

The Cambridge Companion to

# RAVEL

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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.'<sup>1</sup>

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.'<sup>2</sup> 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.'<sup>3</sup>

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.

[1]

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,<sup>4</sup> 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.'<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

### 3 Introduction

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.

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.