

PART I

Culture and aesthetic

1 History and homage

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One should not expect a composer's works to be entirely personal creations, offering no analogy whatever with the achievements of his predecessors. RAVEL¹

An artist should be international in his judgments and esthetic appreciations and incorrigibly national when it comes to the province of creative art. RAVEL²

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 imposter: '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 Kiriak 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

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

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

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 of the few works by Saint-Saëns that Ravel

admired at this time. Not only does it highlight Ravel's fascination with structure and harmonic events, it gives an insight into the manner in which he studied his elders.

Ravel and Chabrier

The enthusiasm and reverence of both Ravel and Viñes for Chabrier is clear from their visit to him in 1893 (to play the ailing composer his *Trois valse romantiques* for two pianos) and the strength of their response to his death. Declaring that he was 'influenced above all by a musician: Chabrier', Ravel was forthcoming about Chabrier's influence on *Pavane pour une Infante défunte* and *Sérénade grotesque*.²⁴ Certainly, there are traces of Chabrier's influence on Ravel's early piano writing in his predilection for dance forms, miniatures, his fascination with Spain, his attention to detail and captivating lyricism. Ravel's orchestration of Chabrier's 'Menuet pompeux' (1919), for the Ballets Russes, represents the tribute of a mature composer; he adds to the harmonically based original a multi-layered texture, highly varied in its range of solo timbres (including bassoon, clarinet and muted horns) and enlivened with percussion instruments, including his favoured *tambour de basque*. His intention to reorchestrate parts of *Le Roi malgré lui* in 1929 'because of certain imperfections in this inspired orchestration' indicates an awareness that he had not only consolidated Chabrier's style, but surpassed him technically.²⁵ Although Ravel wrote to Mme Bretton-Chabrier to gain permission, the project unfortunately came to nothing.

By way of contrast, *A la manière de . . . Chabrier* was written at Casella's request as a light-hearted pastiche. Ravel's decision to adapt a famous Gounod melody (from Act III of *Faust*) not only represents a double tribute, but firmly links the two musicians, who he felt represented 'the sources from which the main stream of French music was derived'.²⁶ Ravel transforms Gounod's simple air into an introspective piano work, marking the entry of the melody 'avec charme' and 'rubato'. Although he retains most of Gounod's melody and bass line, he builds on the existing harmony, changing sevenths into ninths, adding arpeggio movement, dramatic pauses and delaying cadences. Harmonies of D⁷ and E⁷ become D⁹ and E⁹ (cf. Example 1.1a and b), but Ravel avoids Gounod's A minor cadence, opting for E♭ major and delaying the subsequent return to C major. It could be argued that this pastiche involves a misreading, not only of Gounod, but also of Chabrier, in that the result does not sound out of place within Ravel's own work. Roy Howat has identified a number of crucial Chabrier traits introduced by Ravel: the falling fifth (from the ninth to the fifth degree) in the tenor line of bars 13 and 25; the two-octave doublings across

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Example 1.1 Melodic and harmonic comparison

(a) Gounod, *Faust* (Act III, scene I), Siebel's aria: 'The flower song' (bars 28–33)

28 Siebel

Ré-vé-lez à son â-me Le se-cret de ma flam-me!

cre - - - - scen -

32

Qu'il s'ex-hale a-vec vous Par-

- - do dim.

D⁷ E⁷

(b) Ravel, *A la manière de... Chabrier* (bars 26–31)

26

pp

m. g.

2

3

3

D⁹

29

pp subito

E⁹

bars 22–9 (see Example 1.1b) and 35–7, recalling Chabrier’s ‘Paysage’ and ‘Melancolie’; allusions to *Caprice* in the bass figure at bar 31, and to the final eight bars of ‘Sous-bois’ (and Wagner’s ‘Liebestod’) in the last three bars.²⁷ Such observations highlight the ease with which Ravel could move between his own and his influential predecessor’s style.

Along with Debussy, Milhaud and Poulenc, Ravel was involved with reassessing Chabrier’s and Gounod’s contribution to French music. Although Gounod’s influence was less personally felt on his music, Ravel’s view that Gounod was amongst the most French of recent composers and heir to ‘the French harpsichord school of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ indicates that Ravel envisaged French tradition as a chain of composers, with Gounod representing a continuation of the ‘Golden Age’ of French music; indeed, he described the 1880s as a renaissance in French music, claiming that ‘Without Gounod, perhaps there wouldn’t be any modern French music.’²⁸

Ravel and Debussy

Ravel refused to undermine Debussy’s importance, despite his own complex association with him. In Ravel’s student days, Debussy was his idol; he and his fellow ‘Apaches’ endeavoured to attend every performance of the initially controversial *Pelléas*. In a letter to Florent Schmitt of 8 April 1901, Ravel admitted that he was working on a ‘transcription of Debussy’s wonderful *Nocturnes*, in collaboration with Bardac’, alongside writing ‘choral pieces and fugues in preparation for the competition [Prix de Rome]’; the pleasure from one task would counteract the boredom of the other.²⁹ *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* always remained important for Ravel; when asked by Rosenthal what he would like played at his funeral, he replied: ‘*L’Après-midi d’un faune* . . . because it’s the only score ever written that is absolutely perfect’ (Roland-Manuel aptly described Ravel’s arrangement of the work for four hands in 1910 as a ‘homage to a man of genius’).³⁰ Ravel, however, displayed considerable anxiety about his debt to Debussy; while he was happy to admit the influence of Debussy on his *Shéhérazade* in ‘An autobiographical sketch’, he refused to be regarded simply as a follower and imitator.

Ravel’s need to assert his independence from Debussy, yet acknowledge his role, is evident from an interview for *The Morning Post* (1922) in which he declared himself an ‘anti-Debussyist’ while placing Debussy as ‘the great creative influence in modern French music’.³¹ In his view, Debussy lacked a certain discipline, particularly with regard to form; his comment that ‘I started the reaction against him in favor of the classics because I craved

more will and intellect than his music contained' gives an important clue to Ravel's independent aesthetic position.³² His dedication of the Sonata for Violin and Cello to the memory of Debussy is apt given its formal terseness, its austere and restrained expression, and its assimilation of some of the latest preoccupations; it is a fitting example of independence based on a healthy awareness of the past and present of French music.

Ravel's orchestrations of *Danse* and 'Sarabande' in 1922, at the request of the publisher Jean Jobert, differ from his earlier transcriptions in that they are the response of a mature artist. Once more, Ravel imprints his personality onto Debussy's scores; his arrangement of *Danse* contains sustained lines and more solid textures underlined by a rhythmic incision not common in Debussy's orchestral writing.

Ravel and Satie

In 'Contemporary music', Ravel placed Satie alongside Fauré and Chabrier as a formative influence. Although Ravel's interest in Satie while a student at the Conservatoire contributed to his reputation as an anti-establishment figure, it was in fact the charge made by Satie of Ravel's being part of the establishment that exacerbated the rift between the two: Satie's public statement in *Le Coq* of May 1920 that 'Ravel rejects the Légion d'honneur but all his music accepts it' was to constitute a particular snub.³³ As a founding member of the SMI, Ravel was by 1911 in a position of power to promote Satie, and a dedicated concert on 16 January (the first of the 1911 season) signalled a wider interest in Satie's music, leading to the publication of his early works. An indication of their artistic sympathy at this point is found in Roland-Manuel's statement that by 1910 Satie 'considered Debussy as a musician of the past, [whereas] Ravel illustrated the present', while Ravel wrote in 1911 that 'Erik Satie is the originator of the present form of expression.'³⁴ Ravel's dedication of 'Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête' from *Ma Mère l'Oye* 'to Erik Satie, grandfather of the "Entretiens" and other pieces, with the affectionate homage of a disciple', indicates a more personal realisation of indebtedness.³⁵ Additionally, his dedication of 'Surgi de la croupe et du bond' from *Trois poèmes de Mallarmé* can be viewed as a tribute to Satie's role as experimenter, given that it is the most harmonically advanced piece Ravel ever wrote.

Beyond World War I, Satie firmly rejected Ravel's 'deplorable and outmoded aesthetic', as he explained to Jean-Aubry in 1919; Ravel, for his part, disapproved of the faulty orchestration and lack of 'sonorous fluid' in *Parade* and the technically deficient *Socrate*, though he never attacked Satie in public.³⁶ The gulf between them and their supporters is reinforced

by an unpublished letter of 10 September 1917 that Satie wrote to Cocteau. In this letter, Satie complained about an article that Ravel's friend, Jean Marnold, had written about him, adding 'so much the better, Auric has a point: he is, and remains, a Ravel supporter'.³⁷ It is somewhat ironic that Ravel in 1928 allied his aesthetic with that of Satie: 'He anticipated Debussyan impressionism . . . and was one of the leaders in the direction away from it – a direction which I myself, as I think I can say, have consistently followed.'³⁸ His assessment of Satie's importance did not materialise until after Satie's death. Freed from the complications of Satie's personality, Ravel credited him as a pioneering experimenter and 'the inspiration of countless progressive tendencies', who had exerted an influence on most modern French composers, but who had probably never 'wrought out of his own discoveries a single complete work of art'.³⁹

Ravel and writers

Ravel also acknowledged the influence of writers: in fact he placed Poe alongside Fauré and Gedalge as his third teacher. In an interview in the *New York Times* he spoke of his American teacher, 'whom we in France were quicker to understand than you . . . [and] whose esthetic, indeed, has been extremely close and sympathetic [to] that of modern French art. Very French is the quality of "The Raven" and much else of his verse, and also his essay on the principles of poetry.'⁴⁰ An examination of Poe's *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846) and *The Poetic Principle* (1850) reveals the nature of this empathy and the extent of Poe's influence on Ravel as a student. Poe's emphasis within the process of composition on deliberate, calculated and logical planning appealed to Ravel's artisan and measured approach to musical composition and, indeed, he and his friends testified to Ravel's tendency to complete a work in his head before completion.⁴¹ In his discussion of *The Raven*, Poe's highlighting of structure, effect and proportion had an echo in Ravel's criticism of his own *Rapsodie espagnole*: 'The orchestra's too large for the number of bars.'⁴² Similarly, in both his essays, Poe advocated brevity for sustaining 'the elevation of the soul', a quality that Ravel regarded as essentially French.

Ravel undoubtedly appreciated Poe's emphases in *The Philosophy of Composition* on 'originality' and the goal of perfection. And in Poe's view, art, rather than expressing truth or conscience (the moral sense), should express nothing but beauty, tempered only by taste.⁴³ This advocacy of art for art's sake places Poe alongside fin-de-siècle writers, such as Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater and Huysmans. Moreover, the importance Poe attached to music as 'the most entrancing of the Poetic moods' shows his

proximity to the Symbolists.⁴⁴ Poe's view that setting poems to music amounted to 'perfecting them as poems' gives an important insight into Ravel's notion of 'transposing', 'translating' and 'underlining' poetry.⁴⁵ Renard recalled in his *Journal* (1960) Ravel's wish 'To say with music what you say with words . . . I think and feel in music and I should like to think and feel the same things as you'; his desire to find correspondences between the arts also indicates his attachment to Baudelaire.⁴⁶

Ravel's recognition of his bond with fin-de-siècle literary tradition is evident from the following admission:

Naturally, I fully realize that the influences which I underwent are partially related to the time in which I grew up. I am keenly aware that the works I love best have occasionally become outdated. This is true of *A Rebours*: I can't help but consider it of major importance, and yet I know that, justifiably, it no longer retains that importance. Nevertheless, it still rings true for me.⁴⁷

The Huysmans novel, *A Rebours*, published in Paris in 1884, for which Ravel felt a particular affection, achieved a cult status and is a fitting example of decadence in which the hero indulges in sensation and pleasure for their own sake. And beyond this, Ravel's interest in Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine reinforces his attachment to his immediate inheritance. Indeed, in a letter to Mme de Saint-Marceaux of 20 August 1898 he described himself as 'The little symbolist'.⁴⁸ Ravel elevated Mallarmé as 'not merely the greatest French poet, but the *only* French poet, since he made the French language, not designed for poetry, poetical'.⁴⁹ In addition to setting the Symbolists, Ravel ranged widely for suitable texts, showing an interest in the past, with settings of (or scenarios derived from) Marot, Ronsard, Charles Perrault, the Comtesse d'Aulnoy and Marie Leprince de Beaumont. He evoked an imagined past in his own texts, such as *Noël des jouets* and the unaccompanied *Trois chansons* for mixed choir, and also selected contemporary writers, most notably, Jules Renard and his fellow member of the 'Apaches', Léon-Paul Fargue. Ravel's immediate heritage provided the essential context for excursions into the past and to the exotic, and despite his predilection for adopting models or evoking imaginary musical worlds, his art was precisely located in time (turn of the century) and place (France).

National consciousness and tradition

In 1924 Ravel declared, 'Unlike politics, in art I'm a nationalist. I know that I am above all a French composer: I furthermore declare myself a

classicist.⁵⁰ This careful separation between art and politics was crucial to Ravel's left-wing political orientation and to his belief in an artistic national consciousness. Artistic achievement involved a necessary blending of national and individual consciousness; Debussy was one very important manifestation of the French spirit, just as Milhaud, Auric and Poulenc represented more recent manifestations. Despite his keen interest in foreign music, he regarded national traditions as separate and incompatible; 'Schoenberg, "one of the greatest figures of the time", as a German [*sic*] followed a line of development which had hardly reacted at all on the essentially Latin nature of French music.'⁵¹ On the other hand, he viewed Wagner's influence as disastrous and destructive, and thought that d'Indy, by following Wagner, had forsaken both his personality and tradition. He regarded much of the nineteenth century as an interruption, asserting, along with French writers such as Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras, and musicians including Debussy and Milhaud, that the French spirit was naturally classical.

Ravel occasionally equated nationality with 'racial consciousness', but generally stressed culture, climate and language as the determinants of shared national experience, declaring in 1932 that French and Austrian nationalities were not dependent on race, but on 'a cultural community crystallized out of many different races.'⁵² During his American tour he welcomed the mixture inherent in national styles, suggesting that 'it will be found that national music is usually an accumulation from many sources.'⁵³ Indeed, he concluded his 'Contemporary music' lecture in this vein, arguing against the notion of purity in art, a notion held by as diverse a group as d'Indy, Debussy and Milhaud.

Ravel's fear of being associated with the wrong kind of nationalism is evident from his letter to Jean Marnold on receiving an invitation in 1916 to be on the committee of the reformed SN, in which he admitted his hesitation 'fearing that this Society was too . . . national.'⁵⁴ More public, however, was his refusal to join the National League for the Defence of French Music because they advocated prohibiting French public performances of contemporary German and Austrian compositions. His belief that isolation from foreign music would be 'dangerous for French composers' and would lead to the degeneration of French art testifies to a very healthy openness to music from whatever source. While he felt that nationality tied an artist to a particular tradition, it was not a reason for discrimination: 'It is of little importance to me that Mr. Schoenberg, for example, is of Austrian nationality. This does not prevent him from being an outstanding musician.'⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Ravel pledged to 'act as a Frenchman', as his determination to become involved in the War and his obvious pride in finally fulfilling this aim testify.

Musical engagement with the past

Although Ravel referred to Rameau and Couperin as classics, he very rarely discussed them in his writings, admitting only his preference for Couperin and Lully rather than the somewhat intellectual style of Rameau. Unlike Debussy, he was not involved in promoting performances of the music of this ‘Golden Age’ of French music, or in any of the critical editions that appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, his interest in Couperin manifested itself in his transcription of Couperin’s ‘Forlane’ from the fourth *Concert royal* in Spring 1914. Despite Ravel’s jest that he was transcribing the dance in response to the Pope’s prohibition of the tango in favour of the forlane, Messing identifies a more likely reason for Ravel’s transcription in the publication of a harmonisation of Couperin’s ‘Forlane’ by Albert Bertelin.⁵⁶ Bertelin’s transcription had appeared within an article by Jules Ecorcheville entitled ‘La Forlane’, in the *Revue musicale de la S.I.M.* of April 1914. A comparison between Bertelin’s and Ravel’s transcriptions reveals that Ravel adopted a sparser texture, minimising inner movement and avoiding the regular minor second dissonance in the refrain. Ravel also preferred to keep the bass nearer the upper parts, even allowing it to rise above the melody at the start of the third couplet. Finally, in the fourth couplet (Examples 1.2a and b), Ravel avoided the tedious drone effect, choosing to decorate the texture with pianistic octave leaps.

Within a few months of making the transcription (at the start of the War), Ravel wrote to Roland-Manuel stating that he had begun a French suite: ‘no, it isn’t what you think: *La Marseillaise* will not be in it, but it will have a forlane and a gigue; no tango, however’ – a further allusion to the prohibition.⁵⁷ Messing and Orenstein have acknowledged rhythmic similarities between Couperin’s ‘Forlane’ and that of Ravel. Certainly, Ravel retained the rhythmic gestures, ornamentation and formal scheme of refrain and couplets from the original. There are, however, some closer parallels (cf. Example 1.3a–c). Ravel’s rhythm, phrasing, articulation and key of E major correspond exactly with Couperin’s refrain (cf. Example 1.3a and b). Moreover, Ravel’s rhythmic exchange between the parts and general melodic shape are strikingly similar to Couperin’s third couplet (cf. Example 1.3a and c). Ravel overrides his decision in the transcription to maintain a high register, achieving greater force with the antiphonal effect in the bass and closely spaced chords. Other parallels can be found between Couperin’s first and Ravel’s second couplet, which are alike in rhythm, melodic shape and homophonic character, and between Couperin’s and Ravel’s fourth couplets in terms of rhythm, tessitura and key. Despite his claim that ‘The homage is directed less in fact to Couperin

Example 1.2 Couperin, *Concert royal No. IV*, 'Forlane': fourth couplet (bars 1–8)

(a) Ed. Bertelin (Source: *Revue musicale de la S.I.M.* (April 1914), 28)

4^e couplet
mineur

(b) Ed. Ravel (Source: Arbie Orenstein, 'Some unpublished music and letters by Maurice Ravel', *Music Forum*, 3 (1973), 291–334: 331)

4^e Couplet
(Mineur)

himself than to French music of the eighteenth century', Couperin was clearly not far from his mind.⁵⁸ Retaining the linear aspects of Couperin's style, Ravel embellished and added to his model vertically by thickening the harmonies, as he did with the Gounod/Chabrier pastiche. The most repeated section in the dance, the refrain, with its rising major seventh and chordal harmonic support, is stylistically the furthest removed from the original, indicating Ravel's ultimate control of his model. (For more on Ravel's 'Forlane', see Howat, 'Sophistication in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*': Chapter 4.)

21 History and homage

Example 1.3 Ravel and Couperin comparisons

(a) Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, 'Forlane' (bars 124–36)

Musical score for Ravel's 'Forlane' (bars 124–36). The score is in 6/8 time and consists of three systems. The first system (bars 124–128) begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second system (bars 129–133) features a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The third system (bars 134–136) returns to a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score is written for piano with treble and bass staves.

(b) Couperin, ed. Ravel, 'Forlane': refrain (bars 1–8)

(Source: Orenstein, 'Some unpublished music', 330)

Musical score for Couperin's 'Forlane' refrain (bars 1–8). The score is in 6/8 time and consists of two systems. The first system (bars 1–4) begins with a fermata over the first measure. The second system (bars 5–8) ends with a double bar line and the word 'Fin'. The score is written for piano with treble and bass staves.

Example 1.3 (cont.)

(c) Couperin, ed. Ravel, 'Forlane': third couplet (bars 1–7)

(Source: Orenstein, 'Some unpublished music', 330)

3^e Couplet

In other pieces his evocation of the past is unspecific, such as the imagined past of *Menuet antique* (via Chabrier), the *Trois chansons pour chœur mixte sans accompagnement* and songs, including *Deux épigrammes de Clément Marot* and *Ronsard à son âme*, with more clichéd allusions to the past in the bare fourths, fifths and octaves. Messing argues that World War I provided the catalyst for Ravel's renewed interest in older forms and styles.⁵⁹ Although some parallels can be drawn with Debussy in this respect, Ravel remained more open to the wider European musical tradition.

Tradition beyond France

Ravel did not limit his homage to French music. Indeed, Mozart was his favourite composer and, in an interview in the Austrian press in 1932, he stated that he felt 'particularly close to Mozart . . . Beethoven strikes me as a classical Roman, Mozart as a classical Hellene. I myself feel closer to the open, sunny Hellenes.'⁶⁰ In accounting for his personal empathy for Mozart in this way, he touches on an enduring French notion that the French were heirs to ancient Greek civilisation, a view that Paul Collaer later espoused in *La Musique moderne*.⁶¹ Ravel's preference for Mozartian Grecian greatness over the colossal in Beethoven is a further indication of the link he felt between Mozart and his own intimate French art. Mozart also constituted an important part of his training, since Gedalge based his teaching largely on his works. It may appear surprising that he made no arrangements or

transcriptions of any Mozart, but he probably felt that he had nothing to add to the work of the composer whom he described as perfection.

Ravel, like Debussy, had a particular empathy towards the Russian 'Five'. Admitting that he appreciated their music for its 'otherness', he also believed in its beneficial impact on French music and its role in offering French composers an alternative to Wagner's influence. Viñes recalled their early enthusiasm for Russian music, and the theme from Borodin's Second Symphony even became the rallying call of the 'Apaches'. Ravel shows his familiarity with Borodin's style in the pastiche entitled *A la manière de . . . Borodine*. Ravel worked with Stravinsky on the orchestration of Musorgsky's unfinished *Khovanshchina* in 1913, and Ravel's version of *Pictures at an Exhibition* is better known now than Musorgsky's original, with Ravel's character very much in evidence. Rimsky-Korsakov, whose predilection for orchestrating the works of others was matched only by Ravel, became Ravel's focus when he reorchestrated Rimsky's *Antar*. The incidental music comprises sections from *Antar*, *Mlada* and the songs, Op. 4 and Op. 7. A sketch at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France consists of a piano reduction of the intended excerpts from *Antar* and the songs and scraps of dialogue from the play, giving a rare insight into Ravel's working methods.⁶²

Viñes's diaries and Nectoux's study of Ravel's own music library confirm that Ravel's musical interests were always broad. Educated in the traditional piano repertoire at the Conservatoire, including Schumann, Mendelssohn, Weber, Chopin, Grieg and Saint-Saëns, Ravel never lost his interest in them, as his orchestration of Schumann's *Carnaval* and his undertaking of the complete Mendelssohn piano works edition suggest. Nectoux also notes that Ravel owned the first French, Italian and German editions of Liszt, whom he admired for his pianistic and harmonic innovations and for his crucial influence on Wagner.⁶³ The list of other composers he admired and studied ranged from Weber, Bellini and Johann Strauss through to Richard Strauss.

Ravel treated orchestration as a technical skill slightly separate from the compositional process: while Ravel never allowed anyone to watch him composing, he was seen orchestrating. He had a similar attitude towards transcriptions, a process 'which every musical work may undergo, on condition that good taste presides'.⁶⁴ He felt more strongly, however, about interfering with the harmonies of another composer's work, arguing that Rimsky-Korsakov's corrections of Musorgsky amounted to tampering with the essence of Musorgsky's conception; Ravel also writes about the inappropriateness of being asked to complete Chabrier's *Briséis*.⁶⁵ Ravel's edition of Mendelssohn's piano works constitutes his only editorial work and represents a particular kind of tribute, undertaken for Durand during

the War when German editions were unavailable. It comprises nine volumes, with just the first containing editorial comments. Ravel was explicit that he drew upon two published sources: Breitkopf and Brandus, edited by Stephen Heller; and, although he adhered to the Breitkopf version, he presented Heller's suggestions as serious alternatives. Characteristically, his aim seemed to be perfecting Mendelssohn's style, based on intuition, in the absence of manuscript sources. Thus he alluded to details in Heller's version as 'more successful', 'more elegant' or 'with more delicate charm', justifying his preference: 'because they are presented by a sensitive artist, and a sincere admirer of Mendelssohn'.⁶⁶ Guarding Heller from any charge of drawing on his own inspiration, he conjectured that he must have had access to a manuscript or to corrections indicated directly by Mendelssohn. Ravel clearly faced a conflict between his goal of perfection and his practice of not tampering with a completed work.

New musical developments and neoclassicism

Ravel's comment that 'musicians who are true alike to their national consciousness and to their own individuality often appreciate compositions altogether different from their own' was at the root of his objection to the aims of the National League for the Defence of French Music,⁶⁷ and also of his defence of Jean Wiéner's 'salad concerts', which had been attacked by the critic Louis Vuillemin as 'Concerts métèques' in *Le Courrier musical* of January 1923. In his joint response with Roussel, Caplet and Roland-Manuel, in the April issue, he welcomed the performance of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, which he had tried and failed to get performed (together with Stravinsky's *Trois poésies* and two of his own Mallarmé settings) in May 1913 by the SMI, warning against the wrong sort of patriotism 'in an area where it has nothing to gain, but everything to lose'.⁶⁸

Ravel attempted to remain aware of new musical trends throughout his career, at one point setting them and after 1918, increasingly responding to them. Acknowledging that his Mallarmé settings were inspired by the instrumentation of *Pierrot lunaire*, he also admitted that, while the '*Chansons madécasses* are in no way Schoenbergian', they could not have been written without Schoenberg's example.⁶⁹ In the letter to the SMI committee he anticipated the audience's response to *Pierrot lunaire*, Stravinsky's *Trois poésies* and the first two of his Mallarmé settings: whereas the Schoenberg and Stravinsky 'will make the audience howl', the Ravel 'will calm them down, and the people will go out whistling tunes'.⁷⁰ Ravel would therefore have agreed with Boulez's assertion that he, like Stravinsky, was

only able to capture the most superficial elements of Schoenberg's *Pierrot* because of their divergent aesthetic stances.⁷¹

Ravel's interest in Schoenberg brought him close to the position of some of 'Les Six', who, along with Wiéner, were actively promoting foreign music in Paris after World War I. Ravel and the members of 'Les Six' also shared other concerns, including their recognition of the importance of Gounod and Chabrier for French music, their belief in two parallel and distinct traditions – Latin and Teutonic, and their desire to find alternatives to Debussy's inimitable art. These points are well illustrated by Milhaud's article on 'The evolution of modern music in Paris and in Vienna' that appeared in the *North American Review* of April 1923.⁷² Ravel shared the contemporary fascination with jazz and interest in bitonality with Milhaud. Indeed, the jazz-inspired figure (Fig. 5; bars 52–5) from the first movement of his Concerto in G indicates that Ravel knew Milhaud's *La Création du monde*, although Stravinsky and Gershwin's influence are also in evidence. Ravel retained a keen interest in the music of 'Les Six', promoting it abroad, defending it from attacks in the press and even justifying his own rejection by 'Les Six' with the comment, 'if he [Auric] didn't knock Ravel he'd be writing Ravel, and there's quite enough of that!'⁷³

In the early 1920s, Milhaud, Poulenc and Auric regarded Ravel with disdain, harshly criticising what they regarded as his 'outmoded' aesthetic. Milhaud explained that as a conservatoire student he became dismissive of Ravel, perceiving a lack of depth in his music; he also expressed his contempt for *La Valse*, describing it as 'Saint-Saëns for the Russian ballet'.⁷⁴ Most likely, he and his colleagues were also influenced by Satie's deteriorating relations with Ravel. Indeed, their view that Ravel was part of the establishment seemed to be borne out by Ravel's new status as the leading French composer after Debussy's death in 1918. Ravel, who had been close to Stravinsky in the early-to-mid 1910s, did not share the younger generation's wholehearted enthusiasm for Stravinsky's neoclassicism. Declaring his incomprehension of *Mavra* and other 'failed' works, Ravel could not understand Stravinsky's fascination with Tchaikovsky and rejection of his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov.

Yet Ravel was clearly drawn to certain aspects of neoclassicism, insisting on relating the current preoccupations with older, enduring concerns. Ravel, Stravinsky, Satie and 'Les Six' shared the ideal of *dépouillement* (economy of means); while 'Les Six' presented it as something new, initiated by Satie, Ravel credited Debussy for championing it. It is undeniable, however, that Ravel's interest in achieving economy of means increased after the War and that in this respect he demonstrated his receptivity to new musical developments. Thus, in the Sonata for Violin and Cello, Ravel

combined Saint-Saëns with traces of Stravinsky's rhythmic drive, adopting a restraint which suggests both Fauré and a more contemporary austerity.

In an interview in the *New York Times* (1927), Ravel spoke of a 'reaction . . . in the direction of our oldest traditions'.⁷⁵ Welcoming the interest in counterpoint (though surely overplaying the distinction between his and Debussy's string quartets), he argued that it was not as new as Stravinsky made it seem:

After our extreme modernism, a return to classicism was to be expected. After a flood comes the ebb tide, and after a revolution we see the reaction. Stravinsky is often considered the leader of neoclassicism, but don't forget that my String Quartet was already conceived in terms of four-part counterpoint, whereas Debussy's Quartet is purely harmonic in conception.⁷⁶

Although Ravel links himself with neoclassicism as a precursor, he remains separate from the 'revolution' and 'reaction'. His expression of 'delight' in the 'return to pure forms, this neoclassicism – call it what you will' was due to the fact that he had never abandoned his use of traditional forms and classicising titles.⁷⁷ Ravel's classicism, including his predilection for older dance forms and his evocation of the past, owes much to his immediate predecessors, particularly Chabrier, Fauré and Saint-Saëns. Ravel was less concerned with remaking the past than with responding to it, unlike Stravinsky, who had deliberately dissociated himself from his Russian roots and borrowed wilfully to create what T. S. Eliot described as 'new wholes'.⁷⁸

This fundamental difference in attitude towards traditional rules is captured in their response in 1913–14 to the issue of superimposing a major and minor third: 'Ravel said, "But such a chord is perfectly feasible, provided the minor third is placed above the major third below." "If this arrangement is possible", commented Stravinsky, "I don't see why the contrary shouldn't be possible too: and if I will it, I can do it."⁷⁹ While Ravel sometimes experimented with bitonality, his music can generally be analysed in terms of unresolved appoggiaturas, and so on, operating within a single, albeit extended, tonality. Boulez's observation that, even when succumbing to Schoenberg's influence, Ravel's harmonic language derives from Gounod and Fauré, reinforces Ravel's essential link with his immediate past.⁸⁰ Ravel's response to Stravinsky's innovations and to the allied preoccupations of the younger generation was selective, adopting textures, instrumentation and some harmonic procedures, while always linking these developments to tradition.