

SYNTHESIS OF TRADITION AND INNOVATION:
A STUDY OF RAVEL'S
LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a popular choice for concert programming and a staple in the repertoire of pianists. This work caught my attention from the first time I heard it performed, and I was immediately fascinated by the many paradoxes in the music. Its challenging technical demands and appealing twentieth century harmonic sonorities juxtaposed with the use of older forms and styles make it an intriguing example of Ravel's work. The clarity and lucidity in the sound, the defined structure, and the diverse pianistic techniques used by Ravel in *Le Tombeau de Couperin* inspired me to study and play this magnificent work.

With its historical position in the early twentieth century, this unique work offers continuous opportunities for further examinations. Not only is it the last work Ravel wrote for solo piano, it is also the final work he completed utilizing styles and forms from the past. In this essay, I will begin by tracing the historical and compositional background of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and its relationship to the musical environment of the time. I will then examine each movement of the suite and include discussions on form, harmony, tonality, phrase structure, and thematic and rhythmic material. I will also speak about performance practice and issues in interpretation. Next I will discuss the orchestral and other versions of the suite. I will conclude the essay with a brief discussion on the reaction to the work, with an appendix containing a list of selected works under the title *Le Tombeau de Ravel*.

HISTORICAL AND COMPOSITIONAL BACKGROUND

In his letter to French composer and pianist Roland-Manuel on October 1, 1914, Ravel mentioned working on new music, including a piano work in the style of a French suite:

I am still writing music ... this time, I think, I've got it—or to finish *Wien* (Vienna), a symphonic poem. While I'm waiting for a chance to pick up the threads of my old task of Maeterlinck's *Intérieur*—a touching consequence of the alliance—I'm beginning two series of piano pieces: first, a French Suite—no, it's not what you think—the Marseillaise doesn't come into it at all, but there'll be a forlane and a jig; not a tango, though; and secondly, a *Nui Romantique* full of spleen, with a hunt in hell, an accursed nun, etc.¹

Although not all these ideas eventually came to realization, one presumes that the symphonic poem became *La Valse*, and the French suite turned out to be *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The composition process for these new works was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I when Ravel went to serve as a truck driver. Because of his poor health and deep concerns for his ailing mother, despite his patriotism Ravel's service did not last long and he was discharged from the army in late 1916. He returned home to care for his mother until her death in early 1917. Her passing, as well as the sufferings and devastations Ravel had witnessed during the war, profoundly affected him. These tragic and sad experiences perhaps were best reflected in Ravel's use of the word “tombeau”, in the title of his next work “*Le Tombeau de Couperin*.”

In the French literature of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, “tombeau”, meaning tomb or tombstone, was originally used in short poems or collections of poems by several authors to commemorate the death of distinguished individuals. From the middle of the seventeenth century, the term was adopted by

¹ Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. by Cynthia Jolly (London, first published by Dennis Dobson Limited, 1947), 76-77.

musicians for instrumental works, notably works for the lute by composers such as Ennemond Gaultier (1575-1651), Jacques Gallot (c. 1690), Charles Mouton (1617-before 1699), and John Dowland (1563-1626).² Soon afterwards “tombeau” was extended to other instruments, particularly the harpsichord. Louis Couperin (1626-1661), Johann Froberger (1616-1667), and Francois Couperin (1668-1733) were a few composers that favored writing the tombeau for the harpsichord.

The musical tombeau of the time was mostly a single piece or a group of pieces, typically in the character of a lament. Although it gained popularity in the Baroque era, it disappeared during the Classical and the Romantic periods, similar to other popular Baroque genres such as preludes, fugues, or suites. In the early twentieth century the tombeau resurfaced and regained attention. In reaction to the immensity of high Romanticism dominated by the music of Mahler and Wagner, twentieth century composers began to re-evaluate the true essence of music. They looked back in history for inspiration and answers. The revival of musical forms and procedures from the past, the revitalized use of traditional tonalities and harmonies, and the return to a simpler style and manner in music was a movement that came as a reaction to the excessiveness emphasized in late Romantic music. This movement, categorized as Neo-Classicism, was dominated by composers such as Stravinsky and Schoenberg. The neo-classical movement quickly spread throughout Europe and influenced composers including Debussy and Ravel, who were seeking to establish a stronger identity for French music. The revival of the musical tombeau was one of the results of this musical search. Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and Debussy’s *Hommage à Rameau* (from *Images I*, 1905) and

² Michael Tilmouth, “Tombeau,” in Stanley Sadie, ed., vol. 19 of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 37.

Hommage à Haydn (1910) were such examples. Of special significance was the collection of pieces entitled *Tombeau de Debussy* (1920) contributed by numerous composers such as Ravel, Satie, Stravinsky, and Dukas, which not only resurrected the tombeau tradition, but also revived the use of collective authorship from the original idea of the literary tombeau.³ The usage of tombeau in music continues today.

The renewed use of the baroque suite is another result of the neo-classical movement. A popular genre in the Baroque period standardized by the time of Johann Sebastian Bach, a suite typically consisted of multiple dance movements in the same key. Like the tombeau, the Baroque suite lost popularity in the Classical period, and in the Romantic era it became a different type of work consisting of character pieces. Not until the very end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries did composers begin to return the suite to its origins.

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a synthesis of the two revived genres: a musical tombeau and a baroque suite. It consists of six movements, each of them in a form of the past and paying tribute to a deceased friend Ravel lost in the war:⁴

Prelude: to the memory of Lieutenant Jacques Charlot

Fugue: to the memory of Secondary-lieutenant Jean Cruppi.

Forlane: to the memory of Lieutenant Gabriel Deluc.

Rigaudon: to the memory of Pierre and Pascal Gaudin

Menuet: to the memory of Jean Dreyfus

Toccata: to the memory of Captain Joseph de Marliave⁵

From the title of the work, one obviously thinks of François Couperin, the leading figure of the seventeenth century clavicinists. His extensive keyboard output, including 27

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Ravel*, ed. by Pierre Laumonier and trans. by Olive Senior-Ellis. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1973), 94.

⁵ Quoted from the piano score and translated from French: Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (Paris: Durand & Co., 1918), p. 2, 7, 10, 16, 20, and 24.

suites, became the standard and inspiration for later composers when composing keyboard suites. In his article “Some Unpublished Music and Letters by Maurice Ravel,” Arbie Orenstein states that Ravel mentioned to a friend his transcription of Couperin’s *Forlane* from a chamber work entitled *Concert Royal*.⁶ Ravel’s particular interest in studying Couperin’s work confirms the reference to François Couperin as well as the link to the music of the French clavicinists.

In spite of the personal background of this suite, the music of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is not full of sadness, but of confined and controlled emotions. The clarity in its sound and articulations, defined forms and structures, sensuousness in sonorities, and lively dance character seem to be the opposite of what may be expected from a tombeau. Ravel expresses his personal grief and sorrow not through the actual musical characters and lament-style mood, but rather through putting the work into the specific musical category of the tombeau tradition. Therefore his use of the word “tombeau” here does not necessarily indicate the character of the music; it only categorizes the composition.

Ravel’s habit of using older styles and forms can be seen in his earlier works, such as *Menuet Antique* in 1895. Although full of biting dissonances and surprising harmonies, this work does contain aspects of a traditional menuet, such as triple meter for the menuet character, a clear ternary structure, and defined phrases. Use of certain modal elements and strong cadential points further add to the sense of antiquity in the work. Ravel even emphasizes its antique character explicitly in the title. Following *Menuet Antique*, Ravel continuously showed interest in employing musical elements from earlier

⁶ Arbie Orenstein, “Some Unpublished Music and Letters by Maurice Ravel,” *Music Forum* III (1973): 328-329.

times in his new works, such as *Sonatine* (1903-1905), *Menuet sur le nom de Haydn* (1909), and *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911). *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is the last work in which Ravel revived Baroque forms, and the last work for solo piano in his complete musical output.

Le Tombeau de Couperin was completed in 1917 and premiered in 1919 at the Société Musicale Indépendante in Paris. Its first performer, French pianist and pedagogue Marguerite Long (1874-1966), was also the widow of the dedicatee of the *Toccata*. The first publication of the suite was released by the French publishing company Durand in 1918.⁷ This first performance was a success and so well-received that as an encore Long played the suite in its entirety once more.⁸ The work soon attracted other pianists, such as French pianist Vlado Perlemuter (1904-2002). Perlemuter then went to study privately with Ravel not only on this work but also on his other keyboard output and is known as the first pianist to perform the entire piano output of Ravel in public.

In 1919, Ravel transcribed four movements from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* for orchestra. The orchestral version was premiered by the Padeloup Orchestra conducted by Rhené-Baton (1879-1940). Three movements from the work (*Forlane*, *Menuet*, and *Rigaudon*) were also produced as a ballet for the Swedish Ballet Company and the production was first presented in Paris in 1920.⁹ In addition to the orchestral transcription, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is also arranged for piano four-hands on one piano, duo for violin and piano, trio for violin, cello, and piano, and a few other transcriptions for various instrument ensembles.

⁷ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 234.

⁸ Long, 94.

⁹ Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, 234.

THE SUITE

Prelude

Like many Baroque keyboard suites, Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* begins with a prelude. In a less common meter of 12/16 time and marked "Vif," this *Prelude* is no more than two minutes long and is a showcase of agility for the fingers. It opens with constant and vibrant sixteenth-note figurations spread between both hands, and these fast patterns run continuously through the whole piece (Example 1). The only brief break is toward the end of the movement where the music falls to a quiet low E and pauses on it for a measure and a half in mm. 93-94 (Example 2). Immediately following the halt, the piece resumes with a dramatic upward glissando-like passage, leading to the double-tremolo ending.

Example 1: *Prelude*, mm. 1-13.¹⁰

The musical score for Example 1, measures 1-13 of the Prelude, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 1-3) is marked 'Vif' with a tempo of quarter note = 92. The music is in G major and 12/16 time. The right hand plays a continuous sixteenth-note pattern, while the left hand plays a similar pattern with some rests. The dynamic is marked 'PIANO' and 'pp'. The second system (measures 4-6) continues the sixteenth-note patterns, with a 'pp' dynamic marking. The score includes a double bar line and repeat signs.

¹⁰ Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (Paris: Durand & C^{ie}, 1918), 2. All subsequent musical examples are from this score unless specified.



Example 2: *Prelude*, mm. 86-97.



The figure in the right hand in m. 1 is a simple motive with only 6 notes –A-G-D-E-G-B– and yet this motive serves as the base that is developed and extended throughout the whole movement. The descending second figure, A-G, is immediately singled out and developed in m. 2, where the A-G-A figure can be seen as a derivation from the A-G motive. Right away the opening six-note motive is repeated in the left hand in m. 2, but

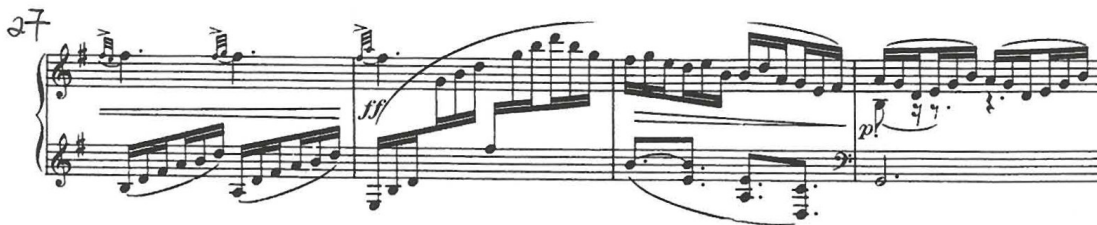
this time transposed a fifth lower. In mm. 10-13 the opening four-bar statement reappears, but this time in a reversed order, with the A-G-A figure from m. 2, transposed now a triton lower, taking place prior to the recurrence of the opening motive in m. 11. The motive continues on to be repeated, transposed, re-ordered, or reversed, throughout the entire movement.

Unlike most of the through-composed Baroque preludes, the structure of this movement is rounded-binary with an introduction:

Introduction	A	B	(Reappearance of partial A)
mm. 1-4	: mm. 5-33 :	mm. 34-60	mm. 61-end
E Minor	G Major		E Minor

Although E minor is the main tonality of the movement and is established by the key signature and the ending cadence, the constant avoidance of the leading tone D[#] and instead the frequent appearance of D natural gives the piece an emphasis on E Aeolian mode. Even though clear cadential points leading into certain key areas such as G major, D major, and A^b major are found (in mm. 30, 48, and 70), due to their brief existence and also to their distant relation to E minor (except for G major), the tonal center becomes more vague. Ravel further veils the sense of strong tonality throughout the piece by using chromatic scales, sequencing by parallel progressions, and abrupt changes of keys without modulations.

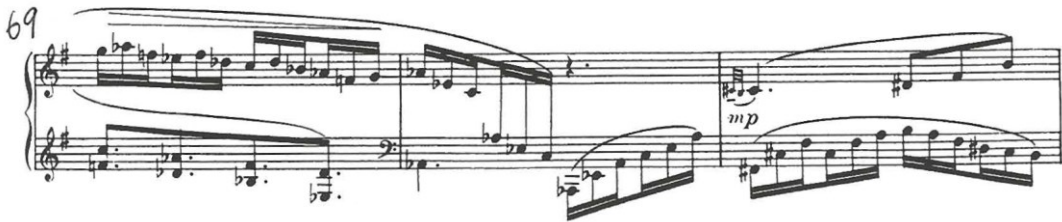
Example 3: *Prelude*, mm, 27-30.



Example 4: *Prelude*, mm. 46-49.



Example 5: *Prelude*, mm. 69-71.



Under the seemingly smooth lines, Ravel discreetly adds a degree of rhythmic intricacy by melding in hemiola in places such as in mm. 7-8 (Example 1) and m. 71 (Example 5). The sense of antiquity and connection to the French clavichinists lies in the usage of mordent ornaments (such as in mm. 2 and 4 in Example 1, amongst many others throughout the movement), the constantly running figurations, use of open fourth and fifth chords (such as in m. 28 in Example 3 and m. 69 in Example 5), and the careful avoidance of the leading tone D^\sharp functionally. Contrary to the above archaic qualities and the movement's conventional formal structure, the wide span of keyboard registers, the deliberate use of chromatic scale and parallel sequencing denote strongly that it is a work with modern musical language.

One of the technical challenges when playing this *Prelude* is maintaining a constant and consistent flow in the music while executing perfect accuracy and clarity. The unusual time signature of 12/16 and the tempo marking of "Vif" indicate the fast speed which requires great control from the fingers to play all the constant running notes evenly. Accurate timing and clarity when playing the mordents add further dimensions to

the difficulties of the movement. According to Marguerite Long's account, Ravel once commented on her performance tempo of this movement:

When a pianist came to Ravel to play the prelude he received this advice: "Not so quick as Marguerite Long." "Why do you always say that?" I asked him one day. "Either my tempo is wrong, or you underestimate the ability of your interpreters." He replied: "Because so far as you are concerned one is sure to hear all the notes."¹¹

It is arguable that perhaps the sense of swiftness and constant motion might be lost if this movement is played too slowly due to concerns for clarity and accuracy. Ravel seeks clarity in tone and sound production, and if the performance tempo is too urgent, there is a danger that this ultimate goal might be more difficult to achieve. Vlado Perlemuter also recounts an encounter with Ravel when discussing this movement:

This leads me to point out that Ravel asked for very sparing pedaling in this *Prelude*. You might say pedaling by little dabs. In m. 2 Ravel was particularly strict about the grace notes being played on the beat, in spite of the rapid tempo.¹²

Other interpretive advice from Ravel includes comments that the melody in m. 22 (Example 6) should imitate the sound of an oboe. Furthermore, the damper pedal should be sustained for the double tremolo and should not be lifted on the final chord so that the sound can fade out over the pedal (Example 2).¹³

Example 6: *Prelude*, mm. 21-23.

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¹¹ Long, 94.

¹² Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, trans. by Frances Tanner, ed. by Harold Taylor, *Ravel According to Ravel* (White Plains, New York: Pro/Am Music Resources Inc., 1988), 68.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

Fugue

Prior to this work Ravel had written several other fugues for his submissions to Prix de Rome such as the Fugues in D major (1900), F major (1901), B^b major (1902), E minor (1903), and C major (1905).¹⁴ An example of Ravel's 1905 Prix de Rome Fugue is provided by Orenstein:

Example 7: Ravel's Fugue of 1905, mm. 1-41.¹⁵

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for Maurice Ravel's Fugue of 1905. The score is written on five systems of staves, each containing two staves. The notation is dense and complex, featuring many slurs, ties, and dynamic markings. The measures are numbered on the left side of each system: 1, 10, 18, 26, and 33. The handwriting is in dark ink on aged paper.

¹⁴ Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, 151.

¹⁵ Ravel's *Fugue* of 1905, page I, taken from Orenstein, "Some Unpublished Music and Letters by Maurice Ravel": 302.

In this fugue, strict academic fugal procedure in four voices is found, with each voice written in a different clef. Contrapuntal texture is maintained throughout the work. According to Orenstein, Ravel believed that this type of rigorous academic training of fugal writing is indispensable, for it assists the composer in mastering his craft.¹⁶ Despite this statement, interestingly Ravel did not continue with any more fugal writing until the *Fugue in Le Tombeau de Couperin*. It is the only published, as well as the last work using fugal procedure in Ravel's total musical output.

In this *Fugue* only three voices are used for texture and frequently all voices are very close to one another in the same register. The simplicity in rhythmic values of mostly eighth and quarter notes, minimal changes in dynamics, and closeness in the range of registers denote the overall tranquil character and atmosphere throughout the movement. Instead of a continuous line, the fugal subject in mm. 1-2 consists of a descending second and a triad, as well as frequent rests.

Example 8: *Fugue*, mm. 1-4.



This subject has the most economical means of melodic material comprised of only four pitches —A, G, B, and E. In particular, the opening descending second recalls the opening motive in the previous *Prelude*. The same tonality of E minor further ties the *Fugue* to the *Prelude*. Although marked with accents, the subject's very soft dynamic of *pp* and its frequent rests create a sense of interruption and uncertainty. What furthers the

¹⁶ Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, 152.

sense of uncertainty is Ravel's purposeful displacement of the accents on off beats in the subject, as if the emphasized notes are the stronger beats. It seems as if Ravel intends for the melodic motive to be so simple and minimal that the complexity in the rhythmic displacement created by the rests and accents can then shine through. Contrary to the subject, the countersubject continues in the top voice in mm. 3-4 and contains constant stepwise motion, with a triplet adding yet more rhythmical complexity in an otherwise lucid eighth-note passage.

Compared to the *Prelude*, Ravel interestingly uses the conventional Italian tempo marking of "Allegro moderato" for the *Fugue*. Also a short movement, in merely four minutes of music Ravel packs the *Fugue* with familiar techniques of subjects (mm. 1-2 in Example 8), answers (mm. 3-4 in Example 8: lower voice, repeated in the exact same intervals as the subject), countersubjects (mm. 3-4 in Example 8: higher voice), episodes (such as mm. 7-8 in Example 9), stretto (such as mm. 35-36 and mm. 39-40 in Example 10), inversions (mm. 39-40 in Example 10, subjects in inversions), false entries (m. 43 in Example 11), and pedal points (such as mm. 30-33 in Example 12).

Example 9: *Fugue*, mm. 5-8.

The musical score for Example 9, measures 5-8 of the *Fugue*, is presented in two staves. The upper staff, in treble clef, shows the subject starting with a half rest followed by quarter notes G, A, and B. The lower staff, in bass clef, shows the countersubject starting with quarter notes G, A, and B. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and a triplet in the upper staff.

Example 10: *Fugue*, mm. 34-41.

Musical score for Example 10, *Fugue*, mm. 34-41. The score is in E minor and 3/4 time. It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (mm. 34-37) features a right-hand part with triplets and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *m.g.*, *m.d.*, and *pp*. The second system (mm. 38-41) continues the texture, with the right hand playing more complex rhythmic patterns and the left hand providing harmonic support. Dynamics include *mf*.

Example 11: *Fugue*, mm. 42-45.

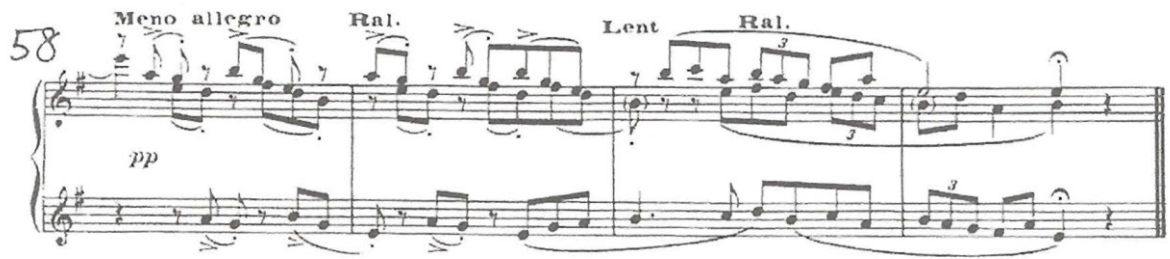
Musical score for Example 11, *Fugue*, mm. 42-45. This system continues the piano accompaniment from the previous example. It features a right-hand part with triplets and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *pp*.

Example 12: *Fugue*, mm. 30-33.

Musical score for Example 12, *Fugue*, mm. 30-33. The score is in E minor and 3/4 time. It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (mm. 30-32) features a right-hand part with triplets and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*. The second system (m. 33) continues the texture, with the right hand playing more complex rhythmic patterns and the left hand providing harmonic support.

As in the *Prelude*, the tonality of E minor in the *Fugue* is colored by modal touches to create the sense of antiquity. The archaic atmosphere is further emphasized by the careful avoidance of the leading tone of D[#] and the lack of the third in the last open fifth chord (m. 61 in Example 13). To juxtapose this sense of antiqueness, Ravel purposely clusters all voices close together, creating a tonal quality that is most modern.

Example 13: *Fugue*, mm. 58-61.



The complexity in the voicing and the awkwardness in the overlapping of the two hands are two complicated and challenging elements that make the *Fugue* one of the most difficult movements to master in the entire suite. On top of everything, this movement demands tremendous control in sound production. The focus should be on maintaining evenness and smoothness in tones especially in softer dynamics. When the two hands are huddled together, it is difficult yet crucial to bring out the right voice regardless of where it falls in the hands. It is recommended to learn the three voices separately and to practice one voice at a time with repetitions. Practicing with different combinations of two voices will solidify the memorization and secure the accuracy of execution. Even the suite's first performer, Marguerite Long, encountered memory issues when playing this movement. Though she had a successful premiere, in her subsequent concerts Long always left out the *Fugue*.¹⁷ She recalled Ravel's casual remark about her solid memory when performing this movement, which had somehow made her overly self-conscious and might have contributed to memory slips. Perhaps leaving the *Fugue* out is a little extreme, yet it does hint at the difficulty of performing this movement successfully.

Pedaling cleanly and effectively is also problematic because of the clustering of voices and closeness of notes. Shallow and frequent changes of pedal are preferable. Redistributions of the inner line between two hands, such as the G-natural and F[#] played

¹⁷ Long, 95.

by the left hand in m. 8 (Example 9), create a better and smoother execution of the middle voice. Perlemuter also summarizes the difficulties in playing this movement:

Not to mention the rhythmic accentuation, which is very difficult for the interpreter, for it is not a brutal accent, but an expressive weighting which varies according to the intensity of the phrase. This kind of accentuation, which continues throughout the piece, calls for great independence of hands and fingers.¹⁸

In spite of its seeming simplicity, the inner intensity and expressiveness in the most graceful lines and quiet atmosphere are ill-served if the movement is played in a purely academic and straightforward fashion. As Perlemuter stated, “It is a mental gymnastics, but also from the heart.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Perlemuter, 70.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 71.

Forlane

The origin of the forlane is from forlana or furlana, a lively folk dance from northern Italy in the Baroque period. The dance gained popularity in the French aristocratic court from about 1697 to 1750. François Couperin's *Forlane* from his fourth *Concert Royal* for harpsichord and ensemble is one such dance.

Example 14: Couperin's *Forlane*, mm. 1-16.²⁰

The image displays a handwritten musical score for the piece "Forlane" by François Couperin. The score is written for harpsichord and ensemble, featuring two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 6/8. The tempo/mood is indicated as "gayement". The score is divided into three systems. The first system (mm. 1-6) includes the title "Forlane Rondeau" and the instruction "gayement". The second system (mm. 7-12) includes the instruction "Fin. 1^{er} Couplet". The third system (mm. 13-16) begins with the number "13" above the treble staff. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above notes, and ornaments are marked with a flourish symbol. The bass staff contains numerous figured bass notations, including "6-", "6", "5-3", "6", "6", "7 7", "6 6", "7 6 6", "5-4-3", and "7".

²⁰ François Couperin, *Forlane* from *Concerts Royaux Composé par MONSIEUR COUPERIN* (Paris: Chés L'Authheur, 1722; reprint, 1979), 26-27.

Example 15: Couperin's *Forlane*, mm. 68-80.²¹

The image shows a musical score for Example 15, Couperin's *Forlane*, measures 68-80. The score is in 6/8 time and features a 4th couplet in minor. The notation includes performance instructions such as "notes égales, et coulées" and "4^{me} Couple. Mineur." The score is written on two systems, each with a treble and bass clef. Fingering numbers (6, 5, 4, 3) are indicated below the notes. The key signature is one flat (B-flat).

Rondo form, 6/8 meter, and lively characters are just a few key elements found in a traditional forlane, as in Couperin's example. According to Orenstein, Ravel mentioned his interest in this *Forlane* and transcribed it for solo piano.²² Orenstein includes a copy of this transcription in his article "Some Unpublished Music and Letters by Maurice Ravel."

²¹ *ibid.*, 27.

²² Orenstein, "Some Unpublished Music and Letters by Maurice Ravel," 328-329

Example 16: From Orenstein's article: Ravel's transcription of Couperin's *Forlane* in manuscript, mm. 1-16.²³


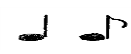


²³ibid., 330.

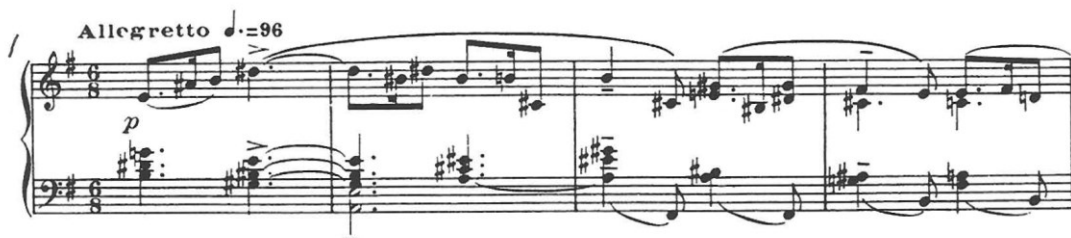
Example 17: From Orenstein, Ravel's transcription of Couperin's *Forlane* in manuscript, mm. 68-80.²⁴



The reason for Ravel's interest to transcribe Couperin's *Forlane* is unknown, yet after examining Ravel's own *Forlane* (Example 18), one cannot deny Couperin's influence on Ravel's *Forlane* because of the striking similarities between the two dances.

Both are in 6/8 meter, and the motive of dotted rhythm  followed by the lilting long-short pattern  permeate most parts of both works.

Example 18: *Forlane*, mm. 1-4.



²⁴ *ibid.*, 331.

Both *Forlanes* have a brief section where the dotted rhythm disappears and instead the top voice has a smooth eighth-note passage (Couperin, mm. 68-80 in Example 15, and Ravel, mm. 140-156 in Example 19).

Example 19: *Forlane*, mm. 138-157.

The musical score for Example 19, *Forlane*, mm. 138-157, is presented in five systems. The first system (mm. 138-141) is marked *pp* and shows a dotted rhythm in the right hand. The second system (mm. 142-145) features a smooth eighth-note passage in the right hand. The third system (mm. 146-149) continues this eighth-note passage. The fourth system (mm. 150-153) is marked *pp* and features a dotted rhythm in the right hand. The fifth system (mm. 154-157) continues with a dotted rhythm in the right hand.

Clear structures and the use of rondo form are present in both Couperin's and Ravel's *Forlanes*. Symmetrical four-bar or eight-bar phrases, frequent repetition of phrase segments, and beginning with an upbeat are a few further similarities the two *Forlanes*

share. These similarities not only confirm Couperin's influence on Ravel's music, they also further endorse the reference to Francois Couperin in the title of the whole suite.

Further reference to the past includes conventional cadences at the end of phrases or sections, as Perlemuter states in *Ravel According to Ravel*: "the piece most evokes the past, with its pastel tones and archaic cadences."²⁵ Although the movement is mostly in E minor, just like in the previous *Prelude* and *Fugue* the lack of the D[#] leading tone throughout the piece continuously emphasizes modal quality. Even when the D[#] does appear, like in the last few measures of the movement, it does not resolve to the tonic E and instead is more like a dissonance. The ornamented final E minor chord without the third in m. 161 may be the most archaic sound in the whole movement.

Example 20: *Forlane*, mm. 158-162.



The image shows a musical score for measures 158-162 of the piece 'Forlane'. The score is written for piano and consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The music features a complex harmonic structure with many chords and melodic lines. A dashed line indicates a phrase that is repeated. The tempo marking 'sans ralentir' is written above the staff, and the dynamic marking 'pp' (pianissimo) is written below the staff. The measure number '158' is written at the beginning of the first staff.

What is juxtaposed to these references to the past is this movement's modern harmonic language. The use of the triton E-A[#] in the melody and the augmented chord in the very opening of the movement set the tone for an interesting display of harmonies that follows. Diminished chords, chords with added dissonant notes, and seventh and ninth chords also prevail throughout the movement. Cadences to distantly related keys, such as G[#] minor in m.18 in Example 21, take this movement away from traditional tonal relations. With these modern elements jelled in one of the oldest forms in the whole suite,

²⁵ Perlemuter, 72.

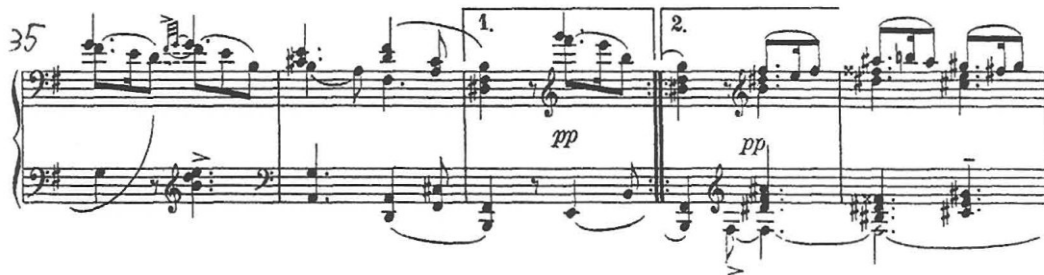
the *Forlane* is perhaps the movement that most clearly demonstrates the synthesis of old and new.

Example 21: *Forlane*, mm. 15-19.



The technical challenge of this movement lies in the perfect control of the hands when they have to constantly move through different registers. They must also manage the chordal texture underneath smooth melodic lines, while successfully creating the glistening tone color from the unusual harmonies. Sensitive and frequent changes of pedals are necessary when playing the biting harmonies and series of chords over long pedal points. Redistributing a chord between the two hands makes playing widespread chords possible, such as in m. 38 (Example 22), where the left hand will be able to sustain the base note of F[#] without much pedaling complication if the right hand also plays the A[#] on the top of the left hand chord. This movement is often performed in a rather fast tempo, though a slightly relaxed performing speed might be more preferable in order to bring out the shimmering, sensual sonorities.

Example 22: *Forlane*, mm. 35-39.



Rigaudon

Historically, rigaudons were both folk and court dances for instruments popular in France and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, typically in duple meter with regular four-bar phrase structures and repeated sections. Marked “Assez vif,” Ravel’s version is an exuberant dance in a lively tempo. It uses the traditional duple meter of 2/4. In the distantly related key of C major, this is one of only two movements in the entire suite that departs from the main tonality of E minor.

Ravel’s *Rigaudon* is in ternary A-B-A form, where the outer A sections are in C major and animated in character, and the contrasting B section (mm. 37-93) is in parallel C minor and in a quieter and more lyrical mood.

Example 23: *Rigaudon*, the first A section, mm. 1-36.

The image shows a musical score for the first A section of Ravel's Rigaudon, measures 1 through 36. The score is written for piano and is in 2/4 time. It is marked "Assez vif" and "PIANO". The key signature is C major. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 1-6) starts with a forte (ff) dynamic and includes a handwritten "CM" annotation. The second system (measures 7-11) features a forte (ff) dynamic and a handwritten "GM" annotation. The third system (measures 12-36) includes a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic and a handwritten "B♭M" annotation. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

16 *f* *più f*
C#M

21 *pp*
F#M

26

31 *f* *ff*

Example 24: *Rigaudon*, mm. 37-50 in the B section.

37 **Moins vif** *pp*

44

The second A section (m. 93 to the end) is almost identical to the first one except for the omission of the repeat signs and the re-harmonization of the passage in mm. 123-126.

The formal structures of all three sections are clearly in binary forms.

Example 25: *Rigaudon*, mm. 119-128.

The harmonic language in this movement is simple and mostly diatonic. There are only a few exceptions of harmonic excursions to distantly related keys (such as B^b in m. 15 and F[#] major in m. 24 in Example 23). Strong half cadences to the dominant G major (such as in m. 7 in Example 23) and full cadences to the home key of C major (in m. 2 and m. 36 in Example 23) clearly assist in defining the traditional aspect of formal and harmonic structures. Continuing with an archaic touch as in previous movements, Ravel's use of pentatonic scales and conscious avoidance of leading tones at cadential points emphasizes such a feeling and sound. The harmonic progression of IV-I (F major to C major in mm. 126-128 in Example 25) resembles a plagal cadence that adds a nostalgic element, especially when it takes place at the end of the movement.

Contrary to conventional formal designs and harmonic structures, the phrase construction is more adventurous and ambiguous. In the beginning eight measures, the music is divided into three parts: a two-measure motive (mm. 1-2) with a full cadence in

C major in the middle of m. 2, a five-measure phrase (mm. 3-7) ending on a half cadence in G major in m. 7, and a single measure (m. 8). Measure 8 is merely a variation of m. 1 in a higher register with fuller sonorities (see Example 23). More irregular is the following part, where the phrase structure is grouped in six measures (mm. 10-15 and mm. 17-22), leaving m. 9 and m. 16 to stand alone respectively just like m. 8. From m. 23 to the double bar in m. 36, the phrase is constructed of two measures (mm. 23-24), four measures (mm. 25-28), six measures (mm. 29-34), and finally another two measures (mm. 35-36). In the B section the phrasing is less structured and has a more through-composed quality.

Marguerite Long commented that the tempo for the beginning and the end of the dance in most performances are not fast enough, and the middle section is not slow enough.²⁶ It is not easy to play this dance at a tempo that is musically convincing and technically comfortable. The brilliance of playing comes from clean execution of the short and detached articulation at a fast speed in the outer sections, which requires advanced control and independence of the fingers. Especially challenging are the large leaps (such as the jump between m. 7 and m. 8 in Example 23), long sequence of staccato passages in both hands (such as in mm. 3-6 and in mm. 25-33 in Example 23), and the left hand frequently reaching over the right hand (such as in mm. 3-5 in Example 23 and mm. 37-41 in Example 24).

Pedaling is somewhat problematic because only one pedal mark is found at the beginning of section B in m. 37 and the release sign of this pedal is nowhere to be seen. Moreover, the complexity of pedaling in this section is heightened by the staccatos in the left hand chords. One can presume that perhaps the pedal mark is Ravel's indication that

²⁶ Long, 96.

the melody should ring more and that the long note should be sustained in the right hand. Careful use of the appropriate amount of pedaling in order to highlight the melody while maintaining a clear articulation of the left hand requires much practice and attention.

Menuet

Prior to *Le Tombeau de Couperin* Ravel had composed three other menuets: *Menuet antique* in 1895, the second movement of *Sonatine* from 1903 to 1905, and *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn* in 1909. Unlike the historical aristocrat court dances, Ravel's menuets contain tender and gentle qualities that seem more personal. Especially with its slower tempo and lyricism, the *Menuet* in *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is more like a song or a lullaby. Apart from the two measures of *ff* in mm. 57-58 (Example 26) and the one measure of *f* in m. 111 (Example 27), the entire *Menuet* stays mostly in dynamics below *mf*. The confined expression by the suppressed dynamics is reminiscent of similar treatment in the previous *Fugue*. The feeling of calmness in the music is created by the smoothness in the melodic contours, consisting of mostly stepwise motion with very few big leaps.

Example 26: *Menuet*, mm. 55-60.

Musical score for Example 26, Menuet, mm. 55-60. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The music is characterized by dense, block-like chords and a slow, stepwise melodic line. The dynamics are marked as *ff* (fortissimo) in measures 57-58 and *poco dim.* (poco decrescendo) in measures 59-60. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Example 27: *Menuet*, mm. 108-112.

Musical score for Example 27, Menuet, mm. 108-112. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F-sharp). It consists of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The music is characterized by a more melodic and flowing style compared to Example 26. The dynamics are marked as *mf* (mezzo-forte) in measure 108 and *f* (forte) in measure 111. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Except for an additional coda section, the *Menuet* is in a ternary A-B-A form just like the previous *Rigaudon*. All three sections are clearly divided by double bars and change of tonalities. Also like the *Rigaudon*, the *Menuet* is the only other movement in the entire suite not in E minor. Instead it is in a distantly related G major, with the middle section in D minor. The tonal center of G major is quickly established in the very beginning of the movement. The cadence to B major in m. 8 hints at the expected appearance of E minor in the next section, though the resolution to E minor never occurs. Instead the following passage travels through various harmonies and finally the music lands on the cadence to D major in m. 24. The last eight measures in this section (mm. 25-32) are colored with more dissonances, and the return to the home key of G major is somewhat veiled by the very soft dynamic marking of *pp* in m. 32.

Example 28: *Menuet*, mm. 1-32.

The image shows a musical score for a minuet in G major, 3/4 time, marked *Allegro moderato* with a tempo of quarter note = 92. The score is in piano (*PIANO*) and starts with a *pp* dynamic. It is divided into three sections by double bar lines. The first section (mm. 1-6) is in G major. The second section (mm. 7-24) is in D minor, with a *pp* dynamic. The third section (mm. 25-32) returns to G major, with a *mp* dynamic. The score is written for piano with treble and bass staves.

The constant rocking rhythm of quarter note-half note and an insistent droning bass of G give the B section of the *Musette* its traditional character of bagpipe music (see Example 29). The formal structure of the *Musette* is almost identical to the previous A section, with the exception that the first eight measures (mm. 33-40) are repeated not by a repeat sign, but written out and the melody of the series of octave chords is alternated between the two hands. Despite the drone of the G pedal, these series of octave chords change from major to minor, which make the tonal center less defined. When the D minor chord is set on top of an open fifth interval of G and D at the end of the phrase (such as in m. 40 and m. 48), this further creates a sense of polytonalities of D minor and G minor. An interesting touch is the overlap of thematic materials of the two sections, when the series of octave chords from the *Musette* continues in the left hand until m. 78 after the A section returns in m. 73 (see Example 30).

Example 29: *Menuet*, mm. 33-72.

33 *Musette*

pp
Sourdine

41

49
p
3 Cordes
mf

55
ff
poco dim.

61
mf soutenu
Sourdine

67

Example 30: *Menuet*, mm. 73-84.

The musical score for Example 30, Menuet, mm. 73-84, is presented in two systems. The first system (mm. 73-78) shows a right hand with a melodic line and a left hand with a bass line of chords. The second system (mm. 79-84) shows a re-harmonization in the right hand and a more active left hand with moving eighth notes. Dynamics include *pp* and *p*.

The returned A section is identical to its earlier counterpart except for the left hand in mm. 73-78, and the re-harmonization in the second half of the section. The coda from m. 104 utilizes thematic fragments from the A section in the right hand, and the left hand's moving eighth notes are the most active part of the whole movement.

Example 31: *Menuet*, mm. 103-107.

The musical score for Example 31, Menuet, mm. 103-107, is presented in two systems. The first system (mm. 103-105) shows a right hand with a melodic line and a left hand with a bass line of chords. The second system (mm. 106-107) shows a re-harmonization in the right hand and a more active left hand with moving eighth notes. Dynamics include *pp*, *p*, and *poco cresc.* A "3 Cordes" instruction is present at the end.

The simplicity in formal structures, thematic developments, and the mostly homophonic and chordal texture are what make this *Menuet* more traditional than other movements in the whole suite. Middle to higher registers of the keyboard are used often. One of the technical demands lies in the alternations between the two hands in the *Musette*, requiring subtle changes of pedals and delicate control when bringing out the melodies.

Toccata

Ravel chooses a virtuosic *Toccata* to give the suite a brilliant finish. It is said that while composing this suite Ravel asked the Durand publishing company for copies of Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*.²⁷ Although a direct link to Liszt's works is unclear, one presumes that Ravel's intention was to write a work that would be a transcendental challenge to pianists and a testimony to their capabilities.

Historically, a toccata is a showcase for pianistic skills and techniques. It is typically free in form and mostly through-composed. Unlike a traditional through-composed toccata, Ravel's *Toccata* here is best analyzed as sonata allegro form. The exposition begins with five thematic motives: motive 1--mm. 1-2; motive 2--mm. 3-4; motive 3--mm. 5-7; motive 4--m. 8, and motive 5--m. 9 (see Example 32). These five components serve as key materials both musically and rhythmically throughout the whole movement.

Example 32: *Toccata*, mm. 1-10.

²⁷ Has Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel: Variations on his Life and Work*, trans. by Samuel R. Rosenbaum (Philadelphia, New York, and London: Chilton Book Company, 1968), 171.

A more lyrical theme in B minor appears in m. 57. The contrasting character and the dominant-tonic relation confirm that this is the secondary theme of the exposition.

Example 33: *Toccata*, mm. 57-60.

Example 33 shows measures 57-60 of the *Toccata*. The music is in B minor and marked "Un peu moins vif" and "pp". The right hand features a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with slurs and accents.

The exposition ends in B major, and immediately the development begins in the parallel B minor in m. 86, using the third thematic motive from the beginning.

Example 34: *Toccata*, mm. 86-94.

Example 34 shows measures 86-94 of the *Toccata*. The music is in B minor and marked "pp sempre staccato". The right hand features a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with slurs and accents.

All five thematic motives from the exposition continue to be used throughout the development. Tonality-wise these motives travel through numerous modulations, to as far as the most remote key of D[#] minor in m. 94 (Example 34). Compared to a traditional recapitulation, in this *Toccata* the recapitulation is abbreviated and is emphasized by the return of the secondary theme in m. 221, now in E major and in a triumphant character

Example 35). After a constant build-up over a pedal point of E major, the movement brings the suite to a brilliant and virtuosic ending (Example 36).

Example 35: *Toccata*, mm. 217-226.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Example 35. The first system, starting at measure 217, features a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand plays a series of chords with a melodic line, while the left hand has a steady bass line. A bracket above the right hand indicates a crescendo leading to a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The second system, starting at measure 222, continues the piece with a more complex texture, including a '8^a bassa' (8th octave bass) marking in the left hand.

Example 36: *Toccata*, mm. 244-251.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Example 36. The first system, starting at measure 244, features a fortissimo (*fff*) dynamic. The right hand plays a series of chords with a melodic line, while the left hand has a steady bass line. The second system continues the piece with a more complex texture, including a '8^a bassa' (8th octave bass) marking in the left hand.

Within the traditional structure of a sonata-allegro form, Ravel's distinct harmonic language adds a modern touch to the movement. Alternations between major and minor triads, the use of seventh, ninth, and eleventh chords throughout the movement, and the use of the chromatic scales are some examples of this. An example of the

juxtaposition between a modal and chromatic scale is in mm. 173-174, where the melody in the top voice is in E Phrygian mode while being intertwined by tritones and dissonances.

Example 37: Toccata, mm. 173-177.

173 E G E F# D C A C G A

p staccato

In mm. 241-243, tonal ambiguity is created by the two hands alternating between four different major and minor chords (G minor-F major-A minor-C major), thus making the arrival in E major in m. 244 (in Example 38) unconventional and surprising.

Example 38: Toccata, mm. 240-247.

240

244

fff

According to Denis Matthews, this *Toccata* “from its first tingling repeated notes to its final flurry of alternating chords, forms a magnificent apotheosis of Ravel’s piano

writing.”²⁸ Repeated notes, extended chords, big leaps, and the overlap of hands are just a few demanding techniques that this movement requires. To bring out the melody which is interwoven in the chords, control busy passages in soft dynamics, and play at the seemingly impossible metronomic marking of quarter note=144 make successful performances of this movement even more difficult. While Ravel demanded clarity and precision of every note, and always expected performers to follow his markings strictly, his own recording of this movement is in a slower tempo, which might suggest that the clarity of the notes outweighs the necessity to keep the actual metronome marking.²⁹ Dramatic effect is created by a well maintained tempo and the strong feeling of a duple meter. Although written with the first note for the left hand and the next three for the right hand, the beginning repeated notes can also be played by two hands alternating notes. Redistribution of notes helps for better execution of bigger chords and leaps, especially for pianists who have smaller hands. One such example is in m. 5 (Example 32), where the left hand playing the second sixteenth note of E in the second beat written in the right hand will allow the right hand to have more time to prepare for the next chord.

²⁸Denis Matthews, *Keyboard Music* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books Inc., 1972), 285.

²⁹ Long, 97.

THE ORCHESTRAL SUITE AND OTHER VERSIONS OF *LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN*

Creating an orchestral transcription after completing a work for solo piano seemed to be common practice for Ravel. Quite a few of his piano compositions have their orchestral counterparts: *Menuet Antique*, *Pavane Pour Une Infante Défunte*, *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*, *Alborada Del Gracioso* from *Miroirs*, and *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. *Ma Mère l'Oye* and *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* are two other works that have both orchestral and ballet adaptations.

In 1919 when *Le Tombeau de Couperin* was premiered, Ravel transcribed four movements from the suite for orchestra: *Prelude*, *Forlane*, *Menuet*, and *Rigaudon*. Ravel reversed the order of the last two movements, perhaps intending for the *Rigaudon* to be a better and more brilliant ending, although this means that the orchestral version ends in C major, rather than in the home key of E minor. Ravel did not offer the reason for omitting the *Fugue* and the *Toccata* in the orchestral version; one's guess is that both movements are of such pure pianism that it is not easy for other instruments to convey such timbre. Ravel's orchestral suite was premiered by the Padeloup Orchestra under Rhené-Baton on February 28, 1920. Later in 1991 British pianist and composer Michael Round produced transcriptions of the two missing movements and his instrumentation went beyond Ravel's version, even adding a percussion section in the *Toccata*. Round's orchestral version of all six movements was performed for the first time by the student chamber orchestra of Trinity College of Music in London in 1995.³⁰

³⁰ *The Kennedy Center*, http://www.kennedy-center.org/calendar/index.cfm?fuseaction=composition&composition_id=3154 (accessed January 22, 2009)

The number of instruments used in Ravel's orchestral version of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is rather small and is close to a chamber orchestra setting: two flutes, one oboe, one English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, one trumpet, one harp, and strings. Staying true to the original piano version, Ravel maintains the clarity in the music by keeping the orchestral texture light and transparent. The orchestration, however, provides the opportunity for Ravel to explore wider registers and different timbres. For instance, at the beginning of the *Rigaudon*, the melody in the higher octave played by the flutes and extra notes played by other instruments create a fuller sonority than the piano can produce alone (see Example 39). In addition to fuller chords, Ravel also adds extra ornaments in the *Forlane* (such as in mm. 32, 33, 36, 38 and 40 in Example 40), which are not in the original piano version.

Example 39: Ravel's *Rigaudon* for orchestra, mm. 1-5.³¹

The image displays a page of a musical score for Ravel's *Rigaudon*. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes staves for 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, Clarinets in B-flat, 2 Bassoons, 2 Horns, Trumpet, and Harp. The second system includes staves for Violins, Violas, Violoncelles, and Contrabasses. The tempo is marked 'Assez vif' with a quarter note equal to 120 (♩ = 120). The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score shows the initial five measures of the piece, with various dynamics such as *ff*, *mp*, and *pp*, and performance instructions like *Div.* and *pizz.* (pizzicato).

³¹ Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin: Suite D'Orchestre* (Paris: Durand & C^{ie}, 1919), 46. The subsequent orchestral examples are from the same score.

Example 40: Ravel's *Forlane* for orchestra, mm.31-40.

31

Fl.
Hrb.
Cor. A.
Cl.
Bons.

Unis
Div.
Unis
Unis pizz.
Div. arco
Unis pizz.
Div. arco
Unis pizz.
Div.
Unis
arco sur Sol
pizz.
ppp

Detailed description: This page of the score covers measures 31 through 40. It features five staves for woodwinds: Flute (Fl.), Horn in B-flat (Hrb.), Cor Anglais (Cor. A.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Bassoon (Bons.). The woodwinds play a complex, rhythmic pattern with various articulations and dynamics. The strings are divided into Violins (Unis) and Divas. The Violins play a steady eighth-note accompaniment, while the Divas play a more active role with pizzicato and arco techniques. The score includes dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *sf*, and *pp*, and performance instructions like *Unis pizz.*, *Div. arco*, and *arco sur Sol*.

36

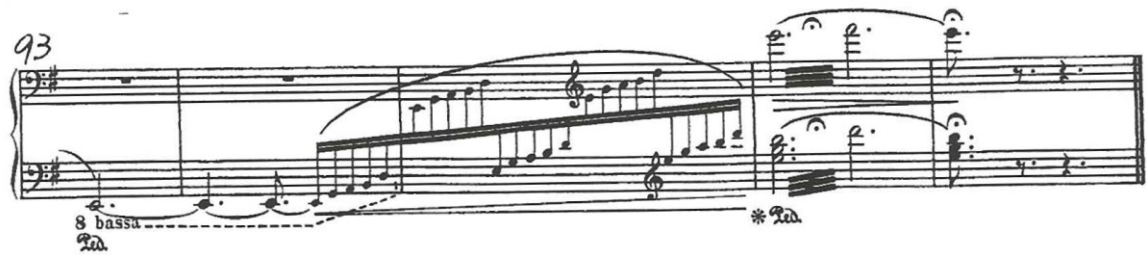
Fl.
Hrb.
Cor. A.
Cl.
Bons.
Cors.
Harpe

Div.
Unis
Div.
Unis
arco
pizz.
arco
pizz.
mf

Detailed description: This page of the score covers measures 36 through 40. It features six staves for woodwinds and strings: Flute (Fl.), Horn in B-flat (Hrb.), Cor Anglais (Cor. A.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bons.), and Cors Anglais (Cors.). The woodwinds continue their rhythmic pattern. The strings are divided into Violins (Unis) and Divas. The Violins play a steady eighth-note accompaniment, while the Divas play a more active role with pizzicato and arco techniques. The score includes dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *mf*, and *pp*, and performance instructions like *Div. arco*, *Unis*, *arco*, and *pizz.*. The Harpe (Harp) part is also visible, playing a delicate accompaniment.

Ravel shows clever choices of specific instrumental timbres such as the use of harp glissando in the end of the *Prelude* and the *Menuet*. One can think of the harp already when looking at the same passages in the original piano version.

Example 41: Ravel's *Prelude* for solo piano, mm. 93-97.



Example 42: Ravel's *Prelude* for orchestra, mm. 93-98.

In the middle section of the *Rigaudon* when the melody dips lower in m. 51 (Example 43), Ravel uses the English horn to take over, which shows his understanding of the range of the oboe and the clever use of the two timbres. Other uses of specific instrumental techniques such as harmonics and pizzicatos for the strings, as well as harmonics and

pedal markings for the harp, further confirm Ravel's extensive knowledge of other instruments beyond the piano.

Example 43: Ravel's *Rigaudon* for orchestra, mm. 47-52.

The image shows a musical score for measures 47-52 of Ravel's *Rigaudon* for orchestra. The score is written for Horn in B-flat (Horn), Cor Anglais (Cor A.), and strings. The Horn part has a handwritten '47' above the first measure. The Cor Anglais part has a 'Solo' marking and 'pp' dynamic. The strings are marked 'Unis.' and 'pp'.

In the same year of 1919 when Ravel created his orchestral version, a piano four-hand arrangement of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* was created by Lucien Garban, a longtime friend of Ravel who also arranged the piano duet version for Ravel's *La Valse*. From the first glance the piano four-hand version is essentially the redistribution of Ravel's solo version, where the right hand is now played by the first piano and the left hand by the second piano. Taking a closer look, the piano four-hand version resembles other specific features of the orchestral suite. A few of these resemblances include the same four movements in the same order as the orchestral version, the higher octave of the melody in the beginning of the *Rigaudon* (Example 44), and the additional ornaments in the *Forlane*

(such as in m. 40 of Example 45). The four-hand version, however, does present different demands and difficulties for pianists. While some of the bigger chords in the solo version can now be shared by two pianists, one of the biggest challenges created by this situation is playing together and being seamless in many fast running passages when the materials are now alternated between the two pianos.

Example 44: Garban's arrangement of *Rigaudon* for piano four-hand, mm. 1-5.³²

Example 45: Garban's arrangement of *Forlane* for piano four-hand, mm. 40-45.

Other versions of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* that involve the piano are a duo for violin and piano (2007), and a trio for violin, cello, and piano (2008), both arranged by American composer and pianist Matthew van Brink. Both arrangements take after the

³² Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, arr. for piano four-hand by Lucien Garban (Paris: Durand & C^{ie}, 1919), 25. The subsequent musical example for piano four-hands is from the same score.

orchestral version of having the same four movements, with the reversed order of *Menuet* and *Rigaudon*. These two arrangements also have similar features of fuller sonorities and added ornaments that only exist in the orchestral arrangement as opposed to the original solo piano version. Example 46 shows the beginning of the *Rigaudon* for piano trio, where the piano now plays the melody an octave higher. The pizzicatos in the cello in mm. 3-5 correspond to the lower string parts in the same measures in Ravel's orchestral version.

Example 46: van Brink's arrangement of *Rigaudon* for piano trio, mm. 1-5.³³

In Example 47 the rolled pizzicatos in mm. 31, 33 and 34, and the extra ornaments in the cello as well as in mm. 32, 33, and 36 of the *Forlane* also correspond to the orchestral version.

³³ Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, arr. for violin, cello, and piano by Matthew van Brink (Mainz, SCHOTT MUSIC GmbH & Co., 2008), 33. The subsequent musical example for the same ensemble is from the same score.

Example 47: van Brink's arrangement of Forlane for piano trio, mm. 30-40.

The image shows a musical score for a piano trio, consisting of three staves: Violin (top), Cello (middle), and Piano (bottom). The score is in 3/4 time and G major. It begins at measure 30. The Violin part features a melodic line with accents and dynamic markings such as *pizz.* and *arco*. The Cello part provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines, marked with *sfz* and *arco*. The Piano part features a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and moving lines, marked with *pizz.* and *arco*. The score includes first and second endings at measure 36, with a repeat sign and a box containing the number 4. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

Many other transcriptions extend to instruments beyond the piano. The following is a selected list of these arrangements and their instrumentations:

Abrahamsen, Hans (b. 1952): for woodwind quintet

Ben-Meir, Shaul: *Menuet* for woodwind octet of 6 flutes, alto flute, bass flute and double bass (Megido Music), 1998

Davis, John E.: *Menuet* for flute choir of six flutes (Falls House Press), 2004

Fournier, Louis: *Menuet* for cello and piano (A. Durand), 1929

Grandjany, Marcel (1891-1975): *Menuet* for harp solo (Lyra Music Co), 1981

Heifetz, Jascha (1901-1987): *Forlane* for violin and piano (Carl Fischer), 1942

Taillard, Jean Francois: *Rigaudon* for brass quintet

Leonard, J. Michael (b. 1962): *Rigaudon* and *Menuet* for oboe and piano (Masters Music Publications), 1998

Nugara, Andrew: *Toccata* transcribed for guitar quartet (Drew Publication), 1998

Pailthorpe, Daniel: *Prelude, Forlane, Menuet, and Rigaudon* for oboe and piano

Potter, Janis: *Prelude* for solo marimba (Go Fish Music), 1999

Schuller, Gunther: the complete suite for woodwind quintet, 1995

REACTION TO *LE TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN*

Despite his popularity and recognition as a composer while alive and after his death, just like any composer, Ravel also receives both praise and criticism. One of the criticisms is the conventionalism in formal structures and his seemingly repetitive employment of extended seventh, ninth, and eleventh chords. Jim Samson, for example, expresses his view on Ravel's originality in harmonies as such:

...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.³⁴

Even supporters of Ravel sometimes express uncertainty about his evidently traditional take on certain musical aspects. British composer and pianist George Benjamin, once a pupil of Olivier Messiaen and a supporter of Ravel's music, states:

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 compartmentalized, 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 overloaded perhaps, which he would have hated.³⁵

It is clear that Ravel is not adventurous in the formal structures in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. It is not my belief that Ravel uses this work to experiment or to push the boundaries in compositional techniques. Rather, it is Ravel's personal statement in

³⁴ Jim Samson, *Music in Transition: A Study of Tonal Expansion and Atonality, 1900-1920* (London: J M Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1977): 65-66.

³⁵ Roger Nichols, *Ravel and the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Deborah Mawer, *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, 240-241. Footnote 2: interviews with George Benjamin.

paying tribute to the past with his very own modern touches. Regardless of the criticism of the work, it clearly is a piece which has proven itself over time in all its arrangements. The popularity of this piece is a testament to Ravel and it is incumbent upon the performers to re-create the beauty and the aesthetics as he intended. It is my hope that this essay can provide a deeper understanding of Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* leading to more informed performance and that others can experience the joy that I have had while studying this piece so intensely.

APPENDIX

Just as Ravel pays tribute to Couperin and to music from the past, many composers after Ravel continue the tombeau tradition and pay respect to Ravel by entitling their works *Le Tombeau de Ravel* or *Hommage à Ravel*. The following is a selective list of such works:

For Piano Solo

Bachlund, Gary: *Hommage à Ravel* (1999), *Menuet and Fugue*

Giazotto, Remo: *au Tombeau de Ravel* (1959)

Françaix, Jean: *Hommage à Maurice Ravel* (fourth movement from *La Promenade d'un Musicologue Eclectique*, 1987)

Helps, Robert: *Hommage à Ravel* (third movement from *Three Hommages*, 1972)

Honegger, Arthur: *Hommage À Ravel* (second piece from *Trois Pièces Pour Piano*)

Jolas, Betsy: *Signets: Hommage à Ravel* (1987)

McCabe, John: *Tunstall Chimes (Hommage à Ravel: Study No 10*, 2004)

Stehman, Jacques: *Le Tombeau de Ravel*

Xenakis, Iannis: *À R. (Hommage à Ravel*, 1987)

For Piano Four-Hands

Greif, Olivier Haridas: *Le Tombeau de Ravel*

For Piano and Other Instruments

Benjamin, Arthur: *Le Tombeau de Ravel: Valse-Caprices*, for clarinet and piano

Greenstein, Judd: *Le Tombeau de Ravel*, trio for violin, cello and piano

Mettraux, Laurent: *Le Tombeau de Ravel*, for tenor saxophone, bassoon, violin, cello, piano, guitar and percussion

Schifrin, Lalo: *Hommage à Ravel*, for piano trio

For Other Instruments or Chamber Ensemble (excluding piano)

Escher, Rudolf: *Le Tombeau de Ravel*, for flute, oboe and string quartet

Gramatges, Harold (b. 1918): *Petite Suite "en hommage à Ravel"* for solo guitar

Lazarof, Henri: *Hommage à Ravel* (first movement from *Musica da camera*), for flute (or alto flute), clarinet, harp, and string quartet

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