through the rests without losing sight of the innocence and capriciousness implicit in the music.

⁵⁵ The author was given access to Michelangeli's annotated score of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by Noretta Conci-Leech (b. 1931), with whom the author studied.

⁵⁶ Marguerite Long's personal score of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Fonds Marguerite Long, Mediathèque Musicale Mahler.

Equally his countersubject is executed with smooth finger legato highlighting the contrast in character with the subject. In this regard Février's conception comes very close to being a true reflection of the composer's intentions, not only for the 'Fugue' but for Ravel's advice on performing all his music.⁵⁷

Henriette Faure's articulation of the subject is also incisive in the opening bars of the 'Fugue' but as the texture thickens she is less consistent in approach. Most of the pianists under discussion allow the sound to linger on through the rests as though looking to sustain the subject with a long mental legato. Even Casadesus, whose practice of making a clear distinction between phrased or legato and unphrased or non-legato passagework in Ravel's piano works has been highlighted previously in relation to the 'Prélude', constructs his interpretation from an overriding legato line where the three voices merge into a confluence backed by gently graded dynamic arcs. Meyer is another case in point, and where Février is simple and understated, she is dramatic and profound. Samson François does observe the quaver rests although his differentiation between accents and staccati is considerably softened. In his performance François sounds as though he is more interested in exploring the harmonic progressions that emerge from the contrapuntal writing than the fugal discourse itself, and his tone colour is measured and weighty rendering an affective poignancy and depth to his reading. In contrast Lefébure applies light vibrato pedalling throughout her performance, imbuing the polyphony with a glistening transparency. In the sleeve notes to her recording, she described her approach thus: 'three metallic threads, their glisten softened and subdued, combine into patterns of pure polyphony'.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Février's recollections are quoted in Chapter 3, p. 153 and n. 14 and 15.

⁵⁸ Yvonne Lefébure, Sleeve notes to her recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. FYCD 018 (1975).

Alfred Cortot had plenty to say about the textual and the sub-textual elements of the 'Fugue': 'focus on the character – melancholy, sorrowful; Ravel's music is full of unobtrusive emotion that we ought to perceive; begin mysteriously and distant; one must guard against a pedantic anxiety; do not overemphasize the voices'.⁵⁹ In Meyer, Francois and Lefébure's highly personal interpretations one can sense Cortot's influence encouraging and daring them to go beyond the notes to discover that unobtrusive emotion and penetrate the hidden depths. Meyer seems to be responding more instinctively than intellectually to the fugal writing. Her subject entries are played with discretion avoiding any overt contrapuntal voicing and she grades the dynamic colouring in long-breathed phrases. Her approach is neoclassical in tone, with a consistent tempo right up until the last section which she injects with a mere hint of reflection and playfulness. Lefébure's pianism owes much of its character and colour to her acute ear for polyphonic textures. Regarding Cortot's advice to avoid overemphasising the voices she announces each subject and countersubject entry with incisiveness but after the first few notes she allows the remainder of the material to be subsumed into the texture, achieving a subtle blend of nuances that draw parallels with Cortot's 'Elysian' sentiment.

For Cortot, the countersubject is more important than the subject in this Fugue.⁶⁰ It is certainly more lyrical and rhythmically pliable than the subject, and this is something that Perlemuter also explores in his recording. Perlemuter tends to expand the triplet figurations, hinting at an inner expression that errs on the nostalgic at times. Many of the pianists here under discussion avoid the trap of overemphasizing the fugal entries, preferring a calm unobtrusive democracy

⁵⁹ Alfred Cortot, *Alfred Cortot: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, p. 86-89.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

between all three strands. The very nature of both the subject and countersubject, their emotional diversity underpinned with differing articulation and explicit dynamic markings, calls to mind Ravel's mantra 'I do not ask for my music to be interpreted, only to be played', and that the most successful performances are those that aim for a simple direct performance of this elusive piece.

From this perspective it is Valmalète who presents the most straightforward reading. She constructs her performance with astonishing lucidity in that her dynamic colouring is wedded to the fugal structure throughout, making total sense of Ravel's counterpoint. Valmalète's nuancing of the subject is thoughtful and inspired and it is worth examining the extraordinary insight she brings to Ravel's text. For the pianissimo opening the subject is light and airy, but as the entries descend through the treble register Valmalète increases the depth of tone. Her brisk tempo adds an air of nonchalance to the character, and a brief moment of rubato to negotiate the rhythmic counterpoint across bars 8-9 is perfectly judged. The pianissimo entry at bar 15 recaptures an innocence and intimacy in line with Ravel's modal progressions, and two bars later she applies a tad more finger pressure to warm the dynamic from *pp* to *p*. For the subject's first appearance in its inverted form at bar 22, she adjusts her articulation to add weight to the first quaver and lengthens the staccato second quaver giving this section from bar 22-34 an intensity that makes it feel like a gritty development. One gets the sense that she is thinking of the 'Fugue' in three broad sections - an exposition (bars 1-21), a development (bars 22-34), and a recapitulation from bar 35 where the subject material regains its capricious innocence. Even in the coda from bars 58-62 she manages to bring her interpretation back to where she started, with both subject and countersubject being played out with unaffected simplicity.

'Forlane'

'[...] a musical curve of very unusual delicacy'.⁶¹
Alfred Cortot.

With the 'Forlane', Ravel revisits the sophisticated harmonic language of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, exploring disparate sequences of chords using subtle chromatic shifts to link the harmonic progressions, within the framework of a Baroque rondeau (ABACADA). Phrases mostly adhere to conventional two-, four-, and eight-bar patterns where the lilting rhythm of 6/8 can lull the listener into a comfortable reverie until Ravel chooses to extend or foreshorten a phrase, or throw in a cross-accent, thereby confounding expectations. In addition the secondary sections B (bar 29), C (bar 63) and D (bar 124) all start as though on the main beat giving the illusion that the half bar point is the main beat.

Given that Ravel's 'Forlane' owes its origins to Couperin's model, the 'Forlane' from the fourth *Concert Royal*, it is worth examining the ways in which all eight pianists address the task of realising eighteenth-century performance practices in their twentieth-century interpretations.⁶² Ravel sets the ball rolling with a request that the 'Forlane' be played strictly in tempo throughout, and just in case the pianist feels the urge to see the final bars as a nostalgic reflection, he presses the point with his trademark 'sans ralentir' in bar 161. The published tempo marking of dotted crotchet = 96 is reproduced from the orchestral transcription. However, the majority of pianists under investigation here opt for a much slower pulse in their recorded performances. Alfred Cortot in his writings also urges caution regarding the overall

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² For a detailed comparison of Couperin and Ravel's 'Forlanes', see also Barbara L. Kelly 'Musical engagement with the past' within the chapter 'History and Homage' in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 19-22.

tempo so that the pulse retains a 6/8 lilt as opposed to 2/4.⁶³ Marcelle Meyer's tempo, dotted crotchet = 84, is rock-solid throughout even when moving from section to section. Février, Valmalète, Faure and Perlemuter also favour this tempo. For Perlemuter it provides the means to place the cadences using discrete rubato without losing track of the overall tempo. He also captures Cortot's 6/8 feel by lengthening the dotted semiquaver in the theme to produce smooth long-breathed phrases. Even more leisurely is the reading of Samson François, although his quirky characterisation has an eighteenth-century finesse about it from the neatly clipped dotted rhythms, sparing pedals and consummate fingerwork to the effective use of rubato to illuminate Ravel's chromatic harmonies.

Lefébure and Casadesus are the only ones who attempt the orchestral tempo in their recordings. Both pay fastidious attention to Ravel's phrase markings, and the dotted rhythms are sprightly and energetic. However, Lefébure's fascination with Ravel's harmonies mean that she is constantly taking time over cadences and the placing of bass notes, and her tempo reduces to match that of Meyer's crotchet = 84 especially towards the final section from bar 140 onwards. Casadesus's performance is imaginatively phrased in accordance with Ravel's instructions, achieving a perfect balance between concise linear articulation (bar 1) and smooth mellifluousness (bars 19-21), but he reduces the tempo markedly from bar 148 onwards and succumbs to the cardinal sin, at least for Ravel, of slowing down even more for the final bars.

As regards the cultivation of sonority, the articulation of textures, pedalling and dynamic colouring in the 'Forlane' it is impossible to divorce the solo piano

⁶³ Ibid.

version from Ravel's skilful orchestration.⁶⁴ Alfred Cortot's teaching of the 'Forlane' focussed intently upon this aspect, comparing Ravel's phrase markings in the piano score to violin bowings and urging his students to search for orchestral sonorities on the keyboard by experimenting with various degrees of attack and stroke.

Perlemuter's working score of the 'Forlane' is littered with orchestral references, for example the evoking of a flute at bar 71.⁶⁵ Another of Cortot's students, Yvonne Lefébure, demonstrates this empathy with orchestral sonority from the very beginning. As she herself declared in the sleeve notes that accompany her recording: 'I try not to play the piano but to play the orchestra'.⁶⁶

Where Ravel's orchestration of the principal theme is transferred from Violin 1 in bar 1 to the Oboe in bar 8, Lefébure responds by adopting a subdued colour in bar 1 followed by a more penetrative sound and a weighty accent on the D sharp half-way through bar 8. Cortot also advocated pedalling each harmony to maximize the vibrations without altering the clarity of the progression. Table 4.4 demonstrates the fine-tuned approach taken by Ravel to imbue the opening section of the Forlane with a wealth of orchestral colour, albeit tempered by economy of means to retain an eighteenth-century balance and reserve.

⁶⁴ See also Howat, 'Sophistication in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*' within the chapter 'Ravel and the Piano' in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 88-93.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ FYCD 018 (1975).

Table 4.4: 'Forlane': Ravel's orchestration in bars 1-25 (selected examples)

Bar Nos.	Instrumentation of principal theme	Details of instrumental colour in accompanying textures
1	Violin 1	Chromatic countermelody played by cor anglais
9 (fig. [1] in the orchestral score)	Oboe	Second beat of bar 9 - combination of held notes in woodwind and horns with violin 2 and viola providing pizzicato accents
13	Flute and Violin 1 (top line of divisi)	Chords from upper woodwind and strings (arco) and harp
15	Oboe doubles the Flute (Violin 1 drops out)	Upper strings change to pizzicato, harp drops out, and lower woodwind added
19 (fig. [2] in the orchestral score)	Flute	Strings and harp
22	Clarinet	Strings and harp
25	Violin 1	As at bar 1

It is Ravel's instrumentation within his accompanimental textures that yields his most inventive and subtle coloristic effects. For example, in bars 1-4 the orchestration singles out a chromatic countermelody that is embedded within the accompanying harmonies in the solo piano version and Ravel underlines its significance by assigning it to the dark tones of the cor anglais (Example 4.5a and b).

A comparison between the dotted minim bass notes in the solo piano score at bars 6 and 10 and their realisation in the orchestral version sheds light upon how one might create the appropriate sonority on the piano using the fingers and also how to retain the bass notes using the sustaining pedal. In bar 6, an incisive weighty finger attack to the bottom of the key bed sustained by the pedal across the whole bar sits well with the rich tones of the bassoon, whereas at bar 10 a finger attack

aided by a wrist movement that catches the bottom of the key for a split second before rebounding, together with the precise lifting of the sustaining pedal after the fourth quaver, helps to evoke the diaphanous timbre of the double basses (Example 4.5, marked with arrows).

Example 4.5

a) 'Forlane', bars 1-10 (solo piano version)

Allegretto ♩ = 96

b) 'Forlane', bars 1-10 (orchestral version)

Allegretto ♩ = 96

Ravel persists with his instruction to place the ornaments on the beat, and as with their performances of the 'Prélude', Valmalète, Perlemuter and Février maintain an exemplary approach. Faure and Casadesus are inconsistent in this regard, most noticeably in the F sharp pedal section at bars 80-88 where their gruppetti fall before the beat. Faure is respectful of Ravel's respirations and make a point of underlining the irregular phrase shapes and cross-accents using subtle dynamic gradations to convey the elegant and refined nature of this dance. Casadesus brings a certain nonchalance to his performance with clipped dotted rhythms and clearly defined phrase structures.

Cortot's comments regarding the 'Forlane' are particularly illuminating with regard to phrasing and colour: 'Pronounce the upper voice clearly, carrying out the idea consistently in the swaying rhythm'.⁶⁷ Marcelle Meyer takes this linear approach to a higher level and it seems as though Ravel's phrase marks are not a

⁶⁷ Alfred Cortot, *Alfred Cortot: Studies in Musical Interpretation* (1937), pp. 86-89.

source of punctuation for her. Her performance is smooth, underpinned with copious amounts of pedal. A prime example of this occurs at pedal points such as bar 10 where she retains the sustaining pedal well beyond the dotted minim that is marked. This is in complete contrast to Jacques Février's lightly pedalled performance in which he achieves a transparency within the chords and still manages to sustain the bass notes for their correct length without undue blurring. Equally so Lefébure's performance is light and airy, the dotted rhythm short and crisp. Her touch is extremely even throughout imparting a crystalline clarity to her chords, thus enabling her to extract snippets of countermelody from the harmonic texture.

All eight pianists bring their individual voices to Ravel's printed score of the 'Forlane' and nowhere is this more evident than in the central B minor section between bars 64 and 95. At this point Ravel's writing is pared down to a chordal texture set within the treble register with no phrase markings other than a few slurs. For Casadesus this offers an opportunity for a complete change in articulation from the legato phrasing of the previous passage resulting in a nuance that is dry and very staccato. The crotchet-quaver pattern becomes two short quavers separated by a rest with minimal application of the sustaining pedal. This pianistic nuance compares well with Ravel's orchestral sonority with the flutes, oboes and clarinets playing the principal material underpinned by harp and string harmonics and pizzicati.

In bars 72-78, the left-hand passagework consists of pedal notes and a few arpeggiated figures. What Ravel does in terms of orchestral colour is inspired, combining muted trumpets and pizzicato second violins in unison with additional colour supplied by harp harmonics; in bars 76-77 the second violins are replaced by

the violas. Casadesus' palette of pianistic sonorities at this point reflects an empathy with Ravel's orchestral sound world. In bars 80-88 the touch he adopts for the pedal F sharps in the left hand alternates between accented staccati on the half-bars and tenuti on the barline. This subtle change in articulation helps to re-establish exactly where the barline falls in this section, especially as it sounds as though Ravel has written the whole passage half a bar out of kilter. At the other extreme sits Meyer, whose sound remains consistently mellow, legato and reverberant throughout her performance of this section. Table 4.5 illustrates how each pianist has constructed their interpretation through varying degrees of touch, pedalling and dynamic colour.

Table 4.5: 'Forlane': Interpretive choices (articulation and pedalling) in bars 64-95

Pianist	Interpretation of bars 64-95
Casadesus	Dry, staccato crotchets and quavers with minimal pedalling and touches of articulation
Valmalète	Same approach as Casadesus but crotchets played tenuto
Faure	Tenuto crotchets (pedalled) and light quavers
François	Expressive articulate playing, lightly pedalled. A marked hike-up in tempo between bars 84-88
Lefébure	Bright articulate sound. Lightly pedalled throughout with no marked change in sound
Février	Delicate and articulate sound. Longer pedals than Lefébure
Perlemuter	Smooth pedalled throughout. Grace-notes unclear between 84-88
Meyer	Treble line brought to the fore. Creates a halo of sound with long pedals.

'Rigaudon'

The 'Rigaudon' inhabits an altogether different world from the refined 'Forlane' and although Ravel took his initial inspiration from Couperin's 'Premier Tambourin' from the *Troisième Concert*, the rumbustious nature of the opening section of the 'Rigaudon' recalls the ebullient Emmanuel Chabrier, in particular his *Joyeuse Marche* for piano (1891) which Ravel knew intimately. The four resonant extended chords at the outset, which Cortot compared to a blare of trumpets,⁶⁸ seem as though the piece is about to end before it has begun with an emphatic perfect cadence, V13 - I, but Ravel ploughs on with a rhythmically taut theme that foreshadows the opening material of the 'Toccata'.

The first section (bars 1-36) of the 'Rigaudon' derives much of its meaty character from closely aligned textures, octave doublings, bare fifths in the bass register at cadential points, and much parallel movement. Robert Casadesus recognized what he termed a 'Basque sportiness' in Ravel's piano works, a quality that Casadesus realises with conviction in his performance of the 'Rigaudon'.⁶⁹ Alongside Casadesus, the performance by Marcelle Meyer must be singled out for its vibrant colours, a fact not surprising when one considers her brilliant interpretations of the piano works of Chabrier.⁷⁰ Lefébure's gutsy performance is also full of robust pianism, capturing a satisfying balance between the playful, the melancholic and the downright boisterous. As ever, Perlemuter treads a midway path between Ravel and Cortot in his characterization, rhythmically taut and

⁶⁸ Cortot, *Alfred Cortot: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, ed. Thieffry, trans. Jaques (1937) p. 88.

⁶⁹ *Robert Casadesus: French Singers and Pianists*. Devised and presented by Roger Nichols, (BBC Radio 3, 14 September 1989). CD recording: British Library Sound Archive No. B 4744/1.

⁷⁰ *Marcel Meyer, Complete Studio Recordings 1925-1957*. CD release EMI Classics 0946 384699-2-6 (2007).

responsive to Ravel's meticulous details, whilst his wistful shaping of the right-hand melody in the *moins vif* section is Cortot personified.

The opening section of the 'Rigaudon' requires a strong muscular finger technique which Meyer, Lefébure and Valmalète display with considerable panache. What is particularly telling is that their recorded performances are created on three different makes of instrument. Mention has already been made of Meyer's highly developed fingers and the ways in which she extracts a rich sound from her Pleyel piano, an instrument noted for its carrying power. A televised recording of Lefébure performing the finale of Ravel's Concerto in G captures her hyper-articulate technique and her crouching body posture.⁷¹ The accompanying booklet notes to Lefébure's recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* provides specific details of the piano she used, Steinway number 423540, whose bright resonant tones match perfectly with Lefébure's broad canvas of sonorities. On the sleeve notes to Madeleine de Valmalète's recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, her digital prowess was described thus: '[...] her hands were small but powerful, her compact fingers ending in little fleshy pads. Her fingerings were fearless and often spectacular'.⁷² Valmalète's playing demonstrates a facility and evenness of execution coupled with eloquent musical expression that is never overstated. The image on the sleeve cover has the young Valmalète in mid-performance on an Érard, the make of piano favoured by Ravel and the instrument on which he shaped and developed his pianism.⁷³

⁷¹ Yvonne Lefébure teaches how to play Ravel, St Germain, 1974, www.youtube.com/watch?v=L06_enYnmBE. [Accessed January 2014]

⁷² Arbiter Records 144. Author unknown.

⁷³ Ravel's Érard grand piano (serial number 96117, made in 1908) is preserved at his home, Le Belvédère, in Montfort l'Amaury. For further information see Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, p. 335.

The central *Moins vif* section of the 'Rigaudon' from bars 37-93 provides a complete contrast in texture and mood from the previous section, with a sinuous melody that sits inside a lightly scored leaping ostinato. Ravel's interpretive vision for this passage is ambiguous as he inserts one pedal indication at the beginning of the *Moins vif* and omits to denote the point of release. Février reduces his tempo to crotchet = 80 and plays the whole passage with virtually no pedal, using a wide palette of finger articulations for his right-hand melody. Faure also provides a dry accompaniment to her melody although she uses discrete pedalling to highlight the movement of the bass line, for example its descent through bars 45-50. In this regard both Février and Faure's interpretations come close to emulating Ravel's orchestral sonority at this point, where the treble solo is shared between the oboe and cor anglais with pizzicato accompaniment from the strings (Fig. 7 in the orchestral score and bar 37 in the piano score). When Ravel's orchestration changes, at Fig. 9 (bar 69 in the solo piano version), to the softer tones of the flute and clarinet accompanied by harp chords and sustained cello chords, Faure responds with a slower finger attack that softens the melodic line and she uses longer pedals.

Faure's tempo of crotchet = 96 is also adopted by Perlemuter who prefers to read Ravel's pedal mark as continuous whilst remaining mindful of the right-hand phrasing. Both Casadesus and François bring a more subjective quality to their readings. Casadesus opts for a sonority where the right-hand melody and accompanying chords are merged using vibrato pedalling to maintain a permanent haze that is effective in setting the *Moins vif* section into relief against the bombast of the outer sections of the 'Rigaudon'. His tempo remains constant throughout at crotchet = 104 and is matched by François. However the latter's interpretation is deeply personal and expressive, employing affective rubato, dynamic subtleties and

inspired use of the pedalling to colour the harmonies. Meyer, Lefébure and Valmalète also interpret Ravel's tempo instructions of *Moins vif* as a slight reduction to approximately crotchet = 104, thereby retaining a forward momentum in their performances: All three highlight the capriciousness of this section and the quirky irregularity of Ravel's phrase structures but Valmalète's adherence to Ravel's grace-note placements on the beat validates her interpretation.

'Menuet'

'Among the old dances the minuet attracted Ravel above all'.⁷⁴

Hélène Jourdan-Morhange

Ravel composed four extraordinarily diverse minuets for solo piano during his lifetime. With the first three, it is as though he set out to redefine the classical Minuet, employing modal and chromatic harmonies in the *Menuet Antique* of 1895, a refined interplay of cross-accents, hemiolas and tied notes across the barlines in 'Mouvement de Menuet' from the *Sonatine* of 1903-5 and a masterful control of contrapuntal textures, not to mention a hair-raising chromatic harmonic sequence (bars 38-43) in the *Menuet sur le nom de Haydn* of 1909.

In the 'Menuet' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* Ravel focuses his attention upon clarity of expression, clean lines and a clear distinction between melodic and harmonic components, making this 'Menuet' more in line with its classical antecedent. It is in the exploration of touch and nuance that Ravel seems to exercise his inventiveness, as his notation takes on a pointillistic dimension, eliciting a myriad of tonal colours assembled within intriguing and unorthodox phrasings. For example, the four-bar melody presented in the right hand at the outset is initially unphrased with each beat marked tenuto (bar 1), whilst the following three bars are grouped together under a single phrase mark. Simultaneously the left hand is given

⁷⁴ Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, p. 76.

over to contrasting articulations, including detached but phrased crotchets in the first two bars followed by legato countermelodies underpinned with syncopated bass notes in the left hand that seamlessly link the end of the first phrase at bar 4 into the next four-bar phrase in bars 5-8. With grace-notes and pedal notes that highlight the second beat of the bar throughout this 'Menuet', Ravel makes a subtle connection with a more stately dance in triple time, the sarabande, that is particularly telling in the bass line of the central 'Musette'.

Alfred Cortot refers to the character of this 'Menuet' as incorporating 'lightness, sober joy and placid grace' and is particularly eloquent in his counsel to 'embroider the ornaments'.⁷⁵ Perlemuter certainly captures the Cortot ideal, combining a sumptuous lyricism with orchestrally inspired colours and a relaxed tempo that allows the ornaments to fall unhurriedly into place just as Ravel insisted, 'sur le temps'. Madeleine de Valmalète leads the way with regard to brisk tempi and at a crotchet = 126 her reading is light, playful and refreshing. Jacques Février is faithful to all the articulation marks and dynamic gradations, but rather dry in the execution and rigid with regard to tempo, with minimal placement at the cadences. Meyer is also unwavering in her overall pulse, evoking an air of cool detachment. What is most unusual and unique to her interpretation is her constant use of dislocation where the left hand anticipates the right by a whisker, coupled with touches of rubato. She persists with this practice in the central 'Musette' where her tone is smooth, combining soft colours with blurred pedals that conjure up a halo of sound. At the return of the 'Menuet' from bar 73, the overall feel is almost improvisatory such is the freedom she imparts to the rhythmic shaping of the main theme.

⁷⁵ Alfred Cortot, *Alfred Cortot: Studies in Musical Interpretation*, pp. 86-89.

One of the main challenges in the 'Musette' is the controlled execution of the chorale-like melody arranged in four-part chords. Ravel surrounds this with pedal notes and there is much hand-crossing to negotiate. Casadesus begins with an even transparent *pp* sound using only the fingers and pedals. He gradually applies more arm weight from bar 49 to fill out the texture, invoking an impressive grandeur and majesty at the climax of the passage at bar 57. Conversely Perlemuter is lyrical and nostalgic in tone, singling out the treble line throughout with a full sonority while subduing the accompanying textures. François imparts an element of mystery by underlining the thumb melodic line at the centre of the texture. As he moves through the 'Musette' this theme is almost submerged within the accompanying ostinati that become more menacing as the textures build from bar 49 onward. All in all it is a very dramatic interpretation. Lefébure's reading of this section is particularly imaginative, employing a wide dynamic range and bringing an air of dignity that highlights the processional element of the 'Musette'. She moves straight through into the 'Musette' from the 'Menuet' maintaining the same tone colour, and begins her build-up at bar 49 from the centre and bass of the texture, giving depth and emotional breadth to her ascent. For the restatement of the 'Musette' theme at bar 65, she emphasizes the thumb melody so that when the 'Menuet' theme joins in three octaves above in bar 73, she generates a real sense of textural and temporal space as though reconnecting with the past at a distance.

For Cortot the coda section should inhabit a different mood from that of the main 'Menuet': 'its rhythm ceases to be that of the minuet and acquires the character of an aubade, a tender reverie'.⁷⁶ In this regard Perlemuter's performance is timed and nuanced to perfection. From bar 104 he expands the treble melody using long

⁷⁶ Ibid.

tenuto phrases, coupled with rubato in bars 114 and 116-7. The subtle dynamic withdrawal is smoothly graded in bars 111-120 and in the final four bars he reproduces Ravel's detailed pedalling, articulation, dynamics and tempo adjustments to the letter.

'Toccata'

Ravel completed his homage to the eighteenth century with a thrilling 'Toccata' that traverses the whole gamut of the French harpsichord tradition as well as more contemporary pianism, from the embroidered filigree of Daquin, Rameau and Couperin, via the scintillating dexterity of Saint-Saëns, to the brilliant colours and nuances of Chabrier and Debussy. In contrast to the orchestrally conceived pyrotechnics of 'Scarbo' from *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), Ravel's 'Toccata' is a *tour de force* in keyboard tactility. The effervescent moto perpetuo textures embrace innumerable permutations that combine repeated notes, changing note figurations, arpeggios in every configuration, chord clusters, hand-crossing at lightning speeds. These technical difficulties are further intensified since not only are melodies and pedal notes required to be sustained in long arcs but also Ravel's intricate passagework has to be executed for the most part within a *pp* dynamic. Even in the climactic final pages the *fortes* and *fortissimos* have to be understood in a Ravelian context, invariably emerging from his explosive crescendi and equally rapid withdrawals in dynamic.

According to Yvonne Lefébure, Ravel had misgivings about the 'Toccata':

He once said to me, 'as piano writing, the finale of my concerto is how I should have liked my Toccata to be, but failed to make it. The last page is downright clumsy, too difficult', and to my surprise he added, 'If you play it, do try to disencumber the writing a bit.'⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Quoted in Nichols. *Ravel*, p. 195.

The last statement is astounding coming from a composer who was so protective of his work and whose principal objective as an artist was 'technical perfection'.⁷⁸

Lefébure does not make any obvious adjustments in her recording other than play the first two semiquaver chords in bars 221 and 224 simultaneously, possibly in line with Ravel's notation at bar 227. Her performance of the last section from bar 218 is truly 'éclatant' and extraordinary, considering she was seventy-seven years of age at the time she made this recording. Pianist Jeanne-Marie Darré, who studied with Long and Philipp, recalled asking Ravel:

Maître, how should one play your Toccata? And he answered "As fast as possible, but so that one hears each note!" What he said stayed with me. I returned home and worked very hard to play it at that speed (144) and I've always told this to my students.⁷⁹

Ravel's disciples, Casadesus and Perlemuter both maintain brisk tempi of crotchet = 138. Henriette Faure is slightly more reserved at crotchet = 132, allowing time to articulate the barlines and direct the harmonic movement by holding on to the chords. Her acknowledgement of eighteenth-century keyboard practices and in particular the touch and nuance of the harpsichord can be felt in her fine-tuned balancing of sonorities across Ravel's figurations, most noticeable from the beginning of the final build-up at bar 191. Where most pianists focus upon the upper melodic line, Faure's fingers move evenly through the texture underlining the tension between melody and harmony and especially the pedal bass notes. She applies the sustaining pedal sparingly but effectively and her reading has a modesty and directness. In this sense Faure's 'Toccata' is perfectly poised in its role as the concluding movement of a suite of pieces inspired by eighteenth-century models.

⁷⁸ Roland-Manuel, *Lettres de Maurice Ravel et documents inédits*. Reproduced in Orenstein, *Ravel Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, revised New York: Dover, 1991), p. 118.

⁷⁹ Jeanne-Marie Darré in conversation with Dean Elder, *Pianists at Play*, p. 84.

Robert Casadesus' interpretation also leans toward the keyboard style of the *clavecinistes*. He polarises his sonority, using a dry, articulate and *non legato* touch for the toccata passages reserving long resonant pedals for Ravel's phrased melodies as at bar 57. In the climactic final pages, Casadesus' normally elegant pianism seems to desert him in that he fails to prepare the long crescendos that begin in bar 191, and as a result he reaches a *fortissimo* dynamic too early. Where other pianists grade the colouring of Ravel's long *fortissimo* from bar 219 onwards with changes of pedal and harmonic delineation, Casadesus ploughs on relentlessly. Unlike Ravel, Casadesus did not favour the Érard piano, preferring instead the deep key action and rich sonorities of the Steinway instruments by this point in his career (1951).⁸⁰ It could be that the reverberant power of a Steinway made it difficult for Casadesus on this occasion to control Ravel's intricate textures in the 'Toccatà'. For those pianists under discussion who opted for the lighter actions of the French piano makers, Érard and Pleyel, life was considerably easier in this regard.

Yvonne Lefébure's nimble fingers dispatch the 'Toccatà' with energy and verve and this together with her sparing use of the pedal connects her interpretation unequivocally to historically informed practices. For example, in bars 78-80 she resists the temptation to bind the figurations with long pedals, opting instead for a sprightly unpedalled *non legato* touch making a clear distinction in character between this toccata-like (unphrased and motoric) passage and the previous passage (expressive and phrased).

Valmalète's performance of the 'Toccatà', like Lefébure, has spirit, power, space and élan. However the most striking aspect of her pianism is the ability to

⁸⁰ Information supplied by Roger Nichols in *French Singers and Pianists*, 'Robert Casadesus', BBC Radio 3 broadcast B4744/1, September 1989.

negotiate Ravel's busy textures whilst retaining his subtly nuanced dynamics. The *pianissimos* never lose definition and Ravel's explosive *crescendos* that immediately pull back to a *p* or *pp* all register in Valmalète's performance; consequently her *f* and *ff* passages are radiant and impactful. The ease with which Valmalète carries off this most demanding aspect of Ravel's pianism, may have something to do with her choice of instrument, the Érard whose light action and excellent responses to fast repetitive movements make it the ideal piano on which to realise Ravel's transparent textures. This can be felt in the more melodic sections such as bars 94-121 where Valmalète succeeds in projecting the melody notes with delicate expressivity above the cascades of harmony notes using varying grades of pedal.

Equally persuasive is the virtuosic performance by Meyer. Her opening dynamic also gets right down to *pp* as though she was playing under her breath and how she maintains this across the first two pages is ingenious. She focuses on the thematic material played by the thumbs and forefingers of both hands at the centre of the texture which she plays using an even legato touch with her fingers deep into the keys, while the added notes played by the other fingers are lightly articulated as though providing harmonic punctuation. In this way the textures avoid becoming leaden and she can control the sudden *crescendos* and *diminuendos*. One of the hallmarks of Meyer's pianism is her wide-ranging use of sustaining pedal techniques applied skilfully to distinguish between the toccata sections and the more expressive passages. For example, the transition from the motoric staccato passagework in bar 93 to the remote key of D sharp minor and the gossamer-like textures is effected by an immediate transfer from incisive finger work and no pedal to close smooth embedded finger sonority bathed in long pedals. In this regard Meyer's sonority is

more nuanced than that of Valmalète and Lefébure, and once more one perceives a glimmer of Debussyan timbre in her interpretations.

For dazzling pyrotechnics on a Lisztian scale no one comes close to François's fearless interpretation. He isolates the motoric features and distinguishes them from the expressive elements implicit in the 'Toccata'. The tempo never flags for a moment, even during the central D sharp minor section where François' shaping of the melody unfolds naturally, underlining one of his interpretive credos: 'I've never worked at virtuosity, the most important thing for me is the melody'.⁸¹ In contrast to Meyer and Valmalète who are far subtler with regard to Ravel's *pianissimos* and the pacing of *crescendos* and overall momentum, François's palette of colours is bold. No wonder one of his pupils at the École Normale de Musique referred to François as the 'Van Gogh of the piano'.⁸²

***Le Tombeau de Couperin* as Ravel's homage to French 'keyboardism'**

In his *Autobiographical Sketch*, Ravel refers to *Le Tombeau de Couperin* as 'a homage directed less in fact to Couperin himself than to French music of the eighteenth century'.⁸³ With the core principles of French pianism having evolved from eighteenth-century keyboard techniques it is not surprising to discover that the pedagogical practices of Diémer, Long, and Philipp sit at the very heart of the majority of these recorded performances of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, evidenced by clean, even fingerwork, a strong rhythmic core, finely graded dynamics and discrete

⁸¹ 'Je n'ai jamais travaillé la virtuosité: l'important, c'est la mélodie'. Quoted in Jean Roy, *Samson François - le poète du piano* (Paris: Lyon, 1996), p. 101.

⁸² 'Van Gogh du piano'. Quoted in Jérôme Spicket, *Scarbo - le roman de Samson François* (Lausanne: Van de Welde, 1985), p. 25.

⁸³ Roland-Manuel, 'Une Esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel' (1928), *La Revue musicale*, 19, special issue (December 1938), pp. 17-23; reproduced in Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: Lettres*, pp. 43-7; Ravel, 'An Autobiographical Sketch by Maurice Ravel', in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, pp. 29-37.

use of the pedal. However, when it comes to questions of interpretation relating to sonority, nuance and expression, the picture expands to reveal a diversity of approaches from all eight pianists. Faure and Février favour a dry, articulate and sparingly pedalled sonority that remains close aligned to the pianism of Diémer and Long, whereas Casadesus' playing has a fluid Mozartian clarity about it, coupled with sharply contrasted phrase shapes, articulations, and pedalling choices. Casadesus' approach found favour with Ravel as Manuel Rosenthal revealed in the following statement:

If there was a pianist [...] whose interpretations Ravel valued above all others, I think that would be [Robert Casadesus]. He was the most complete musician. He composed a lot and was the most scholarly of all the pianists. He had the technique that I imagine Ravel had in his younger days: a pianistic sound closer to the harpsichord. Less weighty than now: one used less pedal. This was Casadesus' style: very little pedal, all very clear, very precise. For Ravel, Casadesus' Mozart interpretations were perfect. I personally found them a bit cool, but Ravel liked that.⁸⁴

Lefébure, Meyer and François also honed their early piano techniques in the Longian image but later saw this prescriptive and somewhat mimetic performance tradition as limiting in interpretive scope. With Alfred Cortot as their mentor and muse they discovered a more personal and imaginative school of pianism, and crucially a sound world that was both outwardly expressive and colourful. Cortot did not subscribe to the French 'reserve' in his playing and his influence can be seen in Lefébure's vibrant polyphonic discourse and orchestral palette of colours tempered by her scholarly respect for Ravel's text. Meyer's dexterous pianism and the kaleidoscopic range of nuances in her recording are refreshingly unapologetic in pushing the boundaries of expressivity. It is Samson François who embraces the

⁸⁴ 'S'il y a eu un pianiste [...] dont il a particulièrement apprécié les interprétations je crois que ce fut [Robert Casadesus]. C'était le plus musicien. Il a beaucoup composé, il était le plus savant de tous les pianistes. Il avait la technique que Ravel avait eue, je suppose, étant jeune : avec une sonorité un petit peu 'clavecin'. Moins emphatique qu'à présent : on mettait moins de pédale. Casadesus était comme ça : très peu de pédale, tout très net, bien précis, très au point. Ravel trouvait que Mozart par Casadesus était parfait. Je le trouvais trop froid, mais Ravel aimait ça'. Marcel Marnat, *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal recueilles par Marcel Marnat*, p. 148.

nineteenth-century romanticism that underpins Cortot's pianism in his unashamedly poetic and virtuosic performance. Vlado Perlemuter, whose early technical grounding was shaped by Moritz Moszkowski, also benefitted from the inspired pianism of Cortot, as witnessed by his refined touch and euphonious sonority. Perlemuter played a vital role in the dissemination of Ravel's interpretive thoughts to succeeding generations of pianists throughout the twentieth century, and like Robert Casadesus, he was held up as the definitive Ravelian pianist, as this statement by Ravel's close friend and dedicatee of the Violin Sonata, Hélène Jourdan-Morhange attests:

Vlado Perlemuter is one of the custodians of Ravel's thought. No one can play more like Ravel. Having worked on the *Sonata*, the *Duo* and the *Trio* with Ravel when I was a violinist, I recognize in Perlemuter's interpretations all the idiosyncrasies, all Ravel's wishes: exaggerated swells, crescendi which explode in anger, turns which die on a clear note, the gentle friction of affectionate cats ... and in all this fantasy, strict time in expression and rigour even in rubato.⁸⁵

Listening to Perlemuter and Casadesus' recordings of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* highlights the similarities and differences in their pianism. They both exhibit what Hans-Heinz Stuckenschmidt referred to as a 'French spiritual strength that is rooted in moderation and clarity'⁸⁶ exemplified by evenness of execution and immaculate rhythmic control. Conversely their approaches to touch and articulation reveal fundamental differences stemming from Casadesus' cool classicism as opposed to Perlemuter's lyrical romanticism. Roy Howat notes that for Ravel 'differences of individual and national style from performers left him unworried:

⁸⁵ 'Après les heures passées à discuter autant qu'à jouer du piano, on peut dire que Vlado Perlemuter est un des détenteurs de la pensée ravélienne. On ne peut jouer plus ravélien. Ayant comme violiniste, travaillé le *Sonate*, le *Duo* et le *Trio* avec Ravel, je reconnais dans l'interprétation pianistique de Perlemuter tous les 'dadas' si j'ose dire, tous les souhaits ravéliens : les soufflets exagérés, les crescendi qui explosent en colère, les gruppetti qui meurent sur une note claire, les frôlements de chattes amoureuses et dans toute cette fantaisie, la mesure dans l'expression et même dans le rubato ... la rigueur'. Ravel d'après Ravel, pp. 8-9.

⁸⁶ Hans-Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel: Variationen über Person und Werk* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), English trans. By Samuel Rosenbaum, (Calder & Boyles, 1969) *Maurice Ravel: Variations on his Life and Work*, Introduction.

many are the stories of him endorsing performances quite different from his own conception so long as they showed musical intelligence and coherence.⁸⁷ These references to intelligence and cohesion indisputably apply to the relative outsider, Madeleine de Valmalète, in her intuitive recording of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and the clear-sighted way in which she brings Ravel's notation to life. In this sense, Valmalète's interpretation would seem to resonate most directly with Ravel's stance on the performance of his music, as recalled by Marguerite Long at a masterclass in 1925: 'Madam, don't interpret my music, just play it, and believe me, that's already enough of a challenge!'.⁸⁸

⁸⁷Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*. p. 321.

⁸⁸ Ravel's comment, made to a student during a masterclass at the École Normale de Musique in 1925, related by Marguerite Long and quoted in Janine Weill, *Marguerite Long - une vie fascinante*, p. 91.

Chapter 5

Ravel's Place in the Twentieth-Century French Pianistic Canon

Ravel the composer

Le Tombeau de Couperin may have signalled an end to Ravel's compositional involvement in the solo piano genre, but for the last twenty years of his life he would explore pianistic sonority in a diverse body of works, including song cycles, instrumental chamber works and two piano concertos as Table 5.1 demonstrates.

Table 5.1. Ravel's piano-based compositions dating from 1920-1937

Year of first Performance	Title	Scoring
1920	<i>La Valse</i>	two pianos (four hands) solo piano
1922	<i>Berceuse sur le nom de Fauré</i>	violin and piano
1924	<i>Ronsard à son âme</i>	voice and piano
1924	<i>Tzigane</i>	violin and piano luthéal
1926	<i>Chansons madécasses</i>	voice, flute, cello and piano
1927	Sonata for violin and piano	violin and piano
1932	Concerto for the Left Hand	piano and orchestra
1932	Concerto in G	piano and orchestra
1934	<i>Don Quichotte à Dulcinée</i>	voice and piano

He continued to juxtapose elements of the musical past and present alternating between works of immense virtuosity and telling simplicity, as he had done in 1908 with *Gaspard de la nuit* and *Ma mère l'oye*. In the solo piano version of *La Valse* the transcendental techniques of 'Scarbo' from *Gaspard de la nuit* are fused with the neoclassical harmonies of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. Contrast this with the two works that follow it, the *Berceuse sur le nom de Fauré* (1922) with its simple chordal accompaniments whose modal flavour allude subtly to the harmonic style of the dedicatee, and *Ronsard à son âme* (1924), where Ravel pares down his pianistic textures to bare fifths played solely by the right hand that weave around the vocal

line, evoking the sound world of sixteenth-century counterpoint. In *Tzigane* Ravel replaced the piano with a newly invented instrument, the piano luthéal, built by Georges Cloetens and patented in 1919. Cloetens had constructed a mechanical frame that could be inserted onto the piano strings transforming the normal piano sound into that of a 'harp' and/or 'harpsichord'.¹ Combining the two colours produced a timbre akin to the cimbalom, providing Ravel with the perfect accompaniment for the solo violin in this brilliant pastiche of Hungarian gypsy music. In yet another about-turn, the piano's percussive qualities come to the fore in the second of the *Chansons madécasses*, 'Aoua!', with rhythmic and melodic ostinati that explore bitonal clashes and dissonant intervallic combinations, whereas in the Sonata for violin and piano, Ravel taps into what he terms the 'incompatibility'² of the two instruments, exploring counterpoint and modality, the rhythmic and harmonic nuances of blues, and dry neoclassical chordal accompaniments in his piano writing.

Ultimately, and arguably the most extensive exploration of pianistic sonority in all of Ravel's keyboard works can be found in the two piano concertos. Composed simultaneously they are all the more extraordinary in that they inhabit totally different pianistic universes. The Concerto in G owes its allegiance to the classical pianism of Mozart and Saint-Saëns, whilst the Concerto for the Left Hand pits the pianist's left hand against the might of the orchestra in a David and Goliath conflict of

¹ The rekindling of interest in early music in France during the first decades of the twentieth century had prompted Cloetens (a Belgian organ builder) to search for a way to create harpsichord (and harp) sounds on the piano by inserting certain devices onto the piano mechanism. Ravel also used the piano luthéal in his opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1920-25). For more information see 'A guide to the piano luthéal', Caroline Rae in conversation with Thierry Maniquet at the Musée de la Musique in the Cité de la Musique, *City of Light: Paris 1900-1950* (London: Philharmonia Orchestra, 2015) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5VpzwrTkfI>> [accessed June 2015].

² Alexis Roland-Manuel, 'Une Esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel', *La Revue musicale* (Paris: 1938), pp. 17-23. English trans. Dennis Collins, 'An Autobiographical Sketch of Maurice Ravel', in Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 32.

Lisztian virtuosity. Together these concertos constitute a comprehensive guide to Ravel's pianistic genealogy, with influences that can be traced back to his earliest experiences, the fluid pianism of the *Stile brillante*, the virtuosic piano writing of Thalberg, a melodic sensibility inherited from Mozart and Chopin, Chabrier's vibrant rhythms and harmonies and Liszt's orchestrally conceived pianism. At one point in the Concerto for the Left Hand, Ravel's extended arpeggio figurations call for a displacement fingering where the whole hand move at lightning speed across the piano in a 1-2-3-5 fingering pattern, an innovative technique associated principally with the pianism of Johannes Brahms, a composer who Ravel famously dismissed as having written 'a concerto against the piano'.³ Tables 5.2 and 5.3 illustrate the breadth of Ravel's models in each concerto.

³ Unsigned interview in De Telegraaf, 6 April, 1932. Reproduced in Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, p. 494.

Table 5.2. Ravel: Concerto in G: Pianistic techniques assimilated from other composers.

Rehearsal number in full score	Composer	Description of piano writing
Movement 1 'Allegramente'		
4-5	Gershwin	Blues harmonies with enharmonic clashes
10	Scarlatti	Leaping ostinati within motoric passagework
17	Saint-Saëns/Liszt	Busy octave ascent between the hands
18	Thalberg	Three-handed texture - inner melody surrounded by chords
26	Thalberg	Three-handed texture - inner melody surrounded by trill (treble) and arpeggiated figurations (bass)
Movement 2 'Adagio assai'		
Opening	Mozart	Simple melody and accompaniment (latter's oom-pah-pah rhythm gently alluding to Ravel's penchant for irony)
3-6	Mozart/Chopin/ Saint-Saëns	Cantilena counter melody
Movement 3 'Presto'		
1	Stravinsky/Thalberg	Brisk inner melody played by alternate thumbs surrounded by bare fifths and augmented intervals.
3	Gershwin	Cross-rhythmic interplay between the hands
4	Liszt	Semiquaver passage work with a leaping chordal accompaniment
6	Moscheles	Hands engage in a fast-moving counterpoint
9	Chabrier	Energetic and lively texture - parallel chords reminiscent of the <i>Joyeuse marche</i>

Table 5.3. Ravel: Concerto for the Left Hand: Pianistic techniques assimilated from other composers.

Rehearsal figure	Composer	Description of piano writing in the <i>Concerto</i>
4	Liszt	First piano entry (cadenza) akin to the bravura opening piano statement in Liszt's Piano Concerto No.1
8	Thalberg	Three-hand texture - treble thumb melody, inner chords and arpeggiated bass line
10-11	Liszt	Extended arpeggios incorporating wide leaps as in Liszt's 'La Campanella'
17	Chabrier	Rhythmic drive and brightly nuanced passagework in compound time
21	Chopin	Rare instance of fast cascade of octaves reminiscent of the final flourish in Chopin's Étude Op.10 No. 5
38	Brahms	Arpeggio writing suggests a fingering of 1-2-3-5/1-2-3-5 etc, a technique exploited by Brahms in his piano works and specifically in his 51 Exercises
43-46	Liszt	Fast moving stride bass similar to those used by Liszt in the Hungarian Rhapsodies
50	Liszt/Thalberg/Chabrier	Arpeggiated textures expanded to accommodate large areas of the keyboard, coupled with thumb melodies and internal chords. Ravel signs off in the final five bars with a salute to Chabrier.

Ravel the performer and teacher

Ravel continued to perform his solo works in public well into the 1930s. A letter written to the promoter of his American tour in 1928-29 details the list of solo works that he was prepared to offer, including *Menuet antique*, *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*, *Sonatine* (all three movements), 'Oiseaux tristes' and 'La Vallée des cloches' from *Miroirs*, *Prélude* (1913), and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (excepting the 'Fugue' and

‘Toccatà’⁴ in addition to the piano parts of the song cycles *Histoires naturelles* and *Chansons madécasses*, and the Sonata for violin and piano. The public responses to his performances were mixed, ranging from ‘polished, infinitely whimsical’ to ‘it is a tradition that composers play badly and no one can complain that Ravel does not respect it’.⁵

Ravel’s performance styles as reflected in the roll recordings from 1913, 1922 and 1928 also highlight elements of quirkiness and unpredictability often at odds with his notated instructions. This has not been helped by distorted and unbalanced transfers of the piano rolls to LP and CD format during the twentieth century (as discussed in Chapter 3). Nevertheless with the advent of sensitive realizations carried out on appropriately prepared pianos by Denis Condon, Ken Caswell, and in particular, Denis Hall, it is now possible to appreciate Ravel’s interpretations for the crucial information they impart with regard to his performance practice choices that go beyond his written notation.

Turning to the interpretations of his works by other performers, Ravel is known to have favoured several pianists (mostly of French origin) at one time or another, the most significant being Ricardo Viñes, Marguerite Long, Robert Casadesus, Henriette Faure, Vlado Perlemuter, Jacques Février, Yvonne Lefébure and Marcelle Meyer. Viñes played a decisive role in the formation of Ravel’s pianistic style and as David Korevaar and Laurie J. Sampsel note ‘there is little question that Viñes’ brand of pianism dependent on his exquisite pedalling and command of colour had a

⁴ Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader* (1990). Letter from Ravel to Bernard Laberge, 11 November 1928.

⁵ Samuel Chotzinoff, ‘Music’, *New York World*, 27 February 1928; Norman Dunfee, *Maurice Ravel in America* (DMA dissertation, 1980). Both quotations reproduced in Nichols, *Ravel*, pp. 292-3.

tremendous effect on Ravel's development as a composer'.⁶ Ravel chose Viñes to premiere the majority of his piano works from the *Sérénade grotesque* up to *Gaspard de la nuit*. The premiere of *Jeux d'eau* in April 1902 was a defining moment for French pianistic impressionism, inspiring and unleashing a stream of works from Claude Debussy including the *Estampes* (1903), *Masques* (1904) and *L'isle joyeuse* (1904) all of which were also premiered by Viñes. However both Ravel and Debussy seem to have become dissatisfied with Viñes' interpretations of their works around the same time. Ravel referred to Viñes' playing of *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908) as not 'in the way the composer intended' citing his ignoring of the nuance and tempo markings.⁷ Likewise Debussy complained of Viñes 'distorting the expression' when performing the second series of the *Images*.⁸

Marguerite Long provided the perfect antidote to Viñes with her clean, elegant playing style, and from 1910 onward she actively promoted Ravel's piano works, giving the premieres of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and the Concerto in G, and as the teacher of Jeanne Leleu and Geneviève Durony (aged 11 and 14 respectively) who premiered *Ma Mère l'Oye*.⁹ Ravel came to Long's defence after the premiere of the Concerto in G (when critic Henri Prunières had panned her performance as 'lacking inspiration') with a resounding endorsement of her interpretation stating that 'it conforms in all particulars to my own thoughts and it should form the basis of a tradition for future performance'.¹⁰ Long's 1932 recording of the Concerto in G

⁶ David Korevaar and Laurie J. Sampsel, 'The Ricardo Viñes Piano Music Collection at the University of Colorado at Boulder', *Notes*, Second Series, Vol. 61, No.2 (Music Library Association, 2004), pp. 361-400.

⁷ Expressed in a letter to Michel Calvocoressi in March 1922 prior to his recording sessions for Duo-Art. Reproduced in Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, p. 219.

⁸ Charles Timbrell, 'Debussy in Performance', *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 262.

⁹ Dates of premieres: 11 April 1919, 5 January 1932, and 20 April 1910 respectively.

¹⁰ Open letter to Henri Prunières, *La revue musicale*, 13 April 1932, p. 320. Prunières' critique had appeared in the February (1932) issue. English trans., Ronald Woodley, 'Performing Ravel: Style and

demonstrates excellent articulation throughout and is played authoritatively with strict tempi tempered with a judicious use of rubato.¹¹

It therefore seems that Ravel's shift towards a more classical style of pianism in his compositions from 1910 onwards was also reflected in his preferred choice of interpreters. The pianist he selected instead of Viñes to record *Gaspard de la nuit* at the 1922 Duo-Art recording sessions was the twenty-three-year-old Robert Casadesus, whose playing style epitomised the French qualities of balance, fluidity and, crucially for Ravel, fidelity to the text and an ability to maintain a rock-solid pulse (Casadesus had briefly served as a drummer in the French army). Ravel was particularly effusive regarding Casadesus' performance of *Jeux d'eau* in a pioneering radio broadcast devoted to Ravel's piano works in 1924.¹² As with Long's brisk interpretation of the 'Prélude' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* Ravel approved of Casadesus' tempo for *Jeux d'eau* (quaver = 160, as opposed to 144 as marked).

Equally appealing to Ravel was the mellow playing of Vlado Perlemuter whose lyrical and more subjective tone brought an added dimension to his interpretations of Ravel's music. Both Perlemuter and Henriette Faure gained invaluable insight into Ravel's vision for his works as their recollections of lessons with him attest. Ravel's attention to detail was microscopic and rigorous, with intense sessions spent fine-tuning rhythmic independence between the hands, accentuation, pedalling, and dynamic nuances. However, Ravel's method seems never to have been draconian as Perlemuter observed: '[...] he wanted one to play exactly what he had written without

Practice in the Early Recordings', in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 235.

¹¹ Marguerite Long (piano); Symphony orchestra with Pedro de Freitas Branco (conductor), Paris: Columbia, April 1932. CD, Pristine Classics PASC285 (2011).

¹² The concert/broadcast took place at the Salle Pleyel, Paris, 11 June 1924. Ravel wrote to Casadesus, saying 'Did I tell you, the other night, that *Jeux d'eau* (among other pieces) has never been played so well?' Letter dated 18 June 1924 reproduced in Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, p. 256.

it becoming stiff (*figé*).¹³ The recorded interpretations of Ravel's piano works by both Faure and Perlemuter discussed in the earlier chapters highlight these essential qualities that Ravel promulgated, and yet their performances display many subtle differences that betray their contrasting pedagogical background. Faure cut her pianistic teeth with arch-classicists Louis Diémer and Marguerite Long, whereas Perlemuter's technique was honed with Moszkowski, whilst his extrovert, nuanced interpretations can be traced back to his studies with Alfred Cortot.

Cortot's relationship with Ravel seems to have been cordial but rather guarded, and as Karen Taylor observes: 'in the opinion of many French musicians active between the war, Cortot had little flair for the music of Ravel - less idiomatic and not of the same exceptional artistic interest as his playing of say Fauré'.¹⁴ It is not known what Ravel thought of Cortot's 1923 recording of *Jeux d'eau*,¹⁵ described by Ronald Woodley as 'a stunning performance, retaining exceptional qualities of clarity and pianism and a finely judged balance between volatility and restraint'.¹⁶ Cortot's opening tempo is even faster than that of Casadesus at quaver = 168, with the performance achieving a structural fluidity that Woodley notes as creating 'the sense of an extended improvisation with links back to the Lisztian tradition'.¹⁷ Marguerite Long highlights this last point in her treatise *Le Piano* where she states that Ravel 'demanded that one should play *Jeux d'eau* like Liszt'.¹⁸ Cortot's 1931 recording of the

¹³ '[...] il voulait que l'on jouât exactement ce qu'il avait écrit mais il ne voulait pas, non plus, que ce soit quelque chose de figé.' Comment sourced from Jean Roy (ed.), *Ravel d'après Ravel, suivi des rencontres avec Vlado Perlemuter* (Aix-en-Provence : Alinea, 1989), p. 98.

¹⁴ Karen M. Taylor, *Alfred Cortot: his Interpretive Art and Teachings*, DMA dissertation (Indiana University, 1988).

¹⁵ New York: Victor, 1 March 1923.

¹⁶ Woodley, 'Performing Ravel: Style and Practice in the Early Recordings' in Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, (2000), pp. 226-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ 'Ravel est le continuateur de la technique de Liszt. Il demandait que l'on jouât *Jeux d'eau* comme du Liszt.' Marguerite Long, 'Introduction', *Le Piano* (Paris: Salabert, 1959), p.16.

*Sonatine*¹⁹ is also highly nuanced, employing lingering touches of rubato and tempo fluctuations that feel somewhat indulgent when compared with Ravel's most restrained approach in his 1913 roll recording. It would seem that Cortot was more suited to Ravel's extrovert piano works (regrettably he did not record *Miroirs* or *Gaspard de la nuit*) as demonstrated in his exuberant and highly charged recording of the Concerto for the Left Hand.²⁰ Unfortunately Cortot incurred Ravel's displeasure by rearranging the Concerto for two hands, an act that implies he misunderstood Ravel's intentions for this work and especially the way in which Ravel's exploration of pianistic virtuosity stems entirely from the singular physical configurations of the left hand.

Jacques Février, who studied with Marguerite Long and was Ravel's favoured interpreter of the Concerto for the Left Hand²¹ cultivated a pianistic style quite distinct from that of Cortot. In his 1971 recording of the complete solo works he demonstrates an empathy with Ravel's orchestral sound world, evoking the woodwind sonorities from the 'Forlane' of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in his performance using a dry, articulate sonority and sparse pedalling.²² The performance style of Yvonne Lefébure, who straddles the pedagogical schools of both Long and Cortot also demonstrates this alertness to Ravel's orchestral palette of colours, as she herself maintained: 'I try not to play the piano but to play the orchestra'.²³ Lefébure's performance style, combining incisive fingerwork with a big sound that

¹⁹ Paris: Gramophone, May 1931.

²⁰ Alfred Cortot (piano); Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, Charles Munch, (conductor), Paris: Gramophone, 12 May 1939. CD, Naxos Historical, 8. 110613, (2000).

²¹ According to Roger Nichols, *Ravel*, p. 320.

²² LP, Adès 7041-4 (1971).

²³ Quote from Yvonne Lefébure in the accompanying booklet notes to CD Solstice FYCD 018 (1975) [author unknown].

emanated from Cortot's whole body technique, was captured in a fulsome review by American composer and critic Virgil Thomson:

One of Madame Lefébure's most impressive achievements is the accuracy with which she can strike whole chords from a height of 15" above the keyboard with perfect balance and agreeable tone at any speed and at any degree of loudness or softness.²⁴

With Marcelle Meyer, the pedagogical picture expands even further to incorporate not only Long and Cortot but also Ricardo Viñes. Thus her interpretations of Ravel's piano works run the gamut of French keyboard techniques, combining the clarity and dexterity of the clavecinistes (Rameau and Couperin), Chabrier's bright colours, Debussy's half-tints and long pedals, the brisk tempi, tensile strength and cool detachment of Les Six, and her most Ravelian attribute, a preoccupation with melodic projection.

The sheer diversity of compositional styles and pianistic techniques in Ravel's solo piano works, coupled with the wide-ranging genealogical backgrounds and performing styles of the pianists discussed within this dissertation, make it virtually impossible to pinpoint one interpretative formula that fits all. What emerges instead is an intriguing *mélange* of performance practices incorporating on the one hand French classicism rooted in eighteenth-century keyboard techniques (with Long at the helm) and on the other nineteenth-century French romanticism (with Cortot at the helm). Threads of commonality bind these two opposing strands of French pianism together in the tempered use of *rubato*, expressive practices governed by clearly defined dynamic gradations and an approach to articulation that stems from orchestral (and vocal) colour, a rhythmic acuity that owes its origins to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dances and a deft balancing of textures that give light and clarity to the interpretation. At the centre sits Ravel who as the composer

²⁴ Virgil Thomson reviewing a recital given by Lefébure in New York [n.d.]. *Ibid.*

imbibed, memorized, reworked, reinvented and gave new life to the piano techniques of his forefathers in a series of staggeringly original compositions.

In a short film extract filmed at Le Belvédère in Montfort l'Amaury, Caroline Rae describes Ravel's home thus:

Each room is its own universe [...] as you travel from room to room you travel in space and in time, so almost the boundaries of Ravel's house are limitless ... as limitless and without boundaries as his own imagination.²⁵

In the same way each piano work inhabits its own universe, inviting the performer to explore pianistic colour, texture and timbre from a fresh perspective at every opportunity with intellect, taste, balance and sensibility whilst always mindful of Ravel's mantra: '[...] the performer's task is never to forget that the line between the letter and spirit of a work is very narrow and must remain so'.²⁶

²⁵ Caroline Rae, City of Light: 'Ravel's world'. <www.philharmonia.co.uk/paris/> [Accessed June 2015].

²⁶ Unpublished typescript by Andre Asselin, entitled 'Nostalgie' imparted to Arbie Orenstein by Jean Touzelet and reproduced in *A Ravel Reader*, p. 389.

Selective Bibliography

This bibliography is divided into two main sections relating to primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are divided into four subsections:

(1) Books, treatises, exercise manuals, studies and scores (excepting scores of Ravel's solo piano works which are listed separately); (2) scores of Ravel's piano works, including early editions and manuscripts, this section being itself subdivided; (3) discography; (4) documentaries, interviews, televised masterclasses and live performances relating to aspects of pedagogy and performance in Ravel's piano music. Scores accessed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France have been identified below with their BnF catalogue number. Annotated performance editions that belonged to pianists discussed in this dissertation, accessed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) and Mediathèque Musicale Mahler (MMM) are also listed below together with details of the modern performance editions consulted in preparation for this thesis.

Secondary sources are arranged into two subsections: (5) books and dissertations; (6) book chapters and journal articles. Relevant articles from the *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* have been listed together in the final section under the journal title. Additional materials including individual letters, press articles and draft papers housed at the archive collections of Marguerite Long, Alfred Cortot, Yvonne Lefébure and Émile Vuillermoz at the Mediathèque Musicale Mahler are too numerous to include here but have been referenced as required in the dissertation footnotes.

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- Sonatine* [IFN 8478966]
- Miroirs* (Paris: Demets, 1906) [VmBob 21895]
- 'Une barque sur l'océan' [MS13453 and MS17328]
- 'Alborada del gracioso' [VmBob 5902]
- 'La Vallée des cloches' [MS17682]
- Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand, 1909) [VmBob 21897]
- Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Paris: Durand, 1911) [VmBob 21899]

b) Annotated performance editions (Ravel) that belonged to other pianists [accessed at the MMM and BnF]

i) Casadesus, Robert (accessed at BnF VM Casadesus 489)

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- Sonatine* (Paris: Durand, 1905)
- Miroirs* (New York: Schirmer, No. 3360 ed. Robert Casadesus according to Gaby Casadesus 1985)
- Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand, 1909)
- Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Paris: Durand, 1911)
- Le Tombeau de Couperin* (Paris: Durand, 1918)

ii) Cortot, Alfred (accessed at the MMM, Fonds Cortot)

- Jeux d'eau* (Paris: Demets, 1902)
- 'Alborada del gracioso' (Paris: Eschig, 1906)
- Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand, 1909)
- Valses nobles et sentimentales* (Paris: Durand, 1911)

Le Tombeau de Couperin (Paris: Durand, 1918)

iii) Long, Marguerite (accessed at the MMM, Fonds Long)

Le Tombeau de Couperin (Paris: Durand, 1918)

Piano Concerto in G (Paris: Durand, 1932)

iv) Perlemuter, Vlado (accessed at the BnF)

Jeux d'eau (Paris: Eschig, 1902) [IFN - 55000854]

Sonatine (Paris: Durand, 1905) [IFN - 55000852]

Miroirs (Paris: Demets, 1906) [IFN - 55000847]

Gaspard de la nuit (Paris: Durand, 1909) [IFN - 55000856]

Valses nobles et sentimentales (Paris: Durand, 1911) [IFN - 55000846]

Le Tombeau de Couperin (Paris: Durand 1918) [IFN - 55000857]

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Paris: Salabert, 1975

Menuet antique

Paris: Enoch, 1898, (reprinted New York: Dover, 1986)

Pavane pour une Infante défunte,

London: Peters (ed. Roger Nichols), 1992

Jeux d'eau

Paris: Eschig, 1902

London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1991

Munich: Henle (ed. Peter Jost), 2008

Sonatine

Paris: Durand, 1905;

London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1995

Munich: Henle (ed. Jost), 2011

Miroirs

Paris: Eschig, 1906

London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1991

Gaspard de la nuit:

Paris: Durand, 1909

Van Nuys: Alfred (ed. Nancy Bricard), 1990

London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1991

Menuet sur le nom de Haydn

London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1993

Valses nobles et sentimentales:

Solo piano - Paris: Durand, 1911

Orchestra - Paris: Durand, 1912, (reprinted: New York: Dover, 2001)

Prélude

London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1993

À la manière de Borodine:

London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1993

À la manière de Chabrier

London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1993

Le Tombeau de Couperin (Solo piano)

- Paris: Durand, 1918
 London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 1995;
Le Tombeau de Couperin (Orchestra)
 Paris: Durand, 1919, (reprinted: New York: Dover, 2001)
La Valse (Solo piano)
 Paris: Durand, 1920
 Concerto pour piano et orchestre (Solo piano with orchestral reduction)
 Paris: Durand, 1932
 London: Peters (ed. Nichols), 2014
 Concerto pour la main gauche (Solo piano with orchestral reduction)
 Paris: Durand, 1937
Maurice Ravel: Œuvres pour piano (reprint of original Durand edition)
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- ii) The Condon Collection, produced by Denis Condon: '*Ravel: Masters of the Piano Roll*'. CD, DSPRCD 004 (1992)
- iii) '*Maurice Ravel plays Ravel*', LP, Ember: GVC 39, 1975; CD reissue (2009)

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 Reissued as CD, BnF Collection [no catalogue number] (2014)

Février, Jacques

LP, Adès 7041/44 (1971)

François, Samson

CVC 2054-6 IME- Pathé Marconi, Paris (1957/58)

LP, EMI France (1967). CD, EMI (2002). CD including the Piano Concertos, Warner Classics 5099967831 (2012)

Lefébure, Yvonne

Jeux d'eau, Valses nobles et sentimentales and *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Recorded in 1975. CD Solstice FYCD 018 (1986)

Long, Marguerite

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