

Introduction: the growth of Ravel studies

Deborah Mawer

The last few years have seen a pleasing expansion in research on Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), one of the most significant figures within French musical culture in the first half of the twentieth century. This trend may be attributable in part, perhaps, to the success of *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* in 2000, which itself sought to stimulate fresh interest in the composer by supplementing a core of eminent Ravel scholars with a group of experts from related French music studies.

According to the Société des auteurs, compositeurs, et éditeurs de musique (SACEM), which collects composers' royalties, Ravel's estate earns more than that of any other French musician; similarly, Ravel remains for his main publisher, Durand-Salabert-Eschig (Universal Music Publishing Group), amongst its best sellers. Although back in copyright within France until 2022, as a consequence of a previous temporary lapse across the mid 1980s to mid 1990s, Ravel's music is available to scholars and students from a range of American and European publishing houses, in original and subsequent editions. In the United States, these publishers include Dover Publications with its album collections and miniature scores,¹ together with Schirmer, and the Alfred Masterwork Editions.² Within Europe, G. Henle Verlag has produced some of the piano repertory in an Urtext edition,³ and of particular scholarly note is the New Urtext Edition of the piano works edited by Roger Nichols for Edition Peters, London.⁴

Equally, despite current economic challenges, the market for recordings of Ravel's music has been buoyant, with many strong catalogue additions since

¹ See, for instance, Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel Songs 1896–1914* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990); and, in miniature score, Maurice Ravel, *La Valse* (New York: Dover Publications, 1997, reprinted 2004), or *Daphnis et Chloé*, Suite No. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1999).

² For examples, see Maurice Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, ed. Robert Casadesus (New York: Schirmer [Great Performer's Edition], 1985); or Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit*, ed. Nancy Bricard (Los Angeles: Alfred Masterwork Edition, 1990, second edition, 2003).

³ See, for instance, Maurice Ravel, *Miroirs*, ed. Peter Jost (Munich: Henle Urtext Edition [HN842], 2008).

⁴ This complete collection of piano music, undertaken in the early to mid 1990s, remains available: *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, *Jeux d'eau*, *Sonatine*, *Miroirs*, *Gaspard de la nuit*, *Ma mère l'Oye*, *Valses nobles*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, plus an *Album of Shorter Pieces* (including *A la manière de...* and *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn*).

2 Deborah Mawer

the year 2000. It is worth highlighting the major undertaking by Claudio Abbado and the London Symphony Orchestra to record the complete orchestral works, the CD of that name released in 2002,⁵ and a subsequent recording of the complete ballet music for *Daphnis et Chloé* conducted by Myung-Whun Chung with the Orchestre philharmonique de Radio France.⁶ In a parallel move, 2007 saw the launch of a *Complete Piano Works* by Artur Pizarro, including in its first volume the *Miroirs*, *Gaspard de la nuit*, and *La Valse*;⁷ while 2009 witnessed Sir Simon Rattle's acclaimed recording of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, coupled with the complete ballet music for *Ma mère l'Oye*.⁸

Within the academic world we have seen a notable engagement with Ravel on both sides of the Atlantic, resulting in high-profile articles, dedicated monographs, and more occasional essays within collected volumes on a variety of themes. Often the focus has been upon individual works of Ravel, sometimes reappraised via interdisciplinary means or used as a catalyst for wider-ranging musicological issues. Special attention may be drawn to two contrasting articles that appeared consecutively in a single issue of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* late in 1999, which undoubtedly gave a boost to Ravel scholarship and confirmed the legitimacy of such enquiry: Carolyn Abbate's 'Outside Ravel's Tomb', which considered Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in the context of historical and philosophical notions of machines and animated objects, and Steven Baur's 'Ravel's "Russian" Period', on the composer's early octatonicism.⁹

There has been a discernible increase in high-quality doctorates on Ravel, especially in the United States and Australia, which augurs very well for the future health of Ravel studies.¹⁰ And together with the welcome arrival of this new generation of researchers has occurred a necessary consolidation of essential reference material on Ravel. The substantial, largely rewritten, entry on Ravel by Barbara Kelly was published in the second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, accessible within an updatable online resource.¹¹ In the United States, the timely reprint of Arbie Orenstein's

⁵ Ravel, *Complete Orchestral Works*, Claudio Abbado/London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (Deutsche Grammophon 000289 469 3542 2 [2002]).

⁶ Ravel, *Daphnis et Chloé*, Myung-Whun Chung/Orchestre philharmonique and choir of Radio France (Deutsche Grammophon 000289 477 5706 1 [2006]).

⁷ Artur Pizarro, *Complete Piano Works of Maurice Ravel*, vol. I (Linn Records CKD290 [2007]).

⁸ Ravel, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, Simon Rattle/Berlin Philharmonic (EMI Classics 5099926419725 [2009]).

⁹ Carolyn Abbate, 'Outside Ravel's Tomb', and Steven Baur, 'Ravel's "Russian" Period: Octatonicism in His Early Works, 1893–1908', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 52/3 (1999) 465–530 and 531–92.

¹⁰ Among others, we may note Elisabeth Winnecke (University of Vienna, 2000), Eddy Kwong Mei Chong (University of Rochester, 2002), Gurminder Bhogal (University of Chicago, 2004), Michael J. Puri (Yale University, 2004), and Emily Kilpatrick (University of Adelaide, 2008).

¹¹ Barbara L. Kelly, 'Ravel, (Joseph Maurice)', in Deane L. Root (ed.), *Grove Music*

3 Introduction: the growth of Ravel studies

invaluable sourcebook *A Ravel Reader* was followed by Stephen Zank's most useful survey of conducted research.¹² In France, the long-term commitment to the *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* has continued, with significant input from Michel Delahaye, and also from Marcel Marnat, Philippe Rodriguez, Jean Roy, and Orenstein.¹³

Upon this basis, selected themes may be identified, without any claims to comprehensiveness. An analytical trajectory is ongoing, with a wealth of articles on harmony, style, and rhythm presented in a dedicated volume of *Ostinato rigore* (2006),¹⁴ as well as those which have appeared in *Musurgia*.¹⁵ Specific mention should be made of Peter Kaminsky's analytical contribution, including his pursuit of music–text relations.¹⁶ Performance-related analysis of Ravel's piano music has received notable treatment by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen,¹⁷ Daphne Leong, David Korevaar,¹⁸ and Roy Howat.¹⁹ In extending Ravel research into the domain of film studies, we may highlight Julie Brown's insightful article 'Listening to Ravel'.²⁰ Chiming with Simon Rattle's recording project and with interests in music–text relations, Ravel's preoccupation with childhood fantasy has been further explored recently by Steven Huebner and by

Online: www.oxfordmusiconline.com/public/ (accessed 10 October 2009).

¹² Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990; reprinted [with minor corrections] New York: Dover Publications, 2003); Stephen Zank, *Maurice Ravel: A Guide to Research* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹³ Volume 7 was issued in 2000, with volume 12 scheduled for 2009; originally produced under the auspices of the Fondation Maurice Ravel, the *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* has since 2004 been published by Atlantica-Séguier and edited by Michel Delahaye.

¹⁴ Jean-Claude Teboul (ed.), *Ostinato rigore: revue internationale d'études musicales*, 24 (2006): *Maurice Ravel*.

¹⁵ Henri Gonnard, 'Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*: approche analytique de la fugue', *Musurgia: analyse et pratique musicales*, 8/2 (2001), 49–58; and Carine Perret, 'Le Romantisme ravélien, un héritage choisi', *Musurgia*, 13/2 (2006), 17–32.

¹⁶ Peter Kaminsky's essay 'Vocal Music and the Lures of Exoticism and Irony', in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 162–87, was accompanied by a more overtly analytical cousin: 'Of Princesses, Children, Dreams and Isomorphisms: Text–Music Transformation in Ravel's Vocal Works', *Musical Analysis*,

19/1 (2000), 29–68. See too Kaminsky, 'Ravel's Late Music and the Problem of "Polytonality"', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 26/2 (2004), 237–64, which perhaps balances Steven Baur's article.

¹⁷ Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, *Ravel: analyses des œuvres pour piano de Maurice Ravel* (Paris: Durand, 2004).

¹⁸ Daphne Leong and David Korevaar, 'The Performer's Voice: Performance and Analysis in Ravel's *Concerto pour la main gauche*', *Music Theory Online*, 11/3 (2005): http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.05.11.3/mto.05.11.3.leong_korevaar.html

¹⁹ Founded on his essay 'Ravel and the Piano', in Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, 71–96, chapters in Roy Howat's *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009) analyse aspects of *Gaspard de la nuit*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and 'Alborada del gracioso'. See too Roy Howat, 'Modernization: From Chabrier and Fauré to Debussy and Ravel', in Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter (eds.), *French Music since Berlioz* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 197–221.

²⁰ Julie A. Brown, 'Listening to Ravel, Watching *Un coeur en hiver*: Cinematic Subjectivity and the Music-Film', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 1/2 (2004), 253–75.

4 Deborah Mawer

Emily Kilpatrick.²¹ Larger questions of the complex relationship between Ravel the man and Ravel the musician, and between his private and public personas, underpinned Benjamin Ivry's thought-provoking biography *Maurice Ravel: A Life*, published in 2000,²² and have subsequently been taken up by others.²³

Arguably one work more than any other has served to stimulate high-level enquiry in recent years: Ravel's masterly ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* (completed not long before World War I) including its associated visual art and balletic dimensions. (The contender for second position would likely be *La Valse*.) This trajectory was surely given initial impetus by Lawrence Kramer in an essay on exoticism in *Daphnis* within his influential book *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* of the mid-1990s.²⁴ A selective list would acknowledge the detailed probing of the ballet's elusive origins by Simon Morrison; the melodic, rhythmic, and symbolic uses of ornamental arabesque pursued by Gurminder Bhogal; and Ravel's strategies of self-portraiture and concealment in *Daphnis et Chloé*, as proposed by Michael Puri.²⁵ My own contribution on the creative and interpretative perspectives of Ravel's ballets extended outwards from *Daphnis* and the Ballets russes, while the work has also proved a significant force behind Puri's new full-length study of Ravel, directed by the conceptual agenda of 'decadent dialectics'.²⁶

Aim and summary of chapters

This field of research is not, however, saturated. Although the treatment of Ravel's music has suffered traditionally from a certain conservatism, implicit

²¹ Steven Huebner, 'Ravel's Child: Magic and Moral Development', in Susan Boynton and Roe-Min Kok (eds.), *Musical Childhoods and the Cultures of Youth* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 69–88; Emily Kilpatrick, 'Into the Woods: Re-telling the Wartime Fairytales of Ravel', *Musical Times*, 149 (2008), 57–66, and 'Jangling in Symmetrical Sounds: Maurice Ravel as Storyteller and Poet', *Journal of Music Research Online*, 1 (2009), 1–19: <http://journal.mca.org.au> (accessed 12 October 2009).

²² Benjamin Ivry, *Maurice Ravel: A Life* (New York: Welcome Rain, 2000, reprinted 2003).

²³ See for instance Lloyd Whitesell, 'Ravel's Way', in Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (eds.), *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 49–78; and Steven Huebner, 'Maurice Ravel: Private Life, Public Works', in Jolanta T. Pekacz (ed.),

Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 69–87.

²⁴ Lawrence Kramer, 'Consuming the Exotic: Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*', in his *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 201–25.

²⁵ Simon Morrison, 'The Origins of *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912)', *19th-Century Music*, 28/1 (2004), 50–76; Gurminder Bhogal, 'Debussy's Arabesque and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912)', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 3/2 (2006), 171–99; Michael J. Puri, 'Dandy, Interrupted: Sublimation, Repression, and Self-Portraiture in Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909–12)', in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 60/2 (2007), 317–72.

²⁶ Deborah Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel: Creation and Interpretation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Michael J. Puri, *Decadent Dialectics: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire in the Music of Maurice Ravel* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

5 Introduction: the growth of Ravel studies

within the developments outlined above is a strengthening strand of interdisciplinarity, one crucial to a vibrant, forward-looking musicology. Several years on from *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, this observation became the main *raison d'être* for a new multi-authored volume. Thus *Ravel Studies* aims to celebrate and explore further the potential benefits of interdisciplinary perspectives as a way of progressing core research on Ravel – the artist himself, his music, and his cultural contexts – as well as contributing substantially to broader musicological debate.

To this end, *Ravel Studies* presents a rich variety of approaches and content. Methodological approaches range from the historical and source-based, through the analytical (still maintaining accessibility, often in conjunction with an extra-musical dimension), to the critical and hermeneutic. Frequently the essays partake of one, or more of these means. Similarly, the interdisciplinary content operates in diverse ways. Even within music, there are of course many (interacting) subdisciplines, so that in *Ravel Studies* the composer's music is assessed in the light of performance studies from a conductor's stance, and in relation to aspects of early jazz. Interdisciplinarity involves music academics extending their terms of reference to those of 'music-plus': for instance, considering how association with aesthetics, literature, cultural or gender issues may enhance our understanding of Ravel's art. In a sense, this notion of interdisciplinarity follows on from and develops Ravel's own example, as witnessed in his song setting and operatic or balletic endeavours (all genres which are discussed in this volume). Equally, we may perceive more multidisciplinary content where Ravel and his music are viewed from alternative disciplinary positions: specifically, those of an American historian, a dance scholar, and a neurologist. In brief, the topics addressed include Ravel's aesthetic quest for perfection; associations between the composer and Colette, and Proust; Ravel the dandy, and questions of sexuality; the composer's relationship with American culture, embracing jazz; the conducting and choreographing of Ravel's music; understanding the composer's final illness and its creative implications.

To support the continued growth of Ravel scholarship, with the exception of the editor the contributors to *Ravel Studies* do not duplicate those of *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*. All have strong academic credentials: the majority are internationally established figures who have published previously on Ravel, but a minority are early-career scholars chosen to recognize and reflect the new blood and increasing interest in Ravel studies. In keeping with the interdisciplinary pursuit, yet despite never being strictly collaborative, some authors' essays do nevertheless 'speak' to each other. Although contributors hail from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe (with two each from McGill University and Lancaster University), the prominence of North American representation in *Ravel Studies* is congruent with North America being such a thriving hub of current activity.

6 Deborah Mawer

Various orderings of the chapters are possible, but the following archlike structure is offered as perhaps the most plausible and coherent. The collection opens with Steven Huebner's Chapter 1 on 'Ravel's perfection', which provides, simultaneously, a point of departure and context for the chapters that follow (especially 2, 3, and 4) and a sense of summation of Ravel's quest, achievement, and legacy. (This chapter could also function well as a conclusion to the volume.) While concerned primarily with early French perceptions of Ravel's aesthetic, the chapter probes relations between (neo) classicism, artistry, and artisanship (or 'craft') in both music and literature, drawing perhaps unexpected parallels with the (paradoxical) symbolism of Stéphane Mallarmé and, particularly, the creative ambience of his poetic descendant, Paul Valéry. An Appendix offers a valuable resource on contemporary French criticism. In Chapter 2, Emily Kilpatrick's contribution on *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* maintains the interest in source study and musico-literary comparison, within an *opéra-ballet* context, specifically between Ravel and the celebrated Colette. (Kilpatrick is also sensitive to artisanship in this context.) An examination of archival manuscript correspondence between the two figures enables a fresh perspective on the creative process and artistic collaboration, and the close-knit nature of music-text relations in *L'Enfant* itself is equally apparent.

Michael Puri (Chapter 3) uses Marcel Proust's preoccupation with memory – a means both of reanimating the past and creating anew – to provide an apt model for Ravel's reanimations: both of pastiche in *A la manière de...* and more fundamentally in the 'Introduction' of *Daphnis et Chloé*, which Puri interweaves analytically with the famous 'madeleine' scene from Proust's epic novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Lastly in this first group of chapters, Lloyd Whitesell (Chapter 4) expands the agenda explicitly through to gender studies, whilst continuing the interest in aesthetics and literature (combined with the image of the dandy registered in Chapter 1). The ways in which Ravel's persona did not conform to social norms are summarized and related to personal 'tunings' advocated by the sociologist Henning Bech. In turn, this ploy is tested in hermeneutic analytical readings of varied music written by Ravel before World War I: the exotic song cycle *Shéhérazade*, the grotesque *Gaspard de la nuit*, together with *Jeux d'eau* and *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. Sexual desire is seen as handled through guarding private space, withholding erotic fulfilment, and engaging in teasing and evasion.

The second half of the volume comprises two pairs of chapters, followed by a final, single chapter. In chapters 5 and 6, two Lancaster University authors offer connected perspectives on Ravel, America, and jazz: 'Crossing borders' I and II. Little has so far been written about the historical context for, and significance of, Ravel's North American tour, a niche filled by the historian Nicholas Gebhardt in Chapter 5. He sees Ravel's experience in terms

7 Introduction: the growth of Ravel studies

of an evolution of tours undertaken by European virtuoso performers in the later nineteenth century, and within a growing American consciousness of modernism itself. Questions about the artist resurface, and about the balancing of freedom and autonomy against commercialism and entertainment. An Appendix gives a detailed summary of Ravel's tour itinerary. Ravel's writings published on his tour are the cue for my own Chapter 6, examining two interconnected relationships: firstly, between Ravel's theory of early jazz and historical actualities in America and France; secondly, between his theory and practice, mainly across the Sonata for Violin and Piano and piano concertos. In the former relationship, close correspondences are accompanied by some 'transformation'; in the latter, theorized transformative processes are closely played out, amid untheorized correspondences between Ravel's music and potential sources. Ravel's engagement with jazz is well informed, Gallicized, and personalized.

Performance studies acts as the connector for the next pair of chapters. In Chapter 7, the late David Epstein uses his dual experience as a conductor and music theorist to probe the importance of tempo in interpreting and performing *La Valse* appropriately. He argues against overly rushed renditions of the climax which succumb to the dictates of theatricality and commercialism over those of the music. A detailed analysis blends elements from music theory, European culture and literature (thus relating to earlier chapters), performers' testimony, and, if more implicitly, cognitive perception. The danceability of Ravel's music is the subject of Stephanie Jordan's 'choreomusical' analysis in Chapter 8, explored through the *Sonatine* and three movements from *Miroirs*, which are unified and reinterpreted in Richard Alston's dance piece, *Shimmer*. Performers' testimony similarly informs this essay (which links with Chapter 2 not only in its balletic connection, but also in its exploitation of primary sources – a choreographer, a pianist, and dancers).

Finally, the neurologist Erik Baeck (Chapter 9) presents within musico-logical literature an authoritative, but readable account of Ravel's terminal illness, including the arguments for and against its possible impact on his late *œuvre* (from *Boléro* onwards),²⁷ which has been restricted previously to medical circles. Divergent contemporary accounts are drawn upon, more recent relevant developments in neurological science are outlined, and comparisons are made with other famous artists who suffered brain disorders that affected their creativity.

²⁷ See L. Amaducci, E. Grassi, and F. Boller, 'Maurice Ravel and Right-Hemisphere Musical Creativity: Influence of Disease on His Last Musical Works?', *European Journal of Neurology*, 9 (2002), 75–82; Erik Baeck, 'The Terminal Illness and Last Compositions

of Maurice Ravel', in Julien Bogousslavsky and François Boller (eds.), *Neurological Disorders in Famous Artists*, *Frontiers of Neurology and Neuroscience*, vol. 19 (Basle: Karger, 2005), 132–40.

8 *Deborah Mawer*

This book may be read in various ways: from working through the chapters in the given order, through to the more likely scenario of dipping into essays of individual interest. While the chapters progress generally from music's association with aesthetic and literary matters to more extended disciplinary couplings, or groupings, the organization is relatively free so that other thematic links may emerge. Different trajectories have unexpected meeting points. Consequently, in any given chapter, selected cross-references have been added to identify further discussions of a piece or concept in other chapters, citing, where applicable, the heading under which they appear. Such intersections may be approached from complementary points of view, reflecting the lively plurality of current debate. Beyond this, larger-scale groupings may be signalled: Ravel's aesthetic and aestheticism (chapters 1, 3, and 4); neoclassicism (1 and 3); music and literature (1, 2, 3, and 4); reception study (1, 2, 5, 7, and 9); analytical studies (3, 4, 6, 7, and 8); studies of one main composition: *L'Enfant*, *La Valse*, and Alston's *Shimmer* – combining *Sonatine* and *Miroirs* (2, 7, and 8, respectively); music–text genres (2 and 4); piano repertory (3 and 8); primary sources and ballet (2 and 8); American perspectives (5 and 6); performance studies (7 and 8); beginnings, endings, and legacy (1 and 9).

So a range of themes may be pursued, and Ravel's music is represented across most genres – orchestral and instrumental music, in addition to those mentioned above. Nevertheless, coverage is not designed to be comprehensive. Some areas are left relatively untouched, ripe for future research: for example, beyond useful work conducted by Orenstein (and despite Ravel's destruction of material to conceal his compositional toil), there is considerable scope for developing music manuscript and sketch studies, as well as a case for substantial methodological analyses of Ravel's *œuvre*, especially once music copyright restrictions are lifted.

Ravel Studies aims to attract a wide readership: it is pitched primarily at academics in musicology and music theory/analysis, other music professionals, and postgraduate students; but it should also appeal to those in other arts that relate to the disciplines of contributors. Additionally, it is intended to be readable by interested undergraduates, concertgoers, and general enthusiasts of French music.

In a Ravelian spirit, it is hoped that these essays may serve collectively as a model for expanding the agendas of other composer-based studies.

1 Ravel's perfection

Steven Huebner

Carlo Caballero's recent monograph on Gabriel Fauré's aesthetics enriches criticism not only by positioning its subject against a wide background of French musical thought, but also by encouraging further thinking.¹ Caballero touches briefly upon the construct of perfection to illustrate Fauré's understanding of sincerity as an aesthetic attribute. 'Sincerity is a never-ending effort to create one's soul as it is,' once wrote the critic and editor Jacques Rivière, and Caballero continues this thought by equating Fauré's commitment to sincerity with an almost spiritual striving for perfection.² Maurice Ravel puts in an appearance as a foil, a composer who had little use for framing his work as either spiritual endeavour or completion of the self.³ Ravel generally disparaged the manipulation of sincerity in value judgements, notes Caballero, while he concomitantly upheld compositional technique as a 'means to beauty and perfection'.⁴ Thus, even as an ancillary point, perfection appears in Caballero's account as an unstable term – touching upon ethics and the psychology of the artist when applied to Fauré, and upon aesthetics for Ravel.

Despite, or perhaps because of, such ambiguities, perfection as a criterion in reception and criticism has received very little systematic reflection in writing on music, or even the arts in general. Caballero's only direct quotation of Fauré's own use of the word both underlines its multivalence and suggests some reasons for this musicological reticence: 'To express what you have within you with sincerity and in the clearest and most *perfect* terms possible would always seem to me the summit of art.'⁵ Here Fauré seems to mean something a bit different from the Rivière-derived idea of completing the self inasmuch as he emphasizes manner of presentation over substance, perfection as

An early version of this chapter was presented at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, Washington DC (October 2005).

¹ Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

² *Ibid.*, 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 33–4. On this general point see Steven Huebner, 'Maurice Ravel: Private

Life, Public Works', in Jolanta T. Pekacz (ed.), *Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 69–87.

⁴ Caballero, *Fauré*, 34.

⁵ Letter from Fauré to Mme de Chaumont-Quitry (summer 1899), cited by Caballero, *Fauré*, 18. 'Exprimer ce que l'on a en soi avec sincérité et dans les termes les plus clairs et les plus *parfaits* me semblera toujours le comble de l'art.'

10 *Steven Huebner*

a means rather than an end. But, more important, ‘perfect’ in this instance may be read either as a synonym for ‘best’ or as ‘best under the circumstances’ (as implied by ‘most perfect terms *possible*’). Is ‘possible’ in this formulation to be understood in an absolute or a relative sense? Moreover, strictly speaking the expression ‘most perfect’ would seem dubious against a view of perfection as a unique and absolute state. Now, to measure Fauré against such rigorous standards of expression would not be quite fair. After all, he might simply have sought an inflated way of saying ‘excellent’ – that which exhibits a high degree of accomplishment – without implying uniqueness (as would be suggested had he used the word ‘best’ *tout court*). This usage is a commonplace of everyday conversation, where ‘perfect’ often functions as a synonym for ‘outstanding’ or ‘very good’, as, say, in a description of the weather as ‘perfect’. When the critic Emile Vuillermoz wrote in his well-known general history of music that Debussy combined his respect for national tradition with a ‘*métier parfait*’,⁶ he meant ostensibly that Debussy had a superb command of his craft. Vuillermoz could just as well have written ‘*métier formidable*’, ‘*métier exceptionnel*’, or some comparable superlative. In short, ‘perfection’ has often been deployed with little self-consciousness, and even less controversy or critical scrutiny. On the one hand, generic superlatives by themselves rarely produce aesthetic categories amenable to criticism. On the other, better-honed manipulations of the word risk engaging philosophical speculation at the expense of real critical insight into music.

For all their vagueness, the words ‘perfect’ and ‘perfection’ have agglomerated with eyebrow-raising frequency around Ravel’s music in reviews, biographies, and critical studies from his day to ours. This is perhaps to be expected from an *œuvre* generally regarded as excellent, indeed a corpus where critics have identified few artistic failures so that Ravel’s very consistency encourages an evaluation as perfect-as-excellent. But the ubiquity of the term as applied to Ravel begs the question of whether it represents some other cultural work or critical orientation. In short, why ‘perfect’, and why so often? Before I show that the cultural roots for this critical vocabulary are manifold and that they provide a window on Ravel’s aesthetics, I would suggest that perfection has become associated with Ravel as a discursive practice in which some musicians unconsciously follow the lead of others without apprehending fully why the word springs so easily to mind. To inject an anecdotal note, I recently asked a fine pianist why he enjoys playing Ravel. He responded that ‘every note seems in the right place and perfect’ – spoken as if this were the gospel truth immanent in the notes themselves. This remark reminded me of the composer Georges Auric’s preface to a commemorative volume celebrating the centenary of Ravel’s birth: ‘[Ravel] puts together the least significant

⁶ Emile Vuillermoz, *Histoire de la musique*, revised edition (Paris: Fayard, 1973), 378.