

11 Ravel and the twentieth century

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No sane commentator has ever doubted Ravel's talent. He was a wonderful technician, a superb orchestrator, a consummate stylist . . . but . . . The sense of disappointment is as often an undertow as a fully fledged current. Jim Samson, for instance, sums up Ravel's harmonic practice by saying that 'ultimately . . . the more astringent harmonies in his music are an extension and enrichment of a traditional type of tonal thinking rather than a reshaping of tonality along new, radical lines'.¹ Samson might reasonably argue that this is a neutral, non-value judgement; but in the context of a book entitled *Music in Transition* it is, I submit, easier to read it as a criticism than as a eulogy. There is surely more than a little truth in Michael Russ's contention with regard to the two piano concertos that 'Musicology is wary of declaring as "canonic" works which set out to entertain rather than those which confront the audience with what it might find unpalatable as a necessary part of discovery and self-expression' ('The Concerto in G and jazz': Chapter 6). It is, in essence, the ways in which Ravel is thought to fall short of the canonic, the 'but' of my first paragraph, that I want to examine, for what they tell us not only about Ravel but also about the twentieth century and the demands it has made of its 'serious' composers.

Ravel's musical structures

First of all, we should consider Ravel's structures (or at least, what are perceived to be such). George Benjamin (b. 1960), a Ravel lover, nonetheless confesses that

the aspect of Ravel that I'm more foreign to is the conservatism of his structures. They work perfectly for his music, but he *is* a bit unadventurous in his structures. It's all so clear-cut and all so classical on the surface that the type of experimentation with phrase-structure and long-term structural exploration you find in German music, in the Second Viennese School, and even up to a point in Debussy, is absent there; it is quite compartmentalised, and in a way he's a miniaturist. The structures do have a certain similarity and indeed cleanness about them.

Now that may be on purpose, because with the harmonies being as subtle as they are, if the form became more subtle and complex, there'd be

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overload perhaps, which he would have hated. But I love it in German music when you get the feeling of structures bursting out of their bounds and going into territory you could never imagine from the beginning of the piece – you find that in Beethoven, and in Brahms and Wagner also, but you don't find that in Ravel. He remains basically within his borders once he's set them up; to do otherwise would probably be contrary to his character, but I find that problematic.²

This feeling, that Ravel could have been more adventurous if he chose, is widespread, as is the feeling that on the occasions he did choose to be adventurous, it was in the wrong directions. Debussy was one of the first to take this line, complaining to Louis Laloy: 'I agree with you Ravel is extraordinarily gifted, but what annoys me is the attitude he adopts of being a "conjurer", or rather a Fakir casting spells and making flowers burst out of chairs.'³

Elsewhere in his letters, Debussy speaks of his own 'personal alchemy' and we may feel that in this context the distinction between an alchemist and a conjurer is rather a fine one. Perhaps one of the things that upset the notoriously secretive Debussy was that Ravel tends to make plain what his technical and emotional intentions are (linked, maybe, with the setting up of borders to which Benjamin alludes). At the same time, like a conjurer, he cultivates surprise within this closely defined environment.

If we are looking for a source for this emphasis on surprise, we can find it in Baudelaire's definition of the dandy (since his French is elegantly simple, I prefer to quote it untranslated). In his view, the dandy is 'épris avant tout de distinction' and embraces 'la simplicité absolue, qui est, en effet, la meilleure manière de se distinguer'; he feels 'le besoin ardent de se faire une originalité, contenu dans les limites extérieures des convenances' (my italics). He is motivated by 'le plaisir d'étonner et la satisfaction orgueilleuse de ne jamais être étonné'. All dandies 'participent du même caractère d'opposition et de révolte' and experience 'ce besoin . . . de combattre et de détruire la trivialité'. In short, they pursue 'le projet de fonder une espèce nouvelle d'aristocratie'.⁴

A mixture of aristocratic attitudes with aggression, and even a balance between the two, certainly helps to explain some of Ravel's music – and in the case of *Boléro*, the distaste of many may be attributable to what they hear as its too wholehearted embrace of aggression and an abandonment of the 'aristocratic' lineaments of the *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*, the *Sonatine* or *Le Tombeau de Couperin*.

There can, at all events, be no doubt over Ravel's determination to be different: witness his willingness to claim of some technical innovation 'And then, you know, no one had ever done that before!'⁵ and his complaint that 'With every new endeavour, the critics throw your previous

characteristics back in your face.’⁶ To that extent, and with suitable caution, one may disagree with Roland-Manuel when he writes that ‘as a pure craftsman Ravel was utterly different from those aesthetes who, to use Nietzsche’s charming expression, always fear “that they will be understood without too much difficulty”’; though he is surely right in claiming that Ravel is not one of those ‘who are eager of their own accord to give their art a significance which lies far beyond its actual range.’⁷

It is relevant to quote the only mention of Ravel in Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*. At the end of ‘Le temps retrouvé’ a young man, hearing the Kreutzer Sonata, mistakenly ‘thought it was a piece by Ravel which someone had described to him as being as beautiful as Palestrina, but difficult to understand.’⁸ Given Proust’s sensitivity to artistic opinion in all its manifestations, we may presume that this blend of beauty with difficulty was the received judgement on Ravel’s music in the salons at the end of the First World War and just after. I cannot help thinking that Ravel must have been pleased when he read it, possibly taking the reference to Palestrina as a tribute to his teacher Gedalge.

Another disconcerting factor for some, including Pierre Boulez (b. 1925), has been the perceived split between Ravel’s pre- and post-war music, with *Le Tombeau de Couperin* acting as a slightly awkward bridge over the divide:

For me what is important is works like *Shéhérazade*, *Miroirs*, *Gaspard de la nuit* or *Ma Mère l’Oye*, where he has no restriction, with a certain spontaneity. After the War, the second period is, for me, much less attractive, although very attractive from outside. He tends to be too much self-restricted, he doesn’t want to go out of himself. After the Trio you don’t find the same deep feeling as before, but more a kind of stylistic game, which is absolutely extraordinary. Only in the second song of *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* does he go back to something very genuine.

Boulez and Benjamin agree about Ravel’s self-restrictions and both Benjamin and Alexander Goehr (b. 1932) make the point that, whatever feeling there may or may not be in the post-war works, a piece like *Boléro* has been crucial for the minimalists. Indeed, Goehr goes further in going back:

I think *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (which I have written imitations of several times) is a model – you can learn from Ravel something that was very unfashionable in the fifties and sixties, but could well be important: which is how you deal with something which is outwardly familiar, such as a waltz, which has a lot of ‘givens’ in it – and it’s not just got to be three-in-a-bar, it’s got to have a certain bass pattern – and you fill in the middle in a very original way.

For instance, minimalist composers, stuck as they are – because once the initial impact of minimalism has been made, what does a composer

such as Glass do? – I would have thought Ravel would have been an extremely valuable model for them, because where the outward is given you go for the subtlety in the middle.

Ravel's influence in France and beyond

After this exposition of some of the problems that the twentieth century has had with Ravel, it is time for some development in the shape of a more formally organised synopsis of the influences, acknowledged and unacknowledged, positive and negative, which Ravel has exerted.

Edward Lockspeiser observed that Ravel's transcriptions and orchestrations of Debussy's music provided 'ample proof of [his] sincere devotion to Debussy. On the other hand, the name of Ravel is not once mentioned by Debussy without a note of sarcasm, irony or concern, certainly never with any sort of unreserved admiration.'⁹ One explanation for this could be that, where Ravel could accept the fact of Debussy's influence on him and put his natural aggression on hold for the most part (always excepting his defence of the primacy of the 'Habanera' in the harmonic stakes and of *Jeux d'eau* in the 'impressionist' piano ones), Debussy was perhaps as anxious for a time about Ravel's influence on him as he continued to be about Stravinsky's, even if this anxiety was nowhere so openly expressed. The coincidence of the two men's Mallarmé settings was unfortunate, but already by then Ravel had given signs in *Valses nobles* that he was pursuing ends far from those of Debussy and it is hard to see that for the six years or so that remained of Debussy's composing life he was indebted to Ravel's music in any way: the quotation from 'Le Gibet' in the fourth of the *Six épigraphes antiques* (see Roy Howat, 'Form and motive in *Gaspard de la nuit*': Chapter 4) I take as the exception which proves the rule.

The extent of Stravinsky's indebtedness to Ravel is equally disputable. Among the printed sources, Eric Walter White notes a couple of possible instances: in Stravinsky's setting of Verlaine's 'Un grand sommeil noir' of 1910 (Ravel's 1895 setting was not published until 1953) 'an occasional chord of the 13th reminds one of Ravel' and in *Jeu de cartes* of 1936 'the waltz in the third deal sounds like a light-hearted skit on Ravel's *La Valse*',¹⁰ while Stephen Walsh detects some Ravel influence in Act I of *Le Rossignol* (The Nightingale).¹¹ Many commentators have also noted the plagiarism of the end of *Rapsodie espagnole* in the final flourish of the 'Danse infernale' in *L'Oiseau de feu*. But, altogether, it is a fairly meagre haul. And in the last instance it is tempting to regard Stravinsky's borrowing as somewhat crudely simplistic – for one thing, where his up–down–up pattern is

consistent in all instruments, Ravel slightly overlaps the three components, presenting the final C major chord as a welcome solution to threatened chaos.

To these examples, however, Benjamin makes one challenging addition:

I don't think *The Rite of Spring* would have been *The Rite of Spring* harmonically if Stravinsky hadn't been friends with Ravel, because (and Messiaen told me this) in the twenties and thirties people thought that Ravel was the more modern of the two because his music was more dissonant. The degree of sensitivity in Ravel's polytonal, polyharmonic world is fabulous; and you find that in *Miroirs* and *Gaspard*. Who else was doing that around then? Not Debussy. And where does Stravinsky get the harmonic language of, say, the beginning of Part II of *The Rite of Spring*? That's from 'Le Gibet', I think, among other things.

In calling this view 'challenging' I am thinking especially of Richard Taruskin's warning regarding the '*Petrushka* chord': that 'by understanding the origins of Stravinsky's triadic-symmetrical octatonicism in Rimsky-Korsakov's work and teaching, one can distinguish his "*Petrushka* chord" from the ones in Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* (1901), for example, or in Strauss's *Elektra* (1908), which have very different historical backgrounds and different functional explanations, but which an analyst unarmed with historical perspective might be tempted to adduce as precedents for Stravinsky's usage'.¹² It could be that Taruskin would not adduce 'Le Gibet' as a precedent for the above passage of *Le Sacre*; the fact remains that Benjamin, as a practising composer and conductor, hears it that way.

It seems unlikely that Stravinsky's use of jazz owed anything to Ravel – apart from anything else, he got there first. Ravel's latecoming in this sphere was also commented on implicitly by Milhaud who in 1927, the year of the first performance by Enesco and Ravel of the latter's mature Sonata for Violin and Piano with its central 'Blues', stated firmly that

the influence of jazz has already passed like a cleansing storm after which you find a clearer sky and more settled weather. Little by little a reviving classicism is replacing the exhausted gasps of syncopation. Our young composers are embarking on paths marked out for them by the new orientations of Stravinsky on the one hand and of Erik Satie on the other.¹³

No mention of Ravel . . . Milhaud admitted though that he was allergic to Ravel's music and increasingly this had come to be true of Milhaud's mentor Satie. In 1911 Satie dismissed Ravel as a 'highly talented Prix de Rome winner, a flashier version of Debussy'¹⁴ and eight years later declined to write an article on Ravel for Jean-Aubry, saying that it 'might not be very much to your taste. The fault lies entirely with the deplorable

and outmoded aesthetic professed by our friend. It would be difficult for me to water down what my thinking dictates. I love Ravel deeply but his art leaves me cold, alas!¹⁵

Against Satie's complaint about Ravel being 'outmoded' (see also Kelly, 'Ravel and Satie': Chapter 1), we have to set the claim of Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) that in the 1920s and 30s people regarded Ravel as more modern than Stravinsky! The only answer seems to be that Satie and the young Messiaen moved in different circles, but it certainly serves as a warning that Ravel's standing was not an acknowledged constant across the whole spectrum of Parisian musical life.

In the case of Honegger and Poulenc, Ravel's influence has to be described as patchy. Honegger's 'Hommage à Ravel', written in 1915 and subsequently published as the second of *Trois pièces* for piano, pays lip service to the older composer in its use of modality and of Ravel's characteristic major ninth over a minor triad, but its stiff gait is most un-Ravelian. Thereafter, in the opinion of Harry Halbreich, there are echoes of *Ma Mère l'Oye* at the end of Honegger's First String Quartet (1917) and in the powerful 'De profundis' in his Third Symphony (1945–6), and the Finale of his Sonatina for Violin and Cello (1932) is close in spirit to that of Ravel's earlier essay in the medium. But by and large the two men's composing worlds were far apart, as can be judged from a denigratory remark Honegger made in 1950: 'Ravel is a little like Utrillo, who used to paint pictures from postcards.'¹⁶

Poulenc too was ambivalent about Ravel's music. After *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* had won him back into the fold of Ravel admirers, he went on to wax ecstatic about both the piano concertos, his epithet 'sublime' for the Concerto for the Left Hand being underlined thirteen times.¹⁷ But elsewhere we find accusations that Ravel's music is cold,¹⁸ that his orchestral technique is inappropriately applied,¹⁹ and that 'neither the blues of the Violin Sonata nor the foxtrot in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* will add anything much to Ravel's fame'.²⁰ His ambivalence shows itself most markedly over *L'Heure espagnole*, a work that has in general provided a focus for discussion of the technique/emotion dichotomy in Ravel's music. In 1943, he found *Mavra* 'more *démodé* than *L'Heure espagnole*' (the word 'even' is implied), but a year later, when working on *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, he could admit: 'I've read the orchestral score of Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole* with unparalleled care, and with the piano reduction in the other hand. What a miraculous masterpiece! But what a truly dangerous example (like all masterpieces)! When you lack Ravel's spellbinding precision (as, alas, I do), you have to set your music on sturdy feet.'²¹ It is hard to say whether Poulenc's praise here for Ravel's consummate technique includes any for his expressive qualities.

We can find a similar ambivalence in Messiaen who, like Poulenc, was no jazz fiend: 'I've never believed in jazz and I've always thought that the poetic

and refined figure of Maurice Ravel was spoiled in his last years by this jazz influence, which really had nothing to do with his personal inclinations.²²

Messiaen's relationship with Ravel could provide a chapter on its own, but it is particularly interesting that, in the original French, the adjective translated as 'refined' should be 'racée', meaning 'thoroughbred, true to one's race or stock': the implication being clearly that not only was Ravel's attachment to jazz in bad taste, it was actually unpatriotic. As Roy Howat has pointed out (see Chapter 4), Ravel's Frenchness was achieved rather than inborn. But it was nonetheless how he was perceived by all but the closest of his friends, who came to recognise in him a typically Basque stubbornness, even cussedness.

Messiaen's view, like that of Boulez, was coloured by his preference for the same works: *Miroirs*, *Gaspard de la nuit*, *Ma Mère l'Oye* and *Daphnis et Chloé*. But occasionally, as Benjamin recalls, one could find cracks in the façade:

Messiaen was rather 'iffy' about quite a lot of Ravel. He would play *Ma Mère l'Oye* on the piano and he would be in tears; *Gaspard* too. But he would try and find a flaw in Ravel – maybe that's part of the question of growing away from something you're very fond of. In *L'Heure espagnole*, you could hear him consciously finding flaws. I can't imagine him saying very nice things about *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, but one day he was in a very good mood and came into the class singing the opening of the 'Rigaudon' – and he kept on going too!

... which takes us back to Russ's point, quoted at the start of this chapter.

Messiaen, like all composers, tended to find in other composers' music what he needed to find: *Daphnis* was a treasure trove of irrational Hindu and Greek rhythms;²³ 'Laideronnette' fed into the *Trois petites liturgies* where, in Boulez's view, the 'side order' (the gamelan sonorities) was more interesting than the 'main order',²⁴ and this in turn fed into Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître*; the coda to 'Oiseaux tristes' was metamorphosed into the opening of the 'Amen du jugement' in *Visions de l'Amen*. But perhaps the most fascinating idea that Ravel's music sparked off in Messiaen came from 'Scarbo', in the passage from bars 121 to 154 where on four occasions a short value (a semiquaver) is followed by a longer value, each one decreasing in duration: the proportions are 1 : 59; 1 : 47; 1 : 37; 1 : 21.²⁵ Bearing in mind that *Gaspard* was one of Messiaen's earliest possessions – he was given it between the ages of seven and ten, before the score of Debussy's *Pelléas* – we may ask whether this was the breeding ground of the *personnages rythmiques* which he was later to apply in his analysis of *Le Sacre* and in the composition of the *Turangalila Symphony*, among other works. Over and above that, *Gaspard* remains a clear influence on Messiaen's piano writing, as a link between *Islamey* and *Vingt regards*.

Henri Dutilleux (b. 1916), born between Messiaen and Boulez and beginning his studies at the Paris Conservatoire in the 1930s, found ‘Ravelism’ entrenched as *the* official style and experienced considerable difficulty escaping from it. Certainly, some of his earlier works which he now prefers not to think about too much, such as the Flute Sonatina, bear some marks of Ravelian influence in their elegant modality. While yielding to no one in his admiration of Ravel’s technique, Dutilleux may have been obliquely criticising his post-war stylistic games when he stated that ‘an artist has a very small number of things that he has to say very firmly, and they are always the same things.’²⁶ On the other hand, one could equally maintain that one of the miracles of Ravel’s output is that, whatever the problem being solved, the authorial voice remains constant.

Boulez has had little to say about Ravel over the years and admits that, in his view,

for the twentieth century, of course he’s not as important a figure as Debussy, for instance, although the comparison is maybe wrong – but Debussy was more inventive, from a certain point of view, trying to get completely out of earlier formal frames, more inventive also in the rhythmical aspect. But I think that without Ravel the profile of French music would be completely different; and that’s something of patrimonial interest, certainly, and without him the patrimony would be much poorer.

Almost the most interesting point here is Boulez’s admission that we should not be comparing Ravel with Debussy, and yet we do. Boulez admits Ravel’s importance for the French composers who came after him, yet at the same time denigrates him because it is not the kind of importance (of language, form and rhythm) which Boulez particularly values. In saying that Ravel is ‘not as important’ to the twentieth century as Debussy, Boulez is also implying ‘or to the twenty-first century and beyond’, an implication which will be challenged below.

The Second Viennese School seem either to have ignored Ravel’s presence, as in the case of Schoenberg, or as in Webern’s example, to have taken a narrow view of his achievement – Eduard Steuermann remembered that ‘Webern once did the Mallarmé songs; he adored them, especially the last, which is very close to Schoenberg.’²⁷ On the other hand, Joan Peyser quotes Webern asking of a Ravel orchestral piece, ‘Why does he use so many instruments?’²⁸ which perhaps tells us more about Webern than about Ravel.

Ravel’s influence in England

Ravel’s influence on English music is probably a good deal greater, but even here it is hard to adduce specific evidence. Much is owed to Sir Henry

Wood, who introduced Ravel's music to Britain with commendable promptness: *Introduction et allegro* in 1907, *Rapsodie espagnole* in 1909, *Pavane pour une Infante défunte* in Manchester in 1911 (the world premiere of the orchestral version, beating the French one by ten months) and *Valses nobles* in 1913.

Among English composers, Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) benefited from his lessons with Ravel but, apart from the short-lived French fever he himself spoke of, the direct influence of the French master is small. It is confined perhaps to ideas of orchestral spacing, especially in the string writing, and to the use of models, Alain Frogley claiming that Vaughan Williams 'firmly believed in the value of modelling as a compositional training technique'.²⁹ Fiona Clampin suggests that Ravel's String Quartet possibly acted as a model for Herbert Howells's Third Quartet, *In Gloucestershire*, as his *Sonatine* may have done for John Ireland's *Sonatina*.³⁰

Among a slightly younger generation, Arthur Bliss (1891–1975) 'at fifteen years of age . . . was immediately captivated by the French masters', including the 'cool, elegant music of Ravel – no beetling brows and gloomy looks here, but a keen and slightly quizzical look at the world'.³¹ Lennox Berkeley (1903–89) in his turn studied with Ravel in Paris during the late 1920s and the same 'cool elegance' distinguishes much of his music, though not all. Ravel was an early influence too on Benjamin Britten (1913–76). By the time he was thirteen or fourteen, Britten had heard the String Quartet and been excited by it,³² and the summer holidays of 1930 were 'largely spent studying Ravel's *Miroirs*'.³³ The astonishing orchestral sounds of the *Quatre chansons françaises* (1928) also indicate a close study of Ravel's scores.

And yet, in 1947, Percy Scholes could write that although 'some few pianoforte and orchestral pieces have become well known . . . there is not much evidence in *The Musical Times* of any really wide public acceptance of the composer'.³⁴ That there was however acceptance by an elite is confirmed by Norman Demuth who, writing in 1952 as a Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London, opined that 'those who deal with young students find that when these begin to branch away from their traditional basic technique, it is Ravel who appears to give the direction'.³⁵

Disentangling Ravel's music and technique

In summing up the situation at present, it is important to distinguish between the example of Ravel's music itself and that of his approach to composition. Goehr makes the point, echoed (if less challengingly) by

Dutilleux, that Ravel ‘is a bit too clever to be of much influence, because you’ve got to be too good at it to actually do it, and people nowadays aren’t characterised by their high technical abilities in this direction!’

Where influences are to be recognised, it is more in the tone and the technique than in any of Ravel’s musical styles or masks, which remain too personal. Julian Anderson (b. 1967) confesses to ‘tearing Ravel’s scores apart to find out how it’s done’; John Casken (b. 1949) muses on Ravel’s ‘astonishing ear for the potent magic that steers individual notes from chord to chord, for a unique orchestral resonance . . . How is it possible that it all seems so effortless?’ Enter Baudelaire’s dandy . . .

For Michael Berkeley (b. 1948), it is

hard to think of a greater model in terms of orchestration. But of course it goes much deeper than that since the extraordinary feel and flair for scoring is always put to the service of the musical idea . . . I feel that my own orchestration is profoundly influenced by the French school and in particular by an axis that is formed quite clearly in my mind by Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and Bartók with, strangely enough, Webern too. For I see a very strong aspirational link between the economy of Webern’s little jewels and Ravel’s somewhat more sumptuous but no less economical settings.

It is intriguing that so many of those who have responded to my questions about Ravel have, *au fond*, been plagued by doubt and ambivalence. Robin Holloway (b. 1943) expresses something of these quandaries:

Maurice Ravel stands for a model of technical perfection. When younger I saw this only in terms of finish, neatness, impeccability, orchestration – something almost fetishistic, but deficient in visible/audible technical prowess *à la* Bach – fugue, canon, ritornello etc. – or *à la* Beethoven – motivic rigour, organic growth, symphonic argument or architecture. Ravel’s perfection isn’t measurable in terms of mastery of things that of their nature require mastery to be shown. It’s more simple, yet more elusive; it can’t be defined . . . the mastery is of spontaneity in capturing with precision the personal predilections of a remarkably individual appetite – garlic and onions – what Virgil Thomson calls ‘the discipline of spontaneity – the toughest discipline there is’.

So what happened to the *petit maître* who, we were advised in the 1960s (I speak as a student during that era), had nothing new to say to us, whose prettily voluptuous music could safely be left to tickle the ears of the bourgeoisie? Surely that ‘surface’ Ravel was never the ‘real’ Ravel. I can only applaud the common sense and humility of Peter Kaminsky’s remark, in his discussion of the links between Ravel’s song texts and his compositional strategies, that ‘If the connection remains obscured, then the fault

lies with the analysis rather than the song' (Chapter 8, p. 163 above). Ravel, it turns out, is a far more baffling, problematic and 'deep' composer than he has so far been given credit for. Added to this is the enigma of his orchestration. In many of the eulogies directed at this aspect of Ravel's craft, it is impossible to miss a sense of embarrassment, of guilt almost, that a practising composer should be singling out the sublimely sensuous instead of more 'important' things like form, motivic coherence or octatonic scales. In Anderson's words, 'Ravel disturbs with his curious mixes, with his experiments couched in traditional forms. He is unpigeonholeable. What to do with him? Like Ligeti, he is having serious fun – both are enjoying themselves at an aristocratically high level.'

And so we return, yet again, to Baudelaire's dandy who flourishes, so Baudelaire tells us (and here I dare to translate), 'especially in transitional epochs when democracy is not yet all powerful and aristocracy only partially tottering and debased'.³⁶

While we must all make up our own minds as to how Ravel's music and the social order are likely to interact in the twenty-first century, the present fact, crudely put, is that Ravel's listing in the 1999 CD catalogue takes up seventeen columns – not as many as Mozart (Ravel would surely have regarded his 130 columns as only fair), but a respectable enough total when compared with those for Purcell (31), Schumann (30), Mendelssohn (27), Debussy (24), Stravinsky (15), Gershwin (12), Monteverdi (9) or César Franck (8).³⁷ Yet despite this basic pointer to Ravel's not inconsiderable popularity, we have barely begun to understand how his music works. Will the twenty-first century be long enough for us to find out?