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# Introduction

DEBORAH MAWER

## The many masks of Ravel

Our image of Maurice Ravel is still partly obscured by mystery and intangibility, and by some lingering misunderstandings. This situation arises as a result of various factors: Ravel's own actions, his elusive blend of French, Basque and Spanish traits and the quirks of reception across the years (for instance, the emphasis on his undoubted skills of orchestration has to some extent down-played the actual substance of much of his orchestral music). Even in his lifetime, an interviewer for *De Telegraaf* exclaimed, literally and figuratively: 'It is not easy to find the hiding place of Maurice Ravel.'[1]

How then might we think about Ravel? He himself sometimes adopted the metaphor of masks, so popular in contemporary dramatic and balletic productions. Castigating the self-conscious academicism of Georges Witkowski, a pupil of d'Indy, he declared: 'How far this repulsive intellectual logic is from sensibility! Nevertheless, behind this dour mask, one discerns a profound, vibrant musician at every moment.'[2] Among Ravel's early biographers, Vladimir Jankélévitch, especially, developed this image of masks in relation to the composer's compositional aesthetic: 'Ravel is friend to *trompe-l'œil*, deceptions, merry-go-round horses and booby-traps; Ravel is masked.'[3]

So what is the nature of the masks, or distorting mirrors, behind which we might seek Ravel? (In posing this question, we're aware of the impossibility of the quest: in peeling off one mask there is invariably another beneath; furthermore, the masks are so bound up with Ravel's identity that, at one level, they are part of him. No mask: no Ravel.) These devices for detachment and distancing take various forms and can embody contradictions. Fastidious neoclassical craftsmanship, abstracted, objectified and sometimes depersonalised, has a place in Ravel's compositional aesthetic; yet this is contrasted by the sheer sensuousness of *Daphnis et Chloé* and the wild abandon of *La Valse*. The reinterpretation of cultural 'otherness' – including Spanish exoticisms and jazz – offers another mask, while imagined otherness powerfully drives the psychological childhood fantasy of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. Additionally, some of Ravel's music shows a pronounced fluidity of genre, appearing in two or more guises.



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Why the need for masks? In part, no doubt, because of his love of artefacts, musical objects and vehicles, but also because the Ravel who would be laid bare is such a private man – one who, both artistically and physically, exhibited unusual sensitivity and vulnerability,[4] yet still had to endure a succession of traumas.

## Aim and summary of chapters

Marking the 125th anniversary of Ravel's birth (within a tradition of anniversary tributes from 1925, 1938, 1975, 1977 and 1987), this *Companion* seeks to celebrate Ravel's achievement by viewing his music and compositional aesthetic in its cultural context. It also aims to offer something of a reassessment at the start of the new millennium. Part of its *raison d'être* – which would also sustain several future volumes – is that Ravel's music has not yet received enough detailed study; Philip Russom's pronouncement of the mid-1980s is still largely true today: 'Music theorists have left Ravel's music untouched, with the exception of a few pages by Felix Salzer.'[5] An important supporting activity involves the production of new critical editions (currently restricted by copyright), and there are as yet no plans for a collected edition to balance that in progress for Debussy. We do, though, have access to *Ravel's Piano Music – A New Edition*, undertaken by Roger Nichols for Peters Edition, and to selected works at competitive rates courtesy of Dover Publications.[6]

In order to broaden the base for Ravel studies beyond France, it was important (beyond a core of eminent Ravel scholars) to bring in 'new blood' from other related areas. Thus scholars with reputations established by reference to Debussy, Satie, Milhaud and Koechlin have here offered fresh perspectives on Ravel's music, coloured by their distinctive backgrounds. Each chapter pursues a differentiated aspect of Ravel's aesthetic, musical style or reception, but it would be false and undesirable to claim that these compartments are airtight. In fact, one of the interesting things is how different trajectories have certain meeting-points. The most important cross-references (connecting discussions of a work or concept) are flagged up in the main text or endnotes as follows: author's surname, 'relevant subheading': chapter.

Part I aims to secure the background, concentrating on the essentials of Ravel's aesthetic and including aspects of biography. Barbara Kelly contextualises the composer's position within the French (and Austro-German) historical tradition, embracing matters musical, literary and more broadly cultural. Robert Orledge then highlights Ravel's interest in a wide-ranging eclecticism: an engagement with cultural 'otherness', manifested through

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Spanish, Russian, Hebrew and Far Eastern inflections of exoticism, together with something of the blues and early jazz. Chapter 3 probes the idea of the 'Swiss clockmaker'; it examines Ravel's fascination with objectivity, especially in respect of machines, and explores the opportunities that this offered for aesthetic detachment and distancing. The complementary 'themes' of Part I enable an overview of Ravel's compositional identity and another way of grouping works beyond the genre-based divisions of Part II. This approach acknowledges that Ravel's music works do exhibit flexibility with regard to instrumentation and genre: to put it another way, particular musical objects may be viewed from varying stances.

Part II offers broad coverage of Ravel's music. While endorsing rhythmic, harmonic, motivic and voice-leading analytical enquiries, we endeavour to maintain accessibility for the general reader. Several chapters illuminate Ravel by comparison with Debussy. Works which cross generic boundaries are detailed in the single most appropriate place: as examples, *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* are regarded primarily as piano pieces, whereas *La Valse* is regarded primarily as a ballet.

Roy Howat brings his expertise to the seminal domain of Ravel's piano music, highlighting *Gaspard de la nuit* and *Le Tombeau* (in which he relates features of phrase structure to Malayan *pantun* poetry), while Mark DeVoto directs his interest in twentieth-century harmony to Ravel's chamber music (especially the Piano Trio and post-war sonatas), with its rethinking of traditional formulae such as the sonata and tonality itself. While not overlooking Ravel's consummate skills as the orchestrator of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Michael Russ probes the modality and thematic workings of Ravel's orchestral music from the early *Shéhérazade* through to the piano concertos.

The multi-dimensional art-form of ballet is seen in the Parisian context of the Ballets Russes and Stravinsky, focusing on the unifying concept of dance, conveyed so exquisitely in *Daphnis*. Beyond the War, *La Valse* represents the ultimate reinterpretation of an inherited classical legacy, while *Boléro* is an essay in the construction and destruction of a musical object, walking a tightrope between oppressive control and ecstatic release. In the genre of song, Peter Kaminsky demonstrates Ravel's insatiable appetite for exoticisms and explores both irony and 'literalism' in his text setting; the main points of arrival are *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* and *Chansons madécasses*. With reference to spectacle and text, Richard Langham Smith completes the musical explorations by considering *L'Heure espagnole* within a tradition of fanciful evocations of Spain and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* within extended Freudian psychology.

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Part III considers matters of performance and reception. Ronald Woodley brings his interest in performance issues to bear on selected early recordings of Ravel's music (mainly from the inter-war period, and including the composer's own piano rolls), and their relationship to more recent performing attitudes, as one dimension of reception. To balance this coverage, in the Appendix, Roger Nichols considers the press reception of Ravel's music within his own lifetime, focusing on Ravel's relations with critics and the composer's own views on criticism; this discussion is followed by a listing of selected first performance details and press clippings.

In the final Chapter 11, which continues the historical trajectory of Chapter 1 through to the present day, Nichols assesses Ravel's contribution and position more broadly. Typically, our perceptions are affected by Ravel's being regarded in association with, or as secondary to, Debussy (whose position is in turn perpetuated by the continuing wealth of Debussy literature). Beyond this, the well-practised response is that, essentially, the nature of Ravel's aesthetic – his highly polished art – seems just not to have been conducive to a 'Ravel School' (appropriately enough, Ravel disapproved of schools, believing them to have a stagnating effect). Nichols challenges this stance by surveying the views of composers writing today, although he still finds ambivalence and complexity in establishing Ravel's relationship with the undisputed twentieth-century 'greats': 'Ravel, it turns out, is a far more baffling, problematic and "deep" composer than he has so far been given credit for.'

So, while it is hoped that this book will go some way towards securing a solid foundation for Ravel studies in the twenty-first century, the mysteries are real and detailed musical enquiries must continue.

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PART I

# Culture and aesthetic

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# 1 History and homage

BARBARA L. KELLY

One should not expect a composer's works to be entirely personal creations, offering no analogy whatever with the achievements of his predecessors. RAVEL[1]

An artist should be international in his judgments and esthetic appreciations and incorrigibly national when it comes to the province of creative art. RAVEL[2]

## Ravel and authority: the Conservatoire and the Prix de Rome

Ravel informed Cipa Godebski in Spring 1914: 'I am transcribing a Forlane by Couperin. I will see about getting it danced at the Vatican by Mistinguett and Colette Willy in drag.'[3] This excerpt reveals Ravel's decidedly ambivalent attitude towards the establishment which was so marked during his early career and which he directs here towards the Church and hostile critics. Klingsor noted that the young Ravel was 'given to mocking but [was] secretly set in his purposes', while Cortot recalled 'a deliberately sarcastic, argumentative and aloof young man, who used to read Mallarmé and visit Erik Satie'.[4] Both these descriptions touch on crucial aspects of Ravel's character: a conflict between 'individual consciousness' and conformity. Ravel's sense of direction was already well developed from his days at the Conservatoire. He had willingly succumbed to the influence of Poe and Mallarmé, and his musical tastes included Chabrier and the anti-establishment figure, Satie. Much to the frustration of some of his teachers, Ravel was only teachable on his own terms. Reports from Bériot, his piano teacher, indicate an untameable temperament which is 'not always with full control' and 'needs to be held in check', and even the sympathetic Fauré damns with faint praise, stating that he was, in time, 'less exclusively attracted than before by pursuit of the excessive'.[5]

In 'Contemporary music' (1928), Ravel spoke of the two essential components of a composer's make-up: individual consciousness and national consciousness, the former amounting to the composer's individuality and the latter to his link with a national tradition. Noting American composers' reluctance to use blues and jazz to create a national style, he described 'those musicians whose greatest fear is to find themselves confronted by mysterious urges to break academic rules rather than belie individual consciousness. Thereupon these musicians, good bourgeois as they are, compose their music according to the classical rules of the European



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epoch.'[6] Despite his criticism, Ravel had faced a similar dilemma when entering for the Prix de Rome. In 1926, he admitted his failure as an impostor: 'I wrote the most terrible thing and was only awarded a third prize. The last time I entered a competition I was rejected because I had submitted a parody-cantata entitled "Sardanapalus' Favorite Slave" [*Myrrha*], at a time when I had already composed my Quartet and *Shéhérazade*. But that's the way I have always been.'[7] Nichols, in a similar tone, describes *Myrrha* as 'a brilliantly worked exercise in pastiche', and *Alyssa* and *Alcyone* as 'inherently false'.[8] (*Myrrha* (1901), *Alcyone* (1902) and *Alyssa* (1903) were Ravel's early unpublished cantatas entered for the Prix de Rome competition, each composed for three solo voices and orchestra.) Certainly, after *Alyssa* and *Alcyone*, Ravel would never again write anything so Wagnerian, or so suggestive of the nineteenth-century operatic tradition that he would later wish to supplant.

Ravel took his Prix de Rome attempts seriously, hoping, possibly expecting, to win. In his letter to Kiriac of 21 March 1900, he recalled his effort: 'I had patiently elaborated a scene from *Callirhoé*, and was strongly counting on its effect: the music was rather dull, prudently passionate, and its degree of boldness was accessible to those gentlemen of the Institute . . . All of this ended up in a miserable failure.' Moreover, the following year he boasted to Lucien Garban about his partial success, citing the approval of Massenet, Leroux, Vidal and even Lenepveu and declaring his intention to try again.[9] Yet Ravel was not able to maintain this conformity; Nichols interprets his uncharacteristically scrappy writing for the 1902 entry as a sign of reluctance, while the fugue submission in 1905 (with its deliberate parallel fifths and a seventh chord ending) suggests an irrepressible impulse to subvert. Distinguishing between these submissions and his real work, he was hurt that Dubois, in 1900, had directed his criticisms at *Shéhérazade* rather than at his cantata. Romain Rolland's response to Ravel's final elimination in 1905 pinpointed the problem when he argued that he could 'not comprehend why one should persist in keeping a school in Rome if it is to close its doors to those rare artists who have some originality – to a man like Ravel, who has established himself at the concerts of the Société Nationale through works far more important than those required for an examination'.[10] Despite experiencing momentary despair as a result of the protracted affair, Ravel did at least establish his reputation as a force to be reckoned with.

Rolland's view that Ravel was 'already one of the most highly regarded of the young masters in our school', was not, however, so universally accepted. The Société Nationale (SN) was dominated by the Schola Cantorum, which was distinctly hostile towards him. After the stormy receptions of *Sites auriculaires* and *Shéhérazade* at the SN, Ravel must have been aware that his *Histoires naturelles* was bound to cause a stir on

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account of its radical treatment of art song. Although the subject-matter and aspects of the piano accompaniment can be compared to Chabrier's animal songs, his naturalistic treatment of language was shocking even to the supportive Fauré.

Ravel's decision to break from the SN and to set up the Société Musicale Indépendante (SMI) was motivated by a desire for independence from the restricting and outmoded authority of the Schola. The new Society's aim to 'make known, through performance, French or foreign modern music, published or unpublished, without exceptions of genre or style' reveals a fundamental belief in freedom, a tolerance of difference and a firm rejection of dogma, which were central to Ravel's thinking.[11] His role in setting up the SMI indicates his growing stature, in that now he did not simply have to respond to events; his actions could make a difference.

Although d'Indy and Fauré could still refer to Ravel, Koechlin, Grovlez and Casadesus as 'the youth' in 1910, this perception quickly changed with World War I, the death of Debussy and the emergence of the post-war generation. If his refusal to accept the Légion d'honneur and election to the Institut de France was motivated by his earlier official neglect, Ravel, now regarded as the most important French composer, became a tool of the French establishment. In the mid-to-late 1920s and early 1930s, Ravel acquired a role as an ambassador in the eyes of the French authorities. The USA tour in 1928, particularly, presented an opportunity for the authorities to market him as a sign of French achievement. His European trip in 1932 with Marguerite Long and his new Concerto in G is fascinating on account of the political wrangling behind the scenes; high-level diplomacy was required to appease Georges Kugel on behalf of the Vienna Philharmonic and Furtwängler in Berlin when it emerged that Ravel was too unwell to play the concerto himself, but would be able to conduct. The Berlin Philharmonic reaction was particularly intransigent and it seemed that Hindemith would be invited in his place as a snub: a situation which René Dommange felt was an insult to France, demanding retaliation.[12] The matter was resolved when Ravel visited and conducted in Berlin on 20 March 1932. Represented by his agent and the director of the Association Française d'Expansion et d'Echanges Artistiques, Ravel was spared many of the details and, motivated largely by his love for travel, he accepted his ambassador's role.

## Technique, imitation and influence

In many respects Ravel remained thoroughly attached to tradition; he stressed the importance of Gedalge for developing his own technique, and

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it is notable how much he valued technique, form, orchestration in others. Beethoven, Berlioz, Wagner, Brahms, Saint-Saëns, d'Indy and even Debussy were found by Ravel to be wanting in some of these areas. Ravel regularly consulted the treatises of Widor, Berlioz and Rimsky-Korsakov and the scores of many composers, including Strauss and Saint-Saëns.

At the heart of his teaching methods, Ravel emphasised mastery of technique through the imitation of models; originality would emerge from 'unwitting infidelity to the model'.[13] He could not comprehend the notion of fascist music, written to order, speculating 'Maybe they are writing Rossini-like music, but they shouldn't do that, because nobody needs bad Rossini. Good Rossini was created by the master himself, so we don't need any more of that either.'[14] Repetition or schools of composers were anathema because they were stagnant. In 1931, he spoke of 'this eternal desire to renew myself',[15] a quality which he admired in both Satie and Stravinsky.

In his writings and discussions with friends, Ravel adopted a detached manner of citing the model behind his works. He was particularly frank in relation to the Concerto in G and, in an interview for the *Excelsior* (1931), talked about the work as follows: 'As a model, I took two musicians who, in my opinion, best illustrated this type of composition: Mozart and Saint-Saëns.'[16] This attitude towards acquiring a style for a particular purpose indicates a rare distance from his own completed work. Basil Deane argues that Ravel's use of models, dance-forms and texts indicates a desire for detachment from direct experience; but, whereas Deane perceives this as a deficiency, Frank Kermode regards 'a writer's sense of the remoteness, the otherness' of his subject as essential to artistic creation.[17] Ravel viewed the model as the external trapping, shielding the inner emotion of the work; detachment from the subject did not equate with insensitivity, a charge frequently directed at his own work.

An essential difference between Ravel and Stravinsky lies in the value that they attached to models. While Stravinsky regarded them as suitable resources on which he could draw in order to forge something new, Ravel studied models principally in order to learn from them. Although achieving a similar fusion of old and new, Ravel's attitude indicates an awareness of his dependence on a history of composition (with a more spontaneous use of the past than that of Stravinsky).

## Ravel and his immediate predecessors

Ravel accepted influence as inevitable and necessary. Alexandre Tansman recalled Ravel's comment that 'A composer who shows no influences

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should change his profession'.[18] In 'Take jazz seriously!', Ravel cited his indebtedness to Fauré, Chabrier, Gounod, Debussy and Satie, highlighting his keen awareness of the influence his immediate predecessors and older contemporaries had on him; his gratitude and occasional 'anxiety' towards the past took a number of forms, including frank acknowledgement in 'An autobiographical sketch' of stylistic influence in certain works.[19] It also manifested itself in acts of homage, pastiches, reductions, transcriptions, orchestrations and editions, in which Ravel engaged with the work or the style of a chosen composer. The degree to which Ravel's homages resulted in misreadings or 'unwitting infidelity' needs to be examined in each case.

Ravel's acknowledgement of Fauré's support is evident from the dedication of the String Quartet and of *Jeux d'eau*. Similarly, his *Berceuse sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré*, destined for the special musical supplement of *La Revue musicale* (October 1922), was written as a tribute to his *maître* and a token of appreciation for Fauré's continued support and his crucial role in attempting to bridge the chasm between the SN and the SMI. Fauré, for his part, described the homage as 'the most beautiful jewel in my crown', expressing his extreme satisfaction with the 'solid position which you [Ravel] occupy and which you have acquired so brilliantly and so rapidly. It is a source of joy and pride for your old professor.'[20] Although Fauré disapproved privately of some of Ravel's innovations, he continued to appreciate his student's importance. While Ravel never acknowledged Fauré's musical influence on any particular work, he rated highly his musicianship and his ability to admit that his opinion might be wrong. Ravel upheld Fauré's songs as his most significant achievement, pinpointing 'his nostalgic and tender lyricism, modest and without superfluous outbursts', which achieve 'a poignant and strong emotion'.[21] This lyricism and emotional restraint that he so admired in *Le Secret* are fundamental to Ravel's own writing, and it seems that Fauré succeeded in taming the more violent inclinations noted in Ravel's student reports.

After resisting Fauré's appreciation of Saint-Saëns as a student, Ravel grew to admire him from about 1910. Calvocoressi recalls his surprise at this new interest, which he detected musically in the Trio; the dedication of the Trio to Gedalge, however, suggests a more direct homage to his counterpoint teacher to whom he owed 'the most valuable elements of . . . [his] technique'.[22] While the contrapuntal writing of the 'Passacaille' suggests Gedalge's teaching, the emphasis on technique and classical structure reflects the elements that he admired most in Saint-Saëns. Ravel's reduction and analysis of Saint-Saëns's *La Jeunesse d'Hercule* as a Conservatoire student is noteworthy for its melodic reduction of the principal themes, sections and fugal entries supported by figured bass.[23] According to Calvocoressi, this was one one of the few works by Saint-Saëns that Ravel

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