A DISCUSSION OF MAURICE RAVEL’S MASTERPIECE,

LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN

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In the late nineteenth century, the impressionist movement in music occurred as a reaction to the excesses of the Romantic era. While the Romantic era was characterized by a dramatic use of the major and minor scale system, Impressionist music tends to use more dissonance and uncommon scales such as the whole-tone scale. Also, musical Impressionism focused on atmosphere, rather than the expression of strong emotion or the depiction of a story, as in program music.\(^1\) Impressionist composers tended to use short forms such as the arabesque, and prelude, while Romantic composers often used long forms such as the symphony and concerto. Maurice Ravel is one of the mainstream French impressionists.

Even though Ravel developed his impressionism on the basis of the generally accepted harmonic system of his day, his music is very personal and individual. In other words, Ravel made his very individual contributions to nineteenth- and twentieth-century French music.

*Le Tombeau de Couperin* is one of the best examples of Ravel’s mature musical style. It is the last piano music of Ravel, and it contains six dances modeled after the Baroque style. Also, there is another reason why *Le Tombeau de Couperin* can be considered an important piece. It was created during a turning point in Ravel’s life. Ravel lost seven friends in World War I, and his beloved mother also died at that time; *Le Tombeau de Couperin* was completed shortly thereafter. Each dance is dedicated to one of these friends.

In the *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel developed the ideas of neoclassicism and impressionism at the same time.

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He possessed an infallible ear for the precise and accurate dosage of instrumental sonorities, delicate adjustments of tone-color and the balance of opposing timbres. Interestingly, Ravel also composed an orchestral version of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*.

I. Historical background

1. Maurice Ravel’s Life

   Ravel was born in 1875 in the Basque village of Ciboure. Three months after his birth, his family moved to Paris. He grew up in Paris, and he studied at the Conservatoire. By 1905, some of Ravel’s works had received performances at the *Societe Nationale*. In 1914, World War I broke out in Europe; Ravel was unfit for military service. He compensated by volunteering as an army truck driver. In 1916, he became ill with dysentery. While he was recuperating in Paris, his mother died suddenly in January 1917. With his emotional bedrock gone, Ravel was desolate. After World War I, Ravel suffered from insomnia, complaining frequently of ‘cerebral anemia.’ He was involved in a car accident and was slightly injured in 1932. From that moment his condition worsened. Despite resting and traveling to Spain and Morocco in 1935, Ravel was sometimes unable even to sign his name. He died in Paris on December 28, 1937. ²

   Ravel’s musical life is often divided into three periods. The first period: 1875-1905. During this time, Ravel’s true style was formed. The Habanera of 1895 is a good example of Ravel’s compositional techniques. About 1900, Ravel became less sure of himself. His music was influenced by Debussy.

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The second period: 1905-1918. Miroirs, Histoires Naturelles, Repsodie Espagnoe, L’Heure Espagnole, Gaspard de la Nuit, Daphnis et Chloe well all written during the period. The common characteristics of these works were flexibility of form within the structural outline, and richness and magnificence in the basic harmonies, in keeping with the exacting caprices of a smooth and compact melodic line. He experimented using elements of folk music.

The third period: 1918-1937. The works of this period include La Valse, the Duo-Sonata, Bolero, and the Concerto for left hand alone. Among the fundamentals of Ravel’s style, melody obviously is considered first. He used minuets, pavannes, passacaglias, the forlane, the rigaudon, and every variety of waltz, czarda, habanera, bolero, fox-trot and “blues.” Ravel borrowed these musical materials in his work, but he never forgot the symphony, the sonata, or the various forms of chamber music.

Le Tombeau de Couperin

Ravel began working on Le Tombeau de Couperin in 1914, and completed this suite in 1917. When World War I began in August 1914, Maurice Ravel compensated by volunteering, but he did not give up his composing. In the summer of 1917, Ravel was discharged from the army, and he returned to the French Suite. He completed it in 1917.

The French word for tomb has been used in French literature and music since the seventeenth century to signify “homage to the dead.”

included patrons or relatives, but more often, the Tombeau was consecrated to a dead teacher or master. A musical tombeau, always a single movement, was written for various instruments, most commonly lute, harpsichord, or viol. Musical tombeaux bring back something that is gone. Musical tombeaux were associated, in sense and style, with the laments and pains that, especially in France and Italy, had been the custom ever since Monteverdi’s Plaint of Ariadne and Froberger’s mourning pieces. The tombeau is a jewel of classic form and of its expression turned inward on itself, a memorial of sublimated grief, and simply, of sublimation itself. All self-torture, all renunciation of love, all tragedy over the loss of a mother and of fallen friends has here found concealment under a projective arch of artistry. Ravel’s heart has been transformed into sheer music.

It is a kind of miniature musical representation of the massive stone memorials inscribed with thousands of names, or of the endless cemeteries of Northern France. Ravel remade the title as Le Tombeau de Couperin for the fallen soldiers with whom he had close relationships. The work reveals the profound emotional impact of his experiences in the war and breathes farewell. Each movement of the suite is dedicated to one or more of Ravel’s lost friends. Prelude was dedicated to Lieutenant Jacques Charlot. He was a fellow musician who had produced the piano reductions of Ma Mere l’Oye. Fugue was dedicated to Sub-lieutenant Jean Cruppi. He was the son of an influential woman who had helped secure the premiere of L’Heure espagnole. Forlane was dedicated to Lieutenant Gabriel Deluc. He was an old friend of Ravel. Rigaudon was dedicated to Pierre and Pascal Gaudin who were also old friends of Ravel. Menuet was

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dedicated to Jean Dreyfus. He was the son of his wartime godmother, to whom he had addressed his Menuet Antique and the second movement of his sonatine. Toccata was dedicated to Captain Joseph de Marliave. He was an amateur musician married to distinguished pianist Marguerite Long.

Also, as the title implies, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* claims admiration to Francois Couperin who lived from 1668 to 1733. The idea of being inspired by him was homage to the French tradition. According to Valdo Perlemuter, a pianist who studied with Ravel, “Ravel tried to copy Couperin…and produced Ravel!”\(^7\) Even though Ravel borrowed Couperin’s ideas, he produced his own style. His aim was simply to pay tribute to French music of the eighteenth century in general.

II. Ravel’s independent musical style

Ravel composed 17 piano works. His piano works are distinguished with the use of abundant dynamic expressions, classical forms, and special dance rhythms. Just like the other impressionists, Ravel also focused on the expression of the changeable impression, not for the reality. However, Ravel was different from the other impressionists. Actually, Ravel was inspired by Debussy’s impressionistic music, and Ravel was happy to admit the influence of Debussy on his *Scheherazade* in his book, *An Autobiographical Sketch*. However, he was not simply a follower or imitator of Debussy.\(^8\)

Ravel was a craftsman and traditionalist. While Debussy’s music focused significantly on atmosphere, Ravel’s music had clear form, and his ideas were never

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obscured. There are many similarities in their music such as using rich harmonies, new scales that are associated with musical impressionism, and an interest in the exotic.

Debussy’s music was characterized by a preference for chords of the ninth and the hexaphonic or whole-tone scale, while Ravel cultivated the eleventh harmonic and never used whole-tone scale. His melodies are almost invariably modal, and the modes he used most frequently were the Dorian(d-d’) and Phrygian(e-e’), the latter being characteristic of Andalucian folk-music and the former of Baroque music, although it is also found frequently in old French songs.  

The piano is the privileged instrument in Ravel’s art, not only because he was a pianist and composer at the keyboard, but because virtually all of the fresh trends in his style first appear in piano music. The sophisticated harmonies, the music of Spain, the dance rhythms, archaic pastiche, the impressionistic techniques, the thinner texture of the postwar years, and even some of its harsher outlines are all announced at the keyboard.

Much of Ravel’s treatment of rhythm is conditioned by the dance. In addition to the lilting waltz, the graceful minuet, and the colorful rhythms of Basque and Spanish music, Baroque dances are adapted in *Le Tombeau de Couperin* very well. Ravel was affected by two people of Spanish color, Ravel’s mother Marie and close friend Ricardo Vines. His mother was of Basque heritage, and Ricardo Vines was a pianist.

The Rigaudon and Toccata are examples of the affection for Spanish color in Ravel’s music. Especially, the prelude and Toccata are Romantic pianistic gesture, and those are virtuoso pieces. According to Henri Gil-Marchex, Romantic pianistic gesture requires “an independence of arm which has to be acquired specially, even after one has

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9 Arbie Orenstein, 127.
studied Liszt’s Transcendental Studies.”  

The French pianist, Henri Gil-Marchex, thought that Ravel’s finger technique was derived from the clavichinists, especially Scarlatti.

Ravel’s certain refinements of touch were influenced by Chopin’s preludes and the études. The piano music derives largely from the clarity and elegance of Scarlatti, Couperin, French clavichinists, Mozart, Chabrier, and Saint-Saens, as well as the color and virtuosity of Chopin and particularly of Liszt.

Also, Ravel used another musical style, neoclassicism, in addition to impressionism. Neoclassicism in music was a twentieth-century development. It was popular in the period between the two World Wars, and composers drew inspiration from the music of the eighteenth century, although some of the inspiring canon was drawn as much from the Baroque period as the Classical period.

*Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a work by a twentieth century composer in an old genre, the dance suite, borrowing obligatory features from Francois Couperin’s keyboard dances, rhythms, forms, and characteristics ornaments, on the basis of strange harmonies. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a six-movement piano suite that borrows the form from the Baroque period’s harpsichord ordre. Eighteenth century manners are suggested in this music, such as lilting dotted rhythms in compound meter. The expression was exposed by twentieth century inflection, such as seventh contour of the melody that stressed the offbeat or combined melancholy and dissonant harmonies. Tightly controlled small scale

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forms, such as binary, ternary, and rondeau with refrains and couplets, were used with traditional notation conventions such as repeat marks and first/second time bars.\footnote{Barbara L. Kelly, \textit{Ravel, Maurice}, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.}

After the original version for piano had been written, the work was transcribed for orchestra and mounted as a ballet. Ravel’s piano scores often imitated instruments and voices, and his orchestral ones sometimes recreate piano sounds, while translating pianistic into orchestral virtuosity. Many of Ravel’s orchestral works began their lives as piano pieces. The piano version represents the true work; its later instrumental version is an attractive variant. Ravel’s transcriptions are brilliant and truly creative interpretations of their originals. The orchestral transcription of \textit{Le Tombeau de Couperin} was completed in September of 1919. Four movements exist in an orchestral version: prelude, forlane, menuet, and rigaudon. Also, it was produced as a ballet. David Diamond has more recently made an orchestration of the Fugue. The orchestra version is scored for two flutes, oboe, cor anglais, two clarinets, two bassoons, two French horns, trumpet, harp, and strings. The orchestra version was first performed in 1920. Ravel transcribed many of his piano pieces for orchestra, but here he reaches the height of his orchestration skills. The orchestral version clarifies the harmonic language of the suite and brings sharpness to its classical dance rhythms; among the demands it places on the orchestra is the requirement for an oboe soloist of virtuosic skill. Ravel’s orchestrations, short pieces, or collections, such as \textit{Le Tombeau de Couperin}, are associated with ballets. Ravel regarded orchestration as a task separate from composition, involving distinct technical skills. He was always careful to ensure that the writing for each family of instruments worked in isolation as well as in the complete ensemble.
Ravel had a fondness for using instruments in unusual registers and took pleasure sometimes in making them play out of character. For example, the horn would be made to impersonate the trumpet. Ravel added appropriate effects to the original music. He marked careful provision of dynamic and attack markings, percussion parts, and the careful apportioning of orchestral forces.

I will demonstrate how Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin* includes both impressionism and neoclassicism musical styles. Also, some suggestions will be presented for pianists as a performance guide.

III. *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Prelude

The prelude starts with a spare texture, rapid ornaments, and perpetual motion; the prelude recalls harpsichord music, especially, the works of Rameau, Couperin, or Scarlatti. The harmonies are contemporary. The unpedalled sound of m.2 evokes the woodwinds of the orchestra. Also, Ravel was strict about the grace notes being played on the beat, in spite of the rapid tempo that is marked in the score.

The beginning of the work, piano solo version and orchestral score (Ex-1, 2)
Ravel put the oboe for this part in the orchestra version. The sweeping, pianistic passages are shown in example 3.
Fugue

The Fugue is the only example of its kind in all Ravel’s published works. In order to write this fugue, he studied the form intensively.\textsuperscript{13} Even though he rewrote a fugue of Bach, he improved it. The fugal subject is somewhat related to the opening of the prelude, as both themes proceed from A to G and then outline the tonic triad. The fugue was closely knitted in texture with many examples of inversion and stretto. Here are the subject and counter-subject, respectively. (Ex-4, 5)

Ex-4

Here is the subject in contrary motion and the counter-subject in contrary motion, respectively. (Ex-6, 7)

The rhythmic accentuation is very difficult. It is not a brutal accent, but an expressive weighting which varies according to the intensity of the phrase. This fugue should be played simply like a musical box with a certain inner intensity.

There are many examples of Bach’s invention and stretto in Ravel’s fugue. The concluding passage of the fugue contains a stretto for three voices.

(Ex-8)
Forlane

The forlane is based on the oldest of the dance forms represented in the suite. It was originally a gondolier’s dance and the only dance permitted to be performed in front of the Pontiff owing to its formal, non-erotic nature. The forlane comes from the outer Friuli, where it borders on Slavic regions to the east. In form it is related to the livelier gigue and the passamezzo. Also, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French music, the forlane was popular as music for the upper class. Usually it has dotted rhythms and many repetitions.

Valdo Perlemuter, who studied the Tombeau with Ravel, calls “the forlane the piece that most faithfully affirms its allegiance to the past through the sound of its cadences, influenced by antiquity.” In preparation for composing the suite, Ravel transcribed a forlane from Couperin’s concerts in the spring of 1914, and there are clear musical parallels between it and the corresponding movement in Le Tombeau. This piece and Couperin’s forlane are related in texture, rhythm, ornamentation, and structure. Ravel retained ornamentation and formal scheme of refrain and couplets from the original. Ravel’s rhythm, phrasing, articulation, and the key of E major correspond exactly with Couperin’s refrain. Ravel’s rhythmic exchange between the parts, general melodic shape, homophonic character, tessitura, and key are similar to Couperin’s.

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15 Hans Heinz, Stuckenschmidt, 174.
Ravel asked the pianist not to play the last quaver of the group too heavily. It makes only a tiny break before the second beat. (Ex-9)

Ex-9

In the first bar, this takes place in the first half of the measure while the second half remains steady. In the second bar, both halves of the measure are marked by the skipping motion. But in the third bar, Ravel postpones the skip until the second half of the measure and repeats this treatment in the fourth bar. A fully asymmetric rhythmic phrasing is within a four-bar melody. This creates a feeling of unrest, artfully and consciously striven for, which beclouds the clarity of the classic forlane.

A new episode, which recalls the opening theme, is heavily accentuated, with its answering phrase very soft, like a reply. (Ex-10)

Ex-10

Ravel asked the pianists to observe carefully the difference between the two similar phrases of which the second is an echo of the first with no slow down. (Ex-11)

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Rigaudon

The Rigaudon is of ancient French and Provencal ancestry. Rameau and Purcell loved the dance form, and Johann Sebastian Bach made use of it in his suites. However, Ravel was not content merely to copy older models. He changed the form and showed it in a new light, harmonically, melodically, and sometimes rhythmically. In the opening measures, the rapid crossing of the hands recalls the technique of the clavichordists. In the opening section, repetitions are omitted, and it is a traditional fashion.

This dance contrasts an exuberant opening section in C major with a slow pastoral-like section beginning in C minor. The reprise is relatively literal, and in traditional fashion, it omits the repetitions found in the opening section. The triumphant opening of the rigaudon seems like a noble salutation before the dance. The most delicate challenge is to make the figure keep the bass in continuous rhythm of the rigaudon.

(Ex- 12)

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Overall the rhythm is continuous, but the sonority is varied. While the delicate bass in the beginning evokes the violin family, this passage represents a brassy sound, respectively. (Ex-13, 14)
Menuet

Ravel’s first work is the Menuet Antique, whose medieval mode evokes the Menuet Pompeux of Chabrier. The menuet has many similarities with Menuet Antique and the second movement of the sonatine in structure, procedure, modal harmony, and classically balanced phrases.

This menuet of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is less elaborate. This piece must not be played too heavy, and also the grace notes must be placed on the beat. This piece can be boring if pianists do not make it different between many fragments. For example, the second couplet can be played with much more melodic expression than the beginning of the movement.

The ending is a good example of impressionistic music. The trills die with the pedal effect. (Ex-15)

Ex-15

![Ex-15](image)

Toccata

The toccata is technically very difficult, but the melody always has to be clear. The structure of toccata is just like the sonata form, as the opening theme leads to a lyrical theme at the dominant. In a development section, a sustained melody is frequently

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used with the opening theme. Themes one and two reappear, and bring the suite to a brilliant conclusion in E major.

Even though this toccata is quite fast, it has to breathe, so that the rhythm of the toccata can remain clear, as well as the melodic line. (Ex-16)

Ex- 16

![Ex-16](image)

**Conclusion**

*La Tombeau de Couperin*, which was composed at a turning point in Ravel’s life, includes six movements, and they were each dedicated to a different man who lost his life in World War I. The piece is one of Ravel’s most personal works, expressed in dance form with the deepest emotions of his life; the double reaction to the war and to the loss of his mother. There is a deep, painful, even tragic emotion concealed beneath the bright, playful movement of these dances, and their artful imitation of harpsichord music.

The whole work reflects farewell. The emotional depth of Ravel’s six movements are concealed behind its hard, sculptured, and classically ordered form. Even though Maurice Ravel is one of the mainstream French impressionists along with Claude Debussy, his music is very personal and individual. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is one of his great masterpieces.
Bibliography


