

## The Operas of Maurice Ravel

Maurice Ravel's operas *L'Heure espagnole* (1907/1911) and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1919–25) are pivotal works in the composer's relatively small œuvre. Emerging from periods shaped by very distinct musical concerns and historical circumstances, these two vastly different works nevertheless share qualities that reveal the heart of Ravel's compositional aesthetic. In this comprehensive study, Emily Kilpatrick unites musical, literary, biographical and cultural perspectives to shed new light on Ravel's operas. In documenting the operas' history, setting them within the cultural canvas of their creation and pursuing diverse strands of analytical and thematic exploration, Kilpatrick reveals crucial aspects of the composer's working life: his approach to creative collaboration; his responsiveness to cultural, aesthetic and musical debate; and the centrality of language and literature in his compositional practice. The first study of its kind, this book is an invaluable resource for students, specialists, opera-goers and devotees of French music.

EMILY KILPATRICK'S fascination with Ravel's operas dates from a memorable summer spent helping to restore the composer's former home in Montfort l'Amaury. With a Ph.D. in Musicology from the University of Adelaide, she has published widely on the music of Ravel and Fauré and is co-editor, with Roy Howat, of the new Peters critical edition of Fauré's complete songs, a project based at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Emily also maintains an active performing career as a pianist and vocal accompanist, and regularly gives recitals, radio broadcasts, master classes and lectures on French opera and song. She holds a lectureship at the Royal Northern College of Music (Manchester).

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EMILY KILPATRICK



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## Preface

I first listened to *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* sitting on the living-room floor of Ravel's house, Le Belvédère in Montfort l'Amaury. The big French windows were open, and as I listened my gaze shifted between the long, sweeping curve of the facing hill, green and blue and gold on a summer afternoon, and the perfectly arranged and intricately detailed surroundings of the house itself.

Over the decade that has passed since I first visited Montfort l'Amaury that memory has remained vivid, for the juxtaposition of concentrated interiors and sunlit panorama seems an apt metaphor for Ravel's œuvre as a whole. It is an analogy, indeed, that echoes even in the sets for the 1925 première of *L'Enfant*: glimpses of tree and garden beckon beyond the cluttered and constricting nursery interior, while a spacious and enticing vista opens behind the garden itself (see Fig. 0.1 below).

Both of Ravel's operas, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1919–25) and the earlier *L'Heure espagnole* (1907/1911), offer us windows through which we can shift our focus between the minutiae of a compositional world and a wider landscape of cultural and historical perspectives, biographical circumstances, and dramaturgical, literary and musical exploration. In many respects, the two works could hardly be more different. One was composed in the last years of the Belle Époque, the other in the *Années folles*; between them lies the great barrier of the First World War. One is a light-hearted, Spanish-themed bedroom farce, the other a magical evocation of childhood and fairytale. The libretto of *L'Heure* was drawn from a successful play; that of *L'Enfant* was purpose-written. *L'Heure* tells its story in rapid exchanges of dialogue; *L'Enfant* in description, dance and reflection. *L'Heure* was composed within the space of three or four months; the gestation of *L'Enfant* spanned twice that many years. *L'Heure* is the work of a young man claiming his place in the musical limelight, but by the time Ravel, within the space of a few weeks, celebrated his fiftieth birthday and the première of *L'Enfant*, he was widely acclaimed as the leading composer of his generation.

Given this wealth of material and perspective, it is perhaps surprising that, although Ravel has been the focus of unprecedented critical attention in

recent years (particularly in the Anglophone literature), the present book is the first to be devoted to his operas.<sup>1</sup> One of its aims, therefore, is to extend and refine certain of the themes and theories presented in the more expansive canvases of recent major publications.<sup>2</sup> Relative to its more limited subject matter, this study takes up some of the dialogues initiated by Steven Huebner's many probing chapters on Ravel's operas and compositional philosophy, and by Jessie Fillerup's recent writings, which masterfully draw together many of the threads running through the rich cultural fabric of the composer's time and place. Deborah Mawer's *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, one of the few books to focus on a single genre within Ravel's output, was one of my points of departure; Roger Nichols's monumental 2011 biography was an indispensable resource. More broadly, the cultural and operatic landscape revealed in the writings of (*inter alia*) Barbara Kelly, Richard Langham Smith, Jann Pasler and Annegret Fauser provided invaluable context.

The present study falls into three parts. Its first chapters set *L'Heure* and *L'Enfant* in historical context; the central chapters explore the interplay of text and music; and the latter chapters are devoted to thematic and analytical aspects of the operas. The book is supplemented by a *Compendium of Sources* ([www.cambridge.org/9781107118126](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107118126)), comprising early reviews, correspondence and other relevant documentation; readers seeking the original French texts of the archival sources quoted here in translation will find them in the *Compendium*.

It is perhaps natural to devote particular attention to the periods that bookend a work's development: on one hand the compositional background and process, and on the other early performances and critical reception. The study of opera, however, necessitates a third element: the passage – often long and rarely straightforward – from score to stage. Years elapsed between the initial conception and the theatrical realisation of both of Ravel's operas. Retracing these periods, as in the present Chapters 1, 2 and 3, throws new light on the composer's professional practice, as a correspondent, negotiator, self-publicist and man of the theatre.

Reaching beyond the operas themselves, this book has at its core the exchange of music and words, in the tug and rasp of a language that Ravel

<sup>1</sup> Schillmöller's *Maurice Ravel's Schlüsselwerk L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1999) is the only monograph to date on *L'Enfant* alone. Roland-Manuel's *Maurice Ravel et son œuvre dramatique* (1928) encompasses operas and ballets.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Zank's *Irony and Sound* and Puri's *Ravel the Decadent*, together with the edited collections *Ravel Studies* (ed. Mawer) and *Unmasking Ravel* (ed. Kaminsky). Mawer's 'Introduction' to *Ravel Studies* summarises the significant trends in Ravel scholarship up to 2010; Fillerup surveys these publications and contemporary Ravel scholarship in her 2014 review article 'Ravel's lost time'. See also Zank, *Maurice Ravel: A Guide to Research*.

once suggested was ‘not designed for poetry’.<sup>3</sup> One of my primary aims is thus to highlight, more thoroughly than has yet been attempted, the centrality of language and literature in his compositional practice. Chapter 4 re-examines the dialogues, direct and oblique, between the composer and his librettists, Franc-Nohain and Colette. Setting new documentary evidence alongside sources from the composer’s lifetime and more recent scholarly appraisals, the book draws out not just aesthetic concerns but practical insights into Ravel as a collaborator and colleague. Chapter 5 outlines Ravel’s explorations of text and text-setting, viewing the operas through the prism of his songs. Special attention is given here to the development, through the *mélodie*, of the meticulously naturalistic recitative that he realised most completely in *L’Heure espagnole*. Riding the historical and philosophical currents that flow through the interplay of French speech and song, this chapter and those that follow build on the recent researches of Katherine Bergeron and Michel Gribenski, and extend studies of Ravel’s text-setting by Kaminsky, James Hurd and Marie-Pierre Lassus, as well as literary analyses by scholars including Michel Mercier and Henry Bouillier, and Ravel’s own reflections on language and text-setting. This chapter forms the point of departure for Chapters 6 and 7, which focus on Ravel’s two libretti and the manner in which, at every level of the compositional process, he integrated his texts into his musical design.

Chapters 8–11 pursue text-driven musical and thematic analyses within the frame of the operas’ central subjects, or settings: Spain and Spanishness, and children and childhood. Weaving a tapestry of sources literary, musical, philosophical, cultural and theatrical, they aim to nuance and hone our understanding of these themes relative to Ravel’s compositional method, his aesthetic and his personal experience and perceptions.

Having established, in Chapter 8, the manner in which *L’Heure espagnole* uses an outwardly comic leitmotif technique to establish a large-scale musical logic, Chapter 9 explores the opera’s conceptual, musical and theatrical ‘Spanishness’. Drawing on the writings of Langham Smith, Hervé Lacombe, Samuel Llano and Kerry Murphy, it locates *L’Heure* within the turn-of-the-century Parisian culture of *espagnolade*. In probing the opera’s typically Ravelian blend of irony and homage, the chapter draws new connections with the greatest of ‘Spanish’ operas, Bizet’s *Carmen*. Turning to *L’Enfant*, Chapter 10 demonstrates how the musical characterisation of the eponymous Child – an onlooker rather

<sup>3</sup> Olin Downes, ‘Maurice Ravel, man and musician’, *New York Times*, 7 August 1927; in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 450.

than an active participant for much of the opera – imparts a compelling large-scale musical coherence, while Chapter 11 looks to conceptions and representations of childhood. Moving from cultural and political perspectives to notions of memory and nostalgia, from Jung to Klein and back to Colette herself, it illuminates the myriad interpretative paths traceable through this most mutable and most entrancing of operas.



Figure 0.1 Set designs by Alphonse Visconti for the première of *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, Monte Carlo, 1925.

## Acknowledgements

In the summer of 2004, Arnaud and Henriette de Vitry generously welcomed into their home in Montfort l'Amaury a young Australian on her first trip to Europe; this marvellous introduction to French culture, manners and humour remains a treasured memory. Claude Moreau, of the Musée Ravel, took me under her wing that summer, and her affectionate intimacy with the composer and his music has profoundly shaped my own relationship with both.

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While I was still embroiled in my doctoral research Vicki Cooper, commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press, encouraged me to write this book; I thank her for her unwavering commitment to the project. Julian Rushton gently prodded me back into writing at a time when, as a sleep-deprived new parent, I might have put it to one side. I am grateful for

his steadfast encouragement and his invaluable guidance, as well as that of his fellow series editor Paul Harper-Scott.

Finally, I thank my family: my parents David and Nancy, who gave me the gifts of music and words; my sisters Hannah and Fleur, singers, scholars and artists; my husband Roy Howat, whose generous musicianship is my constant inspiration, and without whom I could never have written this book; and our daughter Rosalind, whose arrival, midway through the writing process, rather delayed its completion but brought us joy beyond measure.

Last of all, I am inexpressibly grateful for the gift of the tiny being whose kicks and squirms are distracting me as I read these proofs, reminding me that a new era of mingled chaos and enchantment is imminent.

*Emily Kilpatrick*  
*June 2015*

Abbreviations

BHVP	Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France. Specific departments cited: Mus. (Département de la Musique); AdS (Département des Arts du spectacle); Bm-O (Bibliothèque-musée de l’Opéra)
CMR	<i>Cahiers Maurice Ravel</i>
OL	Arbie Orenstein (ed.), <i>Maurice Ravel: lettres, écrits, entretiens</i> (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), published in English (with some additional content) as <i>A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews</i> (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). The present volume generally adopts the English translations presented in <i>A Ravel Reader</i> , with some minor adjustments for clarity and emphasis. Letters are cited by letter number (French and English editions are numbered equivalently); page numbers (for articles and interviews) refer to the French edition unless otherwise indicated. (Articles and interviews originally published in languages other than French are cited from <i>A Ravel Reader</i> .) Interviews and articles cited from this collection are not listed separately in the Bibliography.
SBM	Société des Bains de Mer, Monte-Carlo
*	Original French text given in <i>The Operas of Maurice Ravel: A Compendium of Sources</i> ( <a href="http://www.cambridge.org/9781107118126">www.cambridge.org/9781107118126</a> )

Unless otherwise acknowledged, all translations are my own.

Musical examples are reproduced by kind permission of Éditions Durand. Examples from *L’Heure espagnole* and *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* are derived from the piano-vocal scores, supplemented by reference to the orchestral scores (see Bibliography).



## Opera synopses

### *L'Heure espagnole*

In a clockmaker's shop in Toledo, Concepcion eagerly awaits the weekly departure of her husband Torquemada to wind the municipal clocks, leaving her free to entertain her suitors. But this morning, her plans are upset by the arrival of the muleteer Ramiro, with a watch for Torquemada to fix. She has the ingenious idea of hiding her two swains, the poet Gonzalve and the banker Don Inigo, in large clocks, and employing Ramiro to carry them up to the bedroom for her. As Concepcion becomes frustrated by Gonzalve's self-absorption and Inigo's incompetence, however, Ramiro's great strength, compliance and unassuming manner become increasingly attractive: eventually, she invites the muleteer upstairs 'without a clock'. Torquemada returns, delighted to find his shop so busy, and sells the two clocks to their discomfited former occupants. The final quintet acknowledges the dubious 'morale de Boccace': that 'there comes a time when the muleteer has his turn!'

### *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*

A bored and restless Child is seated at his desk, listening to the purr of the cat and the kettle boiling on the fire. His mother reproaches him for his laziness; his only response is to stick out his tongue. In punishment, she condemns him to stay by himself until dinner, with dry bread to eat and no sugar in his tea. After she leaves, the furious Child shrieks and stamps, destroying and injuring everything within reach. One by one the injured objects come to life, condemning the Child for his destructive acts. He finds himself in the Garden, where, amidst the birds, insects and little creatures there are more reminders of the havoc he has wrought. Lonely and afraid, he calls for his mother, rousing the fury of the Animals, who unite against him. In their frenzy a little squirrel is injured and the Child binds up the wounded paw before falling back



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weakly. Suddenly, there is a ‘profound silence, stupor’ among the Animals: the Child has finally atoned for his wrongdoing. Repenting of their own violence, the Animals try, hesitantly at first and then with confidence, to repeat the word the Child had sobbed: ‘Maman!’