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**REALIZING RAVEL: A STUDY OF THE PERFORMING STYLE OF THE
COMPOSER AND HIS COLLEAGUES**

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Preface

I first came to know the music of Maurice Ravel as a seventh-grader enrolled in the Summer Music West program (a sort of classical band camp) at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in the summer of 1994. I was given a duet partner and we were assigned to play the first two movements of “Ma mère l’Oye” (the Mother Goose Suite). Up to this point I had been playing simple chamber works by Schubert and Mozart, and had begun to get a little bored. My boredom instantly dissipated the moment I sank my fingers into the opening bars of *Ma mère*’s first movement, *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant*. I remember thinking how incredible it was that there was a composer whose music seemed to embody the best elements of both classical music and what sounded like jazz to me at the time. I immediately immersed myself in his piano repertoire, and once I reached the level to be able to play some of Ravel’s more advanced works, I voraciously devoured as many recordings as I could get my hands on. I found myself constantly captivated by Ravel’s harmonic imagination, the lyricism of his melodies, and the tight, architectural quality of his pieces.

When I arrived at the University of California, Santa Cruz for my undergraduate studies, I was determined to learn his most challenging piano pieces, and in preparation for this pursuit, I listened to several different recordings of the complete piano works of Ravel. What I was most surprised by was how similar all of the different interpretations sounded in these recordings. My first contact with classical music as a young child was listening to my mother play the music of Bach

and Beethoven on our living room piano, and when I heard the same pieces in our record collection, I remember thinking how wonderful it was that there were such a variety of portrayals of this music. The small nuances of phrasing, tempo and dynamics allowed me to re-experience my favorite music over and over again, as though it was the first time hearing it. But this was not the case with Ravel.

I had come to expect a fairly broad range of interpretation when listening to music from Ravel's era, and I had developed my own, adventurous ideas about how I could realize this music in new and innovative ways. Imagine my disappointment when my piano teacher told me of accounts of Ravel scolding interpreters of his music for departing from his score notations. Did this mean that I couldn't find my own voice in this music? It felt like it, initially, but I was determined to learn more.

I began to learn about historically informed performance practice traditions, period instruments, and Romantic-era performing styles. My enthusiasm for these subjects remained long after the completion of my undergraduate studies, and it eventually led me to return to UCSC to pursue a graduate degree focused on Ravel's compositional aesthetic, his performing style as a pianist, and his collaborations with some of the greatest virtuosos of the early twentieth century. Along the way, I fell in love with historic recordings and developed a fascination with player piano recording technologies.

My engagement with these sources has enriched my appreciation for Ravel's music immeasurably. This essay represents the first steps in what I'm sure will be a much longer journey towards better defining the interpretive boundaries of Ravel's

music in a manner that is both freeing to Ravel enthusiasts, and consistent with the composer's vision.

Introduction

The atmosphere had to have been tense backstage at the Paris Opéra in the spring of 1930 when maestro Arturo Toscanini returned from the stage having just conducted a decidedly up-tempo rendition of what would become Ravel's most famous work, *Bolero*. Despite an enthusiastic ovation from the audience, Toscanini's gesture to acknowledge Ravel, who was seated in the audience, was met with a conspicuous lack of response from the composer. Toscanini was known not only for his intransigence, but also for making wholesale alterations of scores to the end of better realizing the composer's intent, and Ravel's indifference couldn't have sat well with him. After all, Ravel's reputation as an artist of international status was only just beginning to blossom at this point, and Toscanini had been an integral part of his rise to fame. He had elevated *Bolero* to a solid place in the standard repertoire of the western canon, and after he gave the work its American premiere with the New York Philharmonic in the prior year, Ravel rapidly became a household name to American audiences.

Accounts vary as to what exactly was said when these two doctrinaire personalities confronted one another after this obvious slight. One description contends that Ravel asserted, "It's too fast", to which Toscanini replied, "You do not know anything about your own music. It was the only way to save the work."¹ Another account reports Ravel to have said, "That's not my tempo," to which

¹ Deborah Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel: Creation and Interpretation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 224.

Toscanini replied, “When I play it at your tempo, it is not effective,” to which Ravel retorted, “then do not play it.”²

Whatever the specifics of this altercation may be, Ravel’s reputation for protecting the integrity of his works is legendary, and he has been described as “one of history’s most meticulous, most precise, most detail-loving notators of music.”³ One need only glance at his scores to get a sense of his obsession with craft, notation, precision and structure. Many of the musicians with whom he collaborated would later recount the unflagging conviction with which he gave interpretative direction. Virtuoso pianist Marguerite Long, a lifelong collaborator and close personal friend of Ravel, recalls that the composer once said, when pressed about his convictions with regard to interpretation of his works, “I do not ask that one interpret my music, but simply that one play it.”⁴

The question of how to approach Ravel has been a consistent source of confusion and disagreement among scholars and performers alike. Ravel has always proven difficult to classify, due in no small part to the uniqueness of his style, and the eclecticism of the genres and cultures from which he draws inspiration. Barbara Kelly highlights the numerous contradictions found in Ravel’s compositional aesthetic, drawing attention to his ironic synthesis of traditional classical models, such as sonata form, string quartet, and the piano concerto, with modern elements such as jazz,

² Cecilia Dunoyer, *Marguerite Long: A Life in French Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 87.

³ Gunther Schuller, *The Compleat Conductor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

⁴ Cecilia Dunoyer, *Marguerite Long: A Life in French Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 8.

polyrhythms, bitonality, and extended chords.⁵ The rigid interpretational boundaries that Ravel penned into his scores, his predilection for highly organized compositional techniques, as well as his outright proclamations to not interpret his music, can leave an interpreter bewildered. This pervasive sense of inflexibility can reinforce the notion that Ravel's works ought to stand on their own, and that the performer maintain emotional and interpretive detachment in their performances.

Like Stravinsky, Ravel has become closely associated with neoclassicism, a movement that occurred primarily in the interwar period (1918 – 1939) in which composers revived the balanced forms of earlier times and returned to the aesthetic attributes associated with classicism; namely order, simplicity, clarity, and emotional restraint.⁶ The principle of emotional detachment in musical performance was brought to an extreme by Stravinsky in his writing, *Some Ideas about my Octuor* (1966), in which he uses his *Octet for Wind Instruments* as an exemplar of the musical “object”, asserting that it should remain unadulterated by the interpretative nuances of performers, whom he refers to as “executants”.⁷ Stravinsky contends that the emotive basis for musical compositions resides in the form of the work itself, and that any affectation will have a degrading effect.⁸ There are some points of overlap

⁵ Barbara Kelly, “Maurice (Joseph) Ravel,” Oxford Music Online, last modified Feb. 1, 2017, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000052145>

⁶ Arnold Whittall, “Neo-classicism,” Oxford Music Online, last modified Jan. 10, 2010, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.oca.ucsc.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000019723>

⁷ Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 528 – 530.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 530 – 531.

between Ravel and Stravinsky in their esteem for musical form and minimal interpretive affectation. Barbara Kelly notes, “critical opinion of Ravel has often emphasized craftsmanship over expressiveness.”⁹ However, Ravel did not go to quite the extreme as Stravinsky in terms of compositional objectivity, and he did not completely reject the notion of emotional engagement with his music. Kelly goes on to point out that:

Although the craft of composition was something he (Ravel) valued highly in his own works and those of others, this did not preclude emotional involvement, which he regarded as the expressive core of any work of art.

Based on his statements, one can safely assume that Ravel never intended to narrow the expressive range of his works, or to elicit the type of nuance-less performances as advocated by Stravinsky. Yet, a formidable challenge remains when approaching his scores. How does one ascertain and adhere to the composer’s intent while remaining unrestricted in their performance? Where are the lines drawn in terms of tempo, rubato, dynamics, and pedaling? How does one interpret Ravel?

The debate on ‘authenticity’ in music can be traced back to the early 20th century writings of Arnold Dolmetsch, and extends through to the groundbreaking and provocative prose of Richard Taruskin in the 1980’s.¹⁰ My intent is not to dismiss nor dilate such discourses, nor is it to try and formulate an unbreakable set of

⁹ Barbara Kelly, “Maurice (Joseph) Ravel,” Oxford Music Online, last modified Feb. 1, 2017, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000052145>

¹⁰ Nicholas Luby, “*Authenticity in Musical Performance: An Analytical Critique*” (Thesis, Wesleyan University, 2011), 2.

restrictions on the musician, or to encourage performers to throw caution to the wind. The goal of this study is to be as informative and non-prescriptive as possible, and to draw from a range of sources to the end of expanding the interpretational options for a performer of Ravel.

Some invaluable documents exist to guide the modern performer in their pursuit of bringing Ravel's music to life in a way that both pays homage to its creator's vision, while allowing room for individuality and nuance. First, a close look at Ravel's performing style of his own works will be pursued, focusing in particular on the wide gulf that exists between how he played his music as a young man, versus how he insisted his music be played later in life. The manner in which recording technology influenced how composers and performers interacted with their listeners will also be considered. To this end, we will begin by looking closely at the phrasing and rhythmic nuances of Ravel's 1912 recordings of his music on the Welte Mignon Reproducing Piano system. After exploring, from conception to performance, the evolution of the pieces Ravel recorded, I will contrast my findings with the recorded performances and anecdotal testimony of virtuoso pianist Vlado Perlemuter, one of Ravel's most trusted and intimate collaborators.

To better understand the nuances of Ravel's piano roll performances, a familiarity with the mechanism of the recording medium is key. I will begin with a brief description of the evolution of player piano recording technologies and procedures in order to maximize accuracy of analysis. I will give background on Ravel's collaboration with Perlemuter, and then provide a brief discussion of Ravel's

compositional methods in the context of early 20th-century Europe. I will proceed with an analysis of both the *Sonatine* and the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, while incorporating descriptions of both Ravel's and Perlemuter's unique performing characteristics as they relate to the thematic and formal properties of each work, in an effort to provide a clearer picture of the interpretational array available to the modern performer.

The Welte Mignon Reproducing Piano System

The first important distinction to make when evaluating piano roll recordings as a viable analytical source is to clearly define the difference between a “player piano” and a “reproducing piano.” Player piano technology experienced countless iterations over several decades during the nineteenth century, and hence cannot be attributed to any one single person.¹¹ The first mass-produced, and by far most popular, player piano of the early twentieth century was the Pianola, produced by Edwin Scott Votey in his home workshop in 1895. Votey drew upon mechanisms pioneered by earlier player piano companies, synthesizing them into a complete, fully-functional unit. Shortly after his success, he joined the Aeolian company where the instrument was refined and brought to the market in 1898. The initial product was

¹¹ “History of the Pianola – An Overview,” The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, <http://www.pianola.org/history/history.cfm>.; Pianola.org is authored by Rex Lawson, a pianist, academic and pianist who is generally regarded as the world expert on the technologies of the Pianola and several other player pianos and reproducing piano technologies. Pianola.org is frequently cited in academic journals, dissertations and other scholarly works as the leading internet authority on the history of the player piano and the reproducing piano.

an external device, not unlike a small cabinet in appearance, that was placed in front of the piano, and contained rows of felt “fingers” that were fitted to lay atop the piano keys. These cabinet units, known as “push-ups”, were appropriately called “Piano Players” at the time of their release, and would depress the keys of any piano with which they interfaced (Figure 1.1). Aeolian eventually developed a mechanism that sat inside a normal piano, forming a self-contained unit. These constitute the majority of player pianos seen today (Figure 1.2). Several other player piano companies produced instruments at this time; however, Aeolian’s mechanical wonder grew so popular that the term “Pianola” eventually became a ubiquitous term to refer to any player piano.¹²



Figure 1.1: *Aeolian Co. Pianola Push-up Piano Player Unit*, Image courtesy of liveauctioneers.com

¹² “History of the Pianola – An Overview,” The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, <http://www.pianola.org/history/history.cfm>.



Figure 1.2: *Aeolian Co. Pianola Player Piano Unit*, Image courtesy of pianola.org

The Pianola's mechanism is activated by two foot-pedals connected to a set of bellows at the piano's base which, when pumped, create suction throughout the unit. The force generated by this suction serves to drive the rotation of the piano roll via a series of gears and rocker arms while simultaneously drawing air through the perforations on the piano roll as they pass over the eighty-eight small holes on the tracker bar (Figure 1.3). A subsequent set of eighty-eight small tubes runs from the opposite end of each hole on the tracker bar and connects to a system of much smaller

bellows aligned over every key of the piano. When the perforations on the roll allow air to pass through the tubes, the piano keys are driven down.¹³



Figure 1.3 Tracker bar of the Pianola, Image courtesy of amazingmachine.wordpress.com

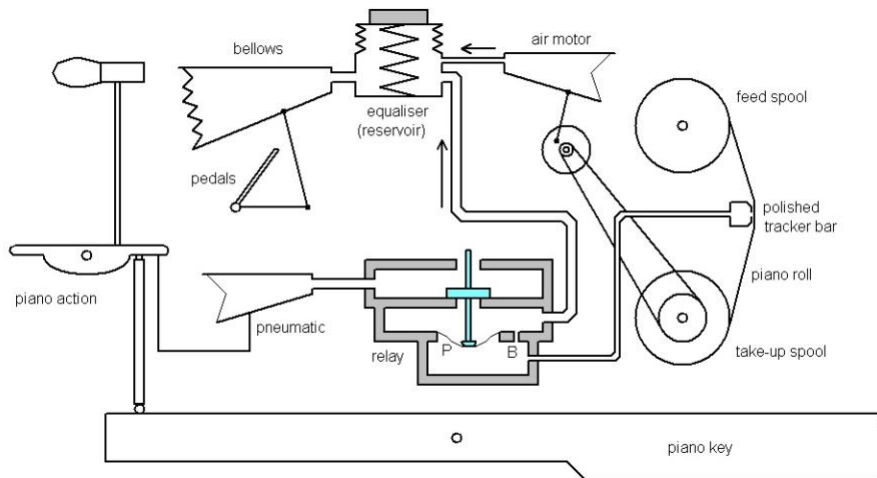


Figure 1.4 Side view of the Pianola mechanism, Image courtesy of douglas-self.com

¹³ “History of the Pianola – An Overview,” The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, <http://www.pianola.org/history/history.cfm>.

The Pianola enjoyed a rapid growth in popularity in the first decade of the twentieth century, with Aeolian's piano roll catalogue reaching 9,000 in 1904, releasing 200 new titles per month.¹⁴ This increase in popularity not only led to a standardization of the piano roll format, but enabled an expansion of player piano technology to create a more interactive experience between the consumer and the music. The initial release of the Pianola enabled rudimentary expressive control with a set of levers that could manipulate the tempo and volume of playback by the operator, or "pianolist," as they came to be known. By 1916, the Pianola reached the apex of its popularity, and the technology was upgraded to enable pianolists to project melodic lines over accompanimental textures.¹⁵

While the player piano served as an interactive musical playback device that allowed for a limited range of expression by the operator, reproducing pianos like the Welte Mignon utilized more complex internal mechanisms and functioned solely to recreate, with remarkable accuracy for the time, actual human performances that included a more faithful representation of dynamics, phrasing, tempo shifts, and articulation – all unique to the recording artist's interpretation.¹⁶

The firm of Michael Welte and Son, operated out of Freiburg-im-Breisgau in southern Germany, began in 1832 as a modest company producing small musical clocks and cabinets. Word quickly spread of the quality of their products and

¹⁴ "History of the Pianola – An Overview," The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, <http://www.pianola.org/history/history.cfm>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kyung Ae Lee, "*A Comparative Study Debussy's Piano Music Scores*" (D.M.A. Treatise, University of Texas at Austin, 2001), 46.

workmanship, and the company eventually grew to achieve worldwide notoriety in the latter half of the nineteenth century for their manufacture of mammoth, self-playing music machines capable of playing several orchestral instruments at once, later dubbed by the public as “orchestrions.” Listeners were wowed by these devices not only for the complexity of their inner-mechanism, but also for the architectural beauty of their woodwork.¹⁷ These instruments were marketed primarily to the extremely affluent, and through the Welte company’s enormous financial success and technological developments for the orchestrion, the company was perfectly poised in the early twentieth century to develop a new species of player piano that was capable of encompassing a broader range of expression. This task was undertaken by Edwin Welte and his partner Karl Bockisch, and eventually led to the Welte Mignon Reproducing Piano. Originally called simply, the *Mignon* (named such to distinguish it from the company’s other, much larger instruments), the Welte Mignon had an appearance very much like a large cabinet or dresser, and represented the first instance of a device capable of transporting individual performances out of the salon or concert hall, and into listener’s homes.¹⁸ The Welte Mignon was a technological miracle for its time and represented the apogee of reproducing piano technology. Several giants of the musical world were to be immortalized on this device, including Ignace Paderewski, Gabriel Fauré, and Claude Debussy, who spoke of it fondly,

¹⁷ “The Reproducing Piano – Welte Mignon,” The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, http://www.pianola.org/reproducing/reproducing_welte.cfm.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

stating “... it is impossible to attain greater perfection of reproduction than the Welte system.”¹⁹



Figure 1.5 *Welte Mignon cabinet unit*, Image courtesy of pianola.org

As mentioned before, the Welte Mignon’s most distinguishing feature was its ability to capture a greater (albeit not perfect) depth of expression than its competitors; however, the exact procedure by which this was accomplished has remained elusive. Welte’s dynamic capturing process was a heavily guarded secret in their heyday and, sadly, all of the relevant documentation and machinery from the Welte factory were lost or destroyed during World War II.²⁰ But thanks to the written accounts of Welte company associates, and to the scrupulous research of scholars like Peter Phillips and Rex Lawson at the Pianola Institute, the dynamic recording procedures of the Welte Mignon have been ascertained to a remarkable degree.

¹⁹ Joseph Van Riper, “*The Reproducing Piano: A Portrait of the Artist* (PhD diss., George Mason University, 2012), 233.

²⁰ “The Reproducing Piano – Welte Mignon,” The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, http://www.pianola.org/reproducing/reproducing_welte.cfm.

The realism of the Welte reproductions is due, in part, to the recording mechanism's ability to capture the expressive elements of a performance automatically, as opposed to the manual methods of other systems that required a human recording producer to document the expressive elements of a performance in tandem with the pianist as they played. These somewhat crude methods often involved either notating a musical score with pencil strokes to represent dynamic shifts or, as in the case of the Duo-Art reproducing piano system, using a manually operated perforation coding device that was controlled by a technician during performances. The fidelity of the performances for Duo-Art was undoubtedly harmed by this "second-hand" approach of capturing musical expression, and Rex Lawson of pianola.org aptly points out that:

...there is often the feeling that the dynamics have been carefully crafted by a roll editor; there is a tendency to use the complete gamut, from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, for every roll, just to prove that the particular system can do it.²¹

The Welte-Mignon, on the other hand, was able to demonstrate:

...astounding realism at some of the most insignificant moments, and on occasions a certain lack of detail when the musical texture becomes too complex – both signs of an automated process.²²

The dynamic capturing mechanism of the Welte Mignon likely involved two metrics to document expression: the length of time taken to execute a given note, and

²¹ "The Reproducing Piano – Welte Mignon," The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, http://www.pianola.org/reproducing/reproducing_welte.cfm.

²² Ibid.

the force deployed when playing it.²³ As mentioned above, the apparatus for measuring these variables remained a matter of speculation for decades, but through careful study of the Welte rolls and photographs of the recording units, combined with comparative analysis of the Welte system with other dynamic capture systems, a few viable explanations have been posited. The most convincing of these is that of pianola specialist Rex Lawson, who hypothesizes that the system most likely involved two sets of electrical contacts; one, a thin metal or carbon rod attached to the underside of each key, and the second, a fine wire fixed to the rear of the piano's action. Since louder notes tend to be the result of a faster execution of a note, the placement of these two contacts on either end of the piano's action enabled a measurement of the time between when a note was pushed, and when the hammer struck the string. These contacts interfaced with a complex system of pneumatics which then connected to a set of pens that would mark the outer margins of the master roll, oscillating in a manner reflective of the dynamic shifts of the performance (Figure 1.6).²⁴

²³ Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 12.

²⁴Rex Lawson, "The Reproducing Piano – Welte Mignon," The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, http://www.pianola.org/reproducing/reproducing_welte.cfm, quoted in Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 12.

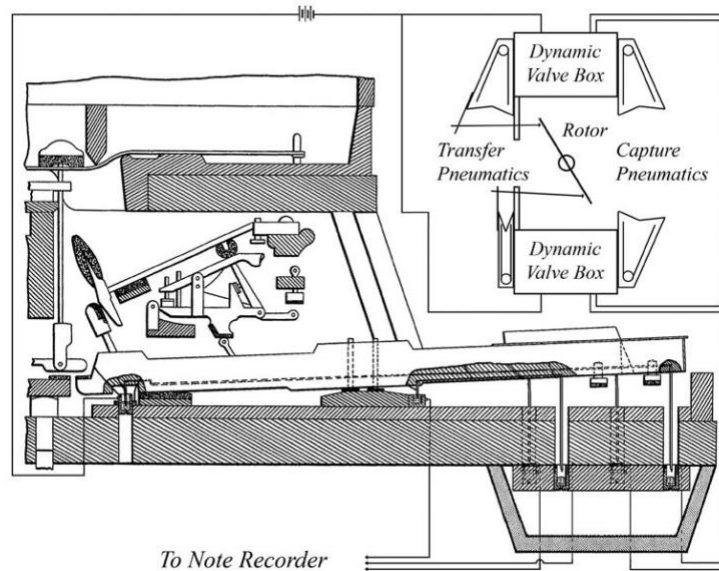


Figure 1.6 *Diagram of the Welte Mignon dynamic capture system as reconstructed by Rex Lawson, Image courtesy of pianola.org*

Much of the mystery surrounding Welte's dynamic capture system was dispelled by the happenstance discovery of a small note hidden in a large, multi-volume history of the gramophone. The note, discovered in 2014 by Gerhard Dangel, confirms Lawson's hypotheses and consists of an account given by Horst Wahl, an audio engineer and historian of recorded sound who dealt directly with Karl Bockisch. In the account, made in 1986 for a German radio broadcast of Welte Mignon rolls, Wahl first describes the crude and inefficient method employed by early reproducing piano companies of hiring trained musicians to mark-up scores in order to capture the dynamics of a given performance. He then goes on to say:

Welte and Bockisch worked tirelessly over several years in order to eliminate this unsatisfactory method,

and they finally developed a (pneumatic action) rail with a whole series of finely graded holes, which regulated the passage of air, responded in proportion to the various loudnesses and thereby provided a different way of recording the dynamic shadings.²⁵

Even with all the praise the Welte Mignon received, it is clear that the system had its shortcomings, and did not provide absolute perfect representations of a performer's playing. There was a mechanism that recorded both damper and soft pedal information by means of a set of contacts affixed to the pedal trap work. While this system accurately captured soft pedal data, subtle shadings and nuances of the damper pedal could not be faithfully recorded, hence these data can only generically be utilized as an informative source.²⁶ An editing process was employed after the recordings were made in which the rolls were formatted for mass production and occasionally cleaned of wrong notes.²⁷ Compared to their competitors, the Welte company's editorial process was relatively unobtrusive.²⁸ In fact, the contracts given to recording artists prohibited them from making any alterations to their performances, but they were instead permitted to re-record a piece in the case of an unsatisfactory performance.²⁹

²⁵ Horst Wahl, *Die Chronik der Sprechmaschine*, Vol. 1 (Düsseldorf: H. Sieben, 1986), 92; as presented on "The Reproducing Piano – Welte Mignon," The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, http://www.pianola.org/reproducing/reproducing_welte.cfm.

²⁶ Peter Philips, "*Piano Rolls and Contemporary Player Pianos*" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2016), 113.

²⁷ "The Reproducing Piano – Welte Mignon," The Pianola Institute, last modified Jan. 3, 2019, http://www.pianola.org/reproducing/reproducing_welte.cfm.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Peter Philips, "*Piano Rolls and Contemporary Player Pianos*" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2016), 117.

Neither Bockisch nor Welte were trained musicians, yet they appointed themselves as supervisors of the editorial process of Welte Mignon piano roll production. Phillips asserts that this indicates an idealism on the part of Bockisch and Welte with respect to the content and quality of the Welte Mignon, and a confidence in the accuracy of its technology. A philosophy of minimal human intervention permeated Welte's recording and editing processes, even to the point that the inexactitudes of the pedal recording mechanism were not corrected.³⁰ Perhaps most importantly, Welte Mignon recordings were always approved by the performer prior to release, and in the case of Ravel, a fastidious man known for his obsessive need for accurate portrayal of his compositions, it is highly unlikely that he would have permitted release of a recording that did not conform to his interpretive ideals. Both Leikin and Phillips contend that the combination of the Welte Mignon's superior technology, along with the Welte company's minimal editorial procedures, qualify it not only as a source of the most accurate piano roll recordings, but as one of the most relevant sources for interpretational analysis.^{31, 32}

³⁰ Peter Philips, "*Piano Rolls and Contemporary Player Pianos*" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2016), 125.

³¹ Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 14.

³² Peter Philips, "*Piano Rolls and Contemporary Player Pianos*" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2016), 126.

Ravel and Perlemuter

Among the greatest exponents of Ravel's music was Lithuanian-born, French pianist Vlado Perlemuter. Born in 1904, Perlemuter was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 10, where he received a first-rate musical education under the tutelage of Moritz Moszkowski and eventually Alfred Cortot. Upon his graduation at age 15, he won first prize for playing *Thème et variations* by Gabriel Fauré, who attended the performance. Perlemuter went on to become a pianist of international repute, enjoying a career that spanned over seven decades. His early musical career flourished during an incredibly important time in French musical culture in which he was exposed to some of the most important musical figures of the early twentieth century.³³

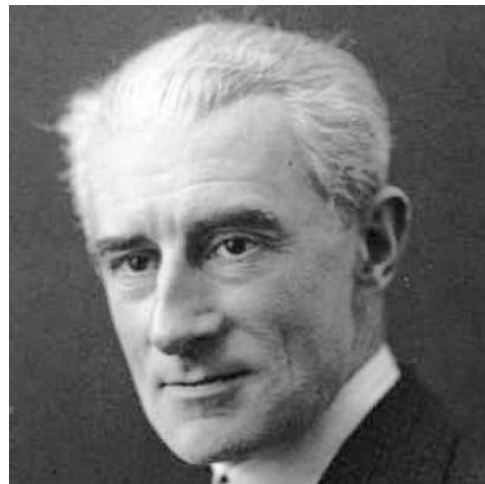


Figure 1.7 *Perlemuter (left) and Ravel (right)*, Images courtesy of Getty Images

³³ "Vlado Perlemuter biography," last modified Sept, 2007, <http://www.vladoperlemuter.com/eng/294-mini-bio-eng>.

Perlemuter was a performer whom Ravel trusted, once even citing him as his favorite interpreter of his works.³⁴ After a brief meeting in 1927, Perlemuter was coerced by his friends to send Ravel a letter, requesting coachings in his pursuit to learn all of Ravel's piano music, to which Ravel obliged. Perlemuter then spent a four-month period studying all thirty of Ravel's works for solo piano in exhaustive detail, with the composer at Ravel's home in Montfort l'Amaury. This period of study culminated in two public recitals, held later that year, in which Perlemuter performed the complete piano works of Ravel, with the composer in attendance. Perlemuter would repeat this feat two more times, once at the age of 83 to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of Ravel's passing, and also for a radio interview with H el ene Jourdan-Morhange in 1950, where Perlemuter supplemented his performances with detailed accounts of his experiences with Ravel.³⁵ With score in hand, Perlemuter guided listeners phrase-by-phrase through every piano piece Ravel wrote, sharing all of the composer's views on interpretation of his music. The transcripts of this interview were eventually published in a book entitled *Ravel According to Ravel* (1989), and serve as an invaluable source to anyone in pursuit of an historically informed approach to Ravel's music.

³⁴ Carla Marion Dodek, "Miroirs d'apr es Perlemuter" (PhD diss., Rice University, 1989), 14.

³⁵ Vlado Perlemuter and H el ene Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 14.

Style, Structure, and Sublimation in the *Sonatine*

During his 1912 recording sessions for the Welte Mignon, Ravel performed his enchanting *Sonatine* in F-sharp minor. Ravel composed what would eventually become the first movement of the *Sonatine* in response to a competition opened in 1903 by the Anglo-French magazine, *Paris Weekly Review*. Submissions were to be a first movement of a piano sonatina, no more than 75 bars in length. Ravel's submission was slightly longer at 87 bars, and ended up being the only entry. The competition was subsequently cancelled, which freed Ravel from the restrictive parameters of the contest, and spurred him to complete the work, adding two more movements later that year.

The *Sonatine* displays Ravel's penchant for classical formalism. Along with its strict adherence to sonata form, the *Sonatine*'s clarity of melody, predictability of cadences and regularity of phrasing are among its most salient features. A descending fourth motif serves as the unifying force throughout the three movements, sometimes appearing in inverted form, other times appearing fragmented among accompanimental figures in the left and right hand (Figure 1.8). Ravel juxtaposes the restrictive framework of sonata form by infusing the piece with a variety of compositional devices unquestionably of the modern ilk. The *New Grove Dictionary of Music* notes:

...the semitonal clashes, appoggiaturas, added 7ths, localized chromaticism and use of the tritone indicate

that he (Ravel) was viewing his Classical subject from a 20th century vantage point.³⁶

The *Sonatine* is filled with harmonic surprises and has a pervasive cogency of texture that can occasionally depart into moments of flourishing intensity, as found in Mm. 6 – 9.

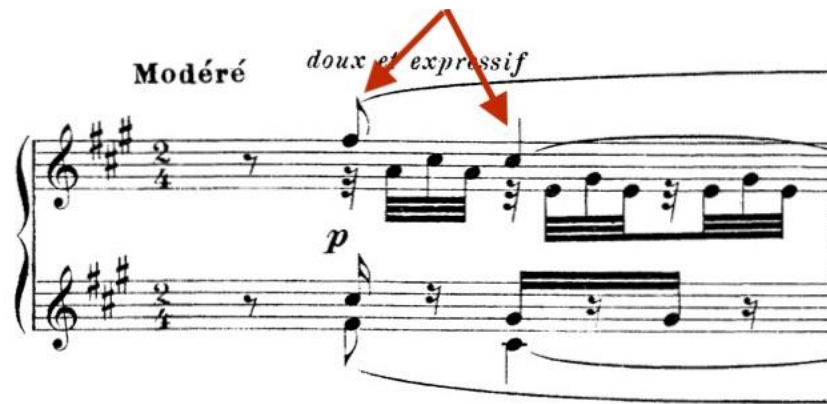


Figure 1.8 The falling fourth melody, introduced in the opening bars of the first movement of the *Sonatine*, serves as a unifying theme throughout all 3 movements. Note its occurrence in both voices of the left hand.

Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, in a preface to her discussion of the *Sonatine* with Vlado Perlemuter during their 1950 interview, captured the character of *Sonatine* aptly:

The spontaneity of youth bursts out, just as it does in the (Ravel) *Quartet* of four years earlier! It is impossible not to be won over by this surging melody,

³⁶ Barbara Kelly, "Maurice (Joseph) Ravel," Oxford Music Online, last modified Feb. 1, 2017, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000052145>

this writing so unfettered that it is not afraid of the constraints of the classical design.³⁷

With respect to interpretation, a quick glance at the score, with its dense and meticulous notation, seems to indicate that Ravel had clear ideas as to how this music should be realized. How can one find their own, unique interpretation while remaining within the parameters set by the composer? The tension created between the piece's strict formal properties and its boldly modern harmonic content can help guide in the right direction. Michael J. Puri, in his refreshing and multilayered study, *Ravel the Decadent*, offers the concept of "sublimation" as one of the central critical terms to describe Ravel's unique style. As defined by the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, to 'sublimate' is to, "divert or modify (an instinctual impulse) into a culturally higher or socially more acceptable activity."³⁸ In the case of Ravel, formalism, detail, and precision can be seen as architectural vehicles – the "more acceptable activities"³⁹ – in which the composer sublimates his emotional impulses. In this context, restraint can serve as an unconventional expressive tool for performers, enabling them to shift their focus towards highlighting the form of the work in their interpretation. The means by which Ravel and Perlemuter achieve this will be explored later.

³⁷ Vlado Perlemuter and H el ene Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 11.

³⁸ *New Oxford American Dictionary*, s.v. "sublimate," accessed June 13, 2019, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sublimate>

³⁹ *Ibid.*

As mentioned previously, the aforementioned traits of Ravel's compositional style qualify him as an early example of a neoclassicist. The neoclassicist revival of order, balance, economy and thematic development in music arose, in part, as a reaction to the exaggerated gestures and perceived formlessness of Romanticism, which could explain why Ravel, later in his life, asserted that the excesses of Romantic-era piano performance practice did not suit his compositional style.⁴⁰ Ravel cautioned interpreters of his music against these stylistic excesses, and his fondness for detailed notation can be perceived as a safeguard against the unbridled expressionism of the Romantic era. And yet, surprisingly, within the first few seconds of Ravel's recordings of the *Sonatine* and the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, there are glaringly obvious, and rarely restrained, stylistic and rhythmic nuances characteristic of the very performing style that Ravel would later caution against. Clearly, Ravel approved of, and even utilized, some elements of Romantic-era pianism, and these expressive techniques can serve to enrich and enliven Ravel's music.

Ravel's 1913 Piano Roll Recording of *Sonatine*

Once Welte's reproducing piano technology had been established and refined, nearly a century's worth of western art music performing traditions could be documented and preserved for future generations to study and enjoy. The immense popularity and realism of the Welte Mignon motivated a multitude of the world's top

⁴⁰ Arnold Whittall, "Neo-classicism," Oxford Music Online, last modified Jan. 10, 2010, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.oca.ucsc.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000019723>

virtuosos and composers to enshrine themselves on piano roll. Among these were several of Liszt's pupils, many of whom would have been at the height of their technical powers during the recording sessions. Several composers such as Edvard Grieg and Gabriel Faure recorded their own works, and Theodor Leschetizky, who, as a young man, studied under Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny, and had heard Chopin perform, also recorded for Welte.⁴¹

The majority of the early Welte Mignon recordings were made either in Freiburg or Leipzig between 1905 and 1908. In 1909, the Welte Mignon recording equipment was taken to England where Clara Schumann's pupil, Fannie Davies, recorded works by Brahms, Schumann, Mozart and Mendelssohn.⁴² The following year, the equipment was again transported, this time to Russia, where Scriabin, Glazounov, and Liapounov committed several of their own works to piano roll. Then, in 1913, the equipment was brought to Paris, and several giants of the Parisian music scene were recorded, including Debussy, Fauré, De Falla and Ravel.⁴³

⁴¹ Peter Philips, "*Piano Rolls and Contemporary Player Pianos*" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2016), 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 32.



Figure 1.9 Ignace Paderewski recording on the Welte Mignon in February of 1906, in Leipzig, Photo courtesy of pianola.org

Despite having won first prize in the Paris Conservatoire's annual piano competition in 1891, Ravel did not remain dedicated to the development of his piano technique.⁴⁴ His shortcomings as a pianist were no secret during his lifetime, which calls into question the usefulness of his own performances as instructive documents for interpretation.⁴⁵ Ravel's technique was limited, and his most virtuosic works remained technically inaccessible to him. The third movement of *Sonatine*, by far the most difficult of the three, is one such instance. While Ravel's Welte Mignon releases credit Ravel as the performer on the third movement, in actuality, he chose not to

⁴⁴ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 92.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

record it and instead performed only the first two. Welte Mignon records show that Ravel had his friend and collaborator Robert Casadesus play in his stead on the third movement, which is further evidenced by the marked difference in the fluidity and style of playing found on the recording.⁴⁶ However, the first two movements – the second, in particular – pose considerably fewer technical hurdles, which allowed Ravel to demonstrate a broader range of expressive devices, without the distraction of difficult passagework. For the purposes of consistency and accuracy, analysis will be limited to the first two movements.

1st Movement:

Among the more striking features of Ravel's performance in the opening bars of the first movement, marked *Modéré*, is his tendency to accelerate through difficult passages, departing well beyond his indicated tempo of 108 to the eighth-note. It would seem that the Ravel's expressive impulses as a pianist took precedence over his own score notations. These tempo discrepancies can be jarring at first; however, upon further listening, a correlation becomes apparent not only between tempo and dynamics, but tempo and phrase as well. The gradual swell in dynamics from Mm. 5 – 10 is accompanied by corresponding accelerandos, and in the areas where the melody moves upward in register, there are similar increases in tempo. It would seem that Ravel utilized tempo, phrasing and dynamics all in tandem to push phrases

⁴⁶ Ronald Woodley, *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 237.

forward and produce flourishing effects, which is particularly evident on the second beats of Mm. 9 and 10. Correspondingly, Ravel utilizes *ritardando* in tandem with *diminuendos* to emphasize the winding down of phrases. This tendency is present throughout the performance, and the listener could be tempted to think that these expressive attributes were a product of Ravel's flawed technique, yet he mirrors this approach, with varying degrees of intensity, during the repeat at M. 4, the modulation of the opening material at M. 34, and the recapitulation at M. 59, clearly indicating intent. These peaks and valleys of tempo also trace the upward and downward movement of the melody accordingly (Figure 2.1).

Ravel's use of tempo shifts to drive phrases forward is further demonstrated by the momentum of the opening section effectively spilling into the second section beginning at M. 13, marked *en dehors*. At this transition point, he completely ignores the *rallentando* (notated in M. 12) and subsequent *a tempo* at M. 13. Ravel does this at nearly every instance where a *rallentando* is followed by an *a tempo* throughout both movements. An agogic lengthening of the sixteenth note at the end of each measure from Mm. 13 – 19 produces a limping effect, which functions to gradually wind down the momentum of the phrase (similar to Mm. 11 and 12), this time coming to a near full stop at the end of M. 19.

Another of the most salient features of Ravel's performing style is his pervasive habit of arpeggiating block chords. This stylistic nuance is a staple of Romantic-era piano performance practice, and in several instances, there is no discernible difference between Ravel's notation of rolled chords and this stylistic

tendency.⁴⁷ The spreading of chords can be found at numerous points, the first being after the caesura in M. 3, where Ravel uses it to highlight the restatement of the melodic line at the end of the bar. This highlighting effect recurs at several other points throughout Mm. 5-12 to emphasize the strong beats and gestural flourishes of the melody. Also prominent is Ravel's use of dislocation, a practice of rhythmically separating the melody from the accompaniment as an expressive highlighting effect. Ravel's use of this technique often coincides with tenutos, and can be heard most prominently from Mm. 20-22, marked *tres expressif*.

⁴⁷ Neal Peres da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 68.



Figure 2.1 1st movement of Sonatine with the tempo fluctuations from Ravel's Welte Mignon piano roll recording notated on the graphs above each system. Note the correspondence of increases in tempo with dynamic swells and upward register shifts.

2nd Movement:

In the second movement, nearly all of the aforementioned stylistic attributes are present. In addition to his pervasive rolling of accompanimental chords, Ravel again accelerates in step with dynamic swells to drive phrases forward, and decelerates to wind phrases down. The most prominent increase in tempo and dynamic occurs from Mm. 33 – 36, at the climax of the first section, where the melody ascends above rolled chords in the left hand. Melodic dislocation is once again present, this time to an even greater extent, resulting in instances where displacement of the melody occurs ahead of the beat by nearly a sixteenth-note, as heard in M. 16. Additionally, a prominent hurrying of the first beat occurs in tandem with the notated rolled chords in Mm. 16 – 20, producing a stumbling effect. The recurring rhythmic motive of four sixteenth-notes (seen first in M. 3) is hurried throughout Ravel's performance in every instance in which it occurs. When opening material repeats at M. 53, the two sixteenth notes (first heard in M. 2) sound as a dotted rhythm, due to Ravel's placement of an agogic stress on the first beat.

Ravel's stylistic nuances can appear on their surface to be eccentric or frivolous; however, multiple listenings reveal that these interpretational attributes are always in service of musical form. His accelerations and minute ritardandos follow a logical pattern, and are strategically placed in a manner that allows phrases to naturally breathe, as well as signal the endings of sections, and the arrival of new ones. Ravel takes care to play repeated sections in a unique manner with each iteration, another common practice of the Romantic era. This serves to break the

monotony that can occur with repetition, and allows the listener to hear primary thematic material in a new light upon restatement. There are some instances in the score where Ravel highlights these formal attributes through dynamic notation, as found in Mm. 35 – 43 in the second movement, but Ravel’s piano roll performance demonstrates numerous other instances of this form-highlighting manner of playing, even where it is not indicated in the score.

Ravel’s Instruction and Perlemuter’s Execution

Ravel and Perlemuter’s recordings have some areas of overlap, but by and large, they represent opposite ends of the interpretational spectrum. Ravel almost sounds like a late nineteenth-century Romantic compared to Perlemuter, whose colorful and controlled interpretation is more akin to a style of playing one might find in recordings of the last forty years. In several respects, Ravel’s assertions to Perlemuter in terms of dynamics, phrasing, tempo, and rubato stand in complete contradiction to the manner in which he plays on his 1912 piano roll recordings – down to nearly every last detail. The disparities are stunning almost to the point of humor. Consider Perlemuter’s opening remarks on the *Sonatine* during his 1950 interview with Jourdan-Morhange. Jourdan-Morhange inquires:

I have often heard the first part of the *Sonatine* played too fast. What do you think?

Perlemuter replies:

Indeed, it is nearly always played too fast. Ravel insisted that the tempo should not be too hurried. Apart from the tempo, which Ravel wanted to be strict and without rubato, he was very concerned about the exact length of the semiquaver in the second theme.⁴⁸

Ravel does none of this. Perhaps his interpretation felt relatively restrained to him in the context of the late Romantic-era performance practices still prevalent in early twentieth century Paris. Whatever his reasons for this shift of philosophy, he was insistent that Perlemuter avoid this highly flexible manner of playing. Perlemuter even recalled that Ravel could, at times, be quite shrewd with him in this respect during his period of tutelage.⁴⁹

In Perlemuter's 1960 recording of *Sonatine*, he is far more restrained and adherent to the composer's wishes; and yet, there are a few suggestions of Ravel's playing style present in the performance. Perlemuter never exceeds a moderate tempo throughout the first movement, and his pace remains predominantly metronomic, unless otherwise notated. He does demonstrate a barely discernible tendency to accelerate along with the dynamic swells as Ravel did, and the agogic dislocations of the aforementioned sixteenth notes in Mm. 13-19 (heard in Ravel's performance) are tempered considerably. Perlemuter sticks faithfully to Ravel's dynamic and tempo markings, and adheres to the verbal instructions given to him in 1923 throughout his

⁴⁸ Vlado Perlemuter and Hèlène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

entire performance. One can also hear a faint suggestion of Ravel's stylistic tendency to hurry the groups of four sixteenth notes throughout the second movement, but the dramatic shifts in tempo and dynamics are not present. Like Ravel, he also highlights structural attributes of the second movement by earmarking the endings of sections with subtle ritardandos and pedal breaks, as found at M. 27.

The Valses nobles et sentimentales

Composed in 1911, the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* is a set of eight short waltzes containing a unique synthesis of impressionistic and modernistic elements. Ravel cited a pair of waltz cycles written by Franz Schubert, entitled *Valses Sentimentales* (1823) and *Valses Nobles* (1827), as his inspiration for the work. However, apart from their titles and couple of rhythmic figures, there is almost no similarity between Ravel's and Schubert's waltzes.⁵⁰ Ravel's waltz-cycle was first performed by its dedicatee, Louis Aubert, at a memorable 1911 concert of the *Société Musicale Indépendante*. The composers of the works being performed that day were present, but their identities were kept unknown to both the audience and to one another, with the aim of soliciting a response to the music that was unadulterated by the notoriety of the composers. Ravel's *Valses* proved a polarizing work, eliciting a mixture of applause and cat-calls throughout the performance.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Maurice Hinson, foreword to *Ravel: Valses Nobles et Sentimentales for the Piano* (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1998), 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

The *Valses nobles et sentimentales* epitomize several elements of the popular genre, with a stylistic range that stretches from the exuberant gestures of Strauss's dancehall works, to the more intimate lyricism of Chopin's short character pieces. With this broad spectrum of mood, texture and harmony, Ravel forges into unique formal and tonal territory that leads the listener through an emotional labyrinth that defies any conventional categories. Maurice Hinson aptly captures this tonal aesthetic with the following description, "Ravel's masterpiece is like a kite being blown about in the winds of atonality yet held firmly by the tonal string."⁵²

Though the *Valses* offer relatively few technical hurdles, the challenge of this work lies in calculated execution of the rhythm, giving careful attention to the formal properties and programmatic attributes of each movement. Ravel was particularly dictatorial with Vlado Perlemuter in this respect, often making him repeat the difficult cross-rhythms and hemiolic patterns found in each movement.⁵³ As we explore the nuances of the Welte Mignon piano roll recordings along with Perlemuter's account of his time with Ravel, we will begin to see how a performer of Ravel can draw influence from these two, seemingly opposed realizations of the score. The wishes of the composer will be given their due deference, as will the stylistic tendencies associated with the genre and the historical period in which these pieces were written.

⁵² Maurice Hinson, foreword to *Ravel: Valses Nobles et Sentimentales for the Piano* (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1998), 3.

⁵³ Vlado Perlemuter and Hèlène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 44.

A detailed analysis of the score reveals a few key motifs and rhetorical devices that recur under the surface of each movement, both of which can serve to enhance the formal characteristics of the set. Among the most frequently occurring of these devices is the sigh motif (melody A), which takes several different forms in each movement. The first obvious occurrence happens in the upper melody of the right hand in Mm. 29 – 30 of the first movement, between A# and G# (Figure 2.2); however, there are sigh motifs present in every movement, ranging from a minor second to as wide as an octave as the set progresses. These descending motifs are occasionally answered by inverting the sigh upwards, retracing the melody back to its destination note, as found in the vacillating upper voice of the left-hand part in Mm. 39 – 42 (Figure 2.3).



Figure 2.2 *Sigh motif at Mm. 29 – 30*



Figure 2.3 *Sigh motif with inverted answer at Mm. 39*

A second unifying theme throughout the work is a descending motif (melody B) first introduced in the opening bars of the third waltz (Figure 2.4). Ravel cleverly disguises this motif in every movement following its initial entry, often burying it in accompanimental textures or superimposing it into longer melodies (Figures 2.5 – 2.8). Subtly emphasizing the occurrences of this melody throughout performance can

enhance the cohesion of the work as a whole, as well as add textural depth to the sections in which it appears.

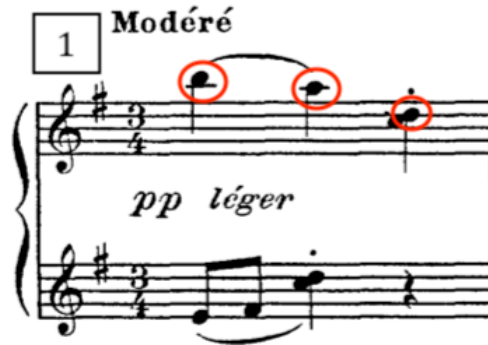


Figure 2.4 *Melody B*



Figure 2.5 *Melody B's occurrences in Waltz 4*



Figure 2.6 *Melody B, Waltz 5*

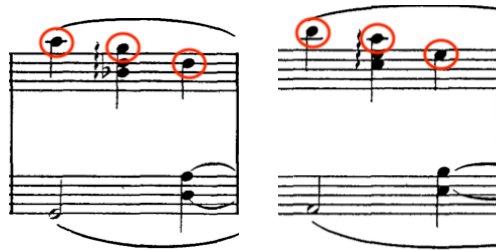


Figure 2.7 *Melody B, Waltz 6*



Figure 2.8 Waltz 7 has the most occurrences of Melody B, it appears inverted in mm 49-50

Waltz No. 1:

The first waltz is marked *Modéré-très franc*, and opens with a sequence of unsettling cluster chords, evoking the flourishes of the Viennese ballroom. The rhythmic motive (rhythmic motive A) of this opening statement (two eighth-notes followed by two quarter-notes) recurs throughout Ravel's *Valses*, and is one of the only instances of similarity with the *Valses nobles* of Schubert (Figure 2.9).

Throughout his Welte Mignon recording, Ravel opts not to employ an anticipation of the second beat, which is characteristic of the Viennese waltz; however, this nuance is idiomatically consistent with the waltz genre, and can be applied at any instance of rhythmic motive A, beginning in the initial four bars, and again in Mm. 45-48, Mm. 51-52, and Mm. 61-64.

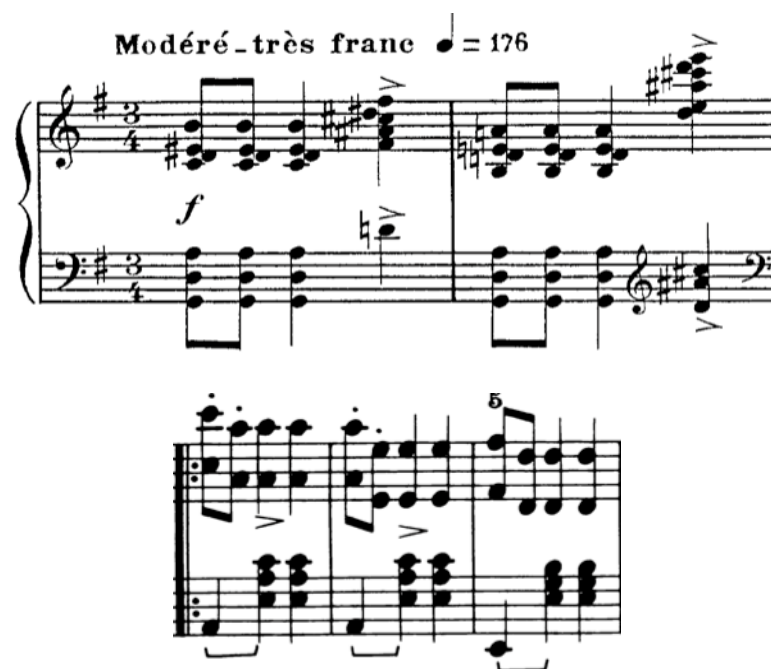


Figure 2.9 *The opening bars of Ravel’s Valses nobles et sentimentales (above image) borrows rhythmic motive A from Schubert’s Valses Nobles (below image). This theme recurs throughout Ravel’s Valses*

Ravel’s frequent complaint about this movement was that it was “often played too fast,” despite his clear tempo marking of 176.⁵⁴ Perlemuter concurred with this sentiment by pointing out that an excessively fast tempo can distort the cleverly constructed cross-rhythms in bars 5-14.⁵⁵ Even with a judiciously slow tempo, these cross rhythms are easily overlooked. The hemiola patterns found in the left hand at Mm. 7-10 and Mm. 67-70 should not affect the stately waltz pattern of the right hand, and allow for a clear juxtaposition of the rhythms. Additionally, Ravel stated that one

⁵⁴ Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

must keep the left hand relatively soft at the start of M. 5 and M. 65 so that the peculiarly offbeat Ds at the top of the right hand are noticeably emphasized.⁵⁶

Despite Ravel's insistence on a relatively restrained tempo, his Welte Mignon performance demonstrates his expected tendency to hurry through difficult passages. This first occurs at Mm. 5 – 14 as Ravel races through the aforementioned cross-rhythms through to the end of the phrase; and yet, the contrast of the left-hand hemiola figures against straight triple rhythm of the right hand is not lost, due to his tactful quieting of the left-hand chords. When rhythmic motive A returns at M. 61, he slows down slightly, allowing the phrase to breathe, before repeating the hurried tempo, initially employed at Mm. 5. Again, Ravel appears to utilize specifically tailored rubato as a sectional marker in order to highlight form.

Ravel seldom spoke to Perlemuter about pedaling throughout their collaboration, but he made it clear that studying the role of the damper pedal was essential for an effective realization of his waltzes. For the first movement, Ravel was adamant that the damper pedal not be applied on the third beat during sections containing conventional waltz accompaniment, but applied instead on the first and second beats, unless otherwise notated.⁵⁷

Along with the seventh, the first waltz poses some of the greatest technical and stylistic challenges of the set. The dissonant harmonies and jaunty character of this movement can easily tempt one towards overly loud and excessively fast playing,

⁵⁶ Vlado Perlemuter and H el ene Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 44.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

and distract from its connection to the Viennese milieu. Despite his specific tempo markings, Ravel saw this tendency in many performances of the work, hence his instructions to Perlemuter to err on the side of restraint in order to preserve its gestural buoyancy and dynamic depth.⁵⁸

Waltz No. 2:

The second movement's delicate textures and intimate lyricism stand in stark contrast to the first. Despite being marked '*Assez lent*' (rather slowly), Ravel assigns a moderate tempo of 108 to the quarter-note which, when juxtaposed against the brisk tempo of the first movement, effectively feels slow.⁵⁹ The score is marked *avec une expression intense*, and the number of ritardandos and '*expressif*' markings indicate that a broad range of tempo inflections are available to the performer. At the same time, Maurice Hinson cautions the performer to set the pace carefully, taking care to allow the melodic gestures to guide tempo alterations, and to avoid proceeding overly slowly at risk of disrupting melodic continuity.⁶⁰

The sigh motif reappears at the onset of the movement, this time with a succession of descending minor thirds in the upper voice of the right hand. The broken left-hand octaves that accompany these motifs run the risk of disrupting the descending motion in the right hand if they are played too loudly, causing the melody

⁵⁸ Vlado Perlemuter and H  l  ne Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 8.

⁵⁹ Paul Roberts, *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (Milwaukee, MI: Amadeus Press, 2012), 163.

⁶⁰ Maurice Hinson, foreword to *Ravel: Valses Nobles et Sentimentales for the Piano* (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1998), 6.

to sound as a rising minor second followed by a descending major third (Figure 3.1). Several modern recordings demonstrate this tendency, despite Ravel clearly separating the two lines through his distribution of them between the right and left hands. Quieting the octaves down to give them a distant, bell-like quality allows for the right-hand sigh motif to sing out undisrupted (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.1 If the upper 'G' of the left hand is played too loudly, the descending motion of the right-hand melody can become disrupted



Figure 3.2 Without the intrusion of the left hand the descending minor 3rd (sigh motif) sings out

Ravel's performance is fairly rigid tempo-wise; and yet, it is adorned throughout with a noticeable tendency to anticipate the left-hand chords slightly ahead of the right-hand melody, which highlights the melodic line. One could be forgiven for thinking this to be a result of an inaccuracy in the recording mechanism; however, after careful study, it becomes clear that this affectation was not an error in the Welte Mignon recording technology, nor its subsequent transfer to modern reproducing equipment, but an instance of intentional melodic dislocation on the part of Ravel.⁶¹

Ravel included few rubato markings in the *Valses*, but he reserves one such instance for M. 25. After an understated rallentando in the prior bar, Ravel anticipates

⁶¹ Ronald Woodley, *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 215.

the second beat slightly, effectively evening out his timing and arriving back on the underlying metronomic pulse. The presence of the anticipated second beat, initially employed in the first waltz, enhances the capricious character of the section, and is present in every iteration of this phrase throughout the second movement. Perlemuter treats these moments similarly, instead inclining to elongate the third beat.

Of the thirteen *expressif* markings in the *Valses*, five are in the second waltz, an unusual amount for Ravel to include in just one movement. In Ravel's performance, he essentially treats these markings as an indication to slow down, and makes no prominent shift in dynamics. Perlemuter recalls that Ravel encouraged him to approach these moments prudently, as an excessive flexing of the tempo can easily fragment the phrases.⁶²

Waltz No. 3:

The third movement, which Paul Roberts described as “almost doll-like in character”, opens with a delicate, gamboling melody that employs the same rhythmic pattern found in the opening bars of the first waltz (rhythmic motive A).⁶³ Beneath this melody is a sprightly left-hand pattern consisting of two eighth notes slurred into a pair of staccato quarter notes. Vlado Perlemuter points out the importance of

⁶² Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 38.

⁶³ Paul Roberts, *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (Milwaukee, MI: Amadeus Press, 2012), 164.

following Ravel's pedal markings to help reinforce the rhythmic quality of this pattern.⁶⁴

A curious feature of Ravel's interpretation of this movement is his subtle elongation of the first eighth note in the aforementioned left-hand part, which nearly makes it dotted. This affectation gives the rhythmic gestures of this section a hopping quality, particularly when the hemiola patterns begin at M. 5. Perlemuter makes no mention of this agogic stress in his account of Ravel's instructions on the movement, nor is it prominently displayed in his 1960 recording. Ravel applies a slight emphasis on the second beat at several points throughout his performance, while Perlemuter tends to lean into the first beat of each measure, the one exception being when hemiola patterns enter, in which Perlemuter emphasizes the first beat of each duple couplet.

At M. 18, the B section begins and the rhythmic energy is dissipated with a sequence of cascading seventh chords. The challenge of this section lies in prominently voicing the melodic line that occupies the top position of the chords without allowing the remaining notes to overpower the melody. Perlemuter notes that skillful independence of the fourth and fifth fingers is required to achieve this effect.⁶⁵ Ravel executes these chords somewhat forcefully, ignoring his own pianissimo marking, and with notable detachment. Perlemuter opts for more pedal and smoother

⁶⁴ Vlado Perlemuter and Hèlène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 47.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

execution through this section, putting emphasis on the melodic line throughout the entire movement.

The repeat of the A section at M. 61 is marked *très expressif*, and Perlemuter notes that this phrase should be played, “freely and romantically”.⁶⁶ In the recordings, we hear a rare instance of Ravel playing more freely and with more rhythmic affectation than Perlemuter. Ravel slows down noticeably when the closing section commences at M. 57, and gives particular attention to the *très expressif* marking at M. 61, decreasing his tempo by nearly a third.

Waltz No. 4:

Ravel referred to this movement as a “Venetian Waltz,” and its most salient feature is a three-beat phrase spread across two measures – a rhythmic pattern borrowed from the closing bars of the preceding waltz.⁶⁷ The unrelenting dotted rhythms give the phrases a buoyant ebb and flow throughout the movement, evoking the graceful whorls and fleckerls of the ballroom.⁶⁸ These vacillating rhythms are further augmented by hairpin dynamic swells, the importance of which Ravel emphasized to Perlemuter. Perlemuter cautions that the tempo can easily be weighed

⁶⁶ Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 48.

⁶⁷ Paul Roberts, *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (Milwaukee, MI: Amadeus Press, 2012), 164.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

down by these swells, and strict adherence to the beat is crucial, unless otherwise notated.⁶⁹

In 1912, one year after the original publication of the *Valses*, Ravel orchestrated the set for his ballet, *Adélaïde ou le langage des fleurs*. While studying the fourth waltz with Perlemuter in 1927, the composer penciled in a single ascending line at M. 31, borrowed from the horns and cellos in the ballet score (Figure 3.3).⁷⁰ This simple, but highly effective line enhances the tension built through Mm. 31-34, resulting in a greater climax at Mm. 35-36. Because of the line's wide proximity to the bass notes (the line begins at a 12th, and reaches as far as a 16th), the pianist should roll the notes from the bottom-up, effectively transforming the adjoined bass notes into grace-notes. Ravel chose not to include this addendum in his performance. However, the line can be heard in Perlemuter's recording, signifying a rare instance in which Ravel left the decision to the performer.

⁶⁹ Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 48.

⁷⁰ Maurice Hinson, foreword to *Ravel: Valses Nobles et Sentimentales for the Piano* (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1998), 11.

Waltz No. 4, measures 31-37
Example 7

Figure 3.3 *The added voice from Ravel's ballet arrangement of the Valses is highlighted in bold, Image courtesy of Maurice Hinson and Alfred Publishing Inc.*

Waltz No. 5

Waltz number five is the shortest of the set, lasting only 32 measures. Ravel wrote at the top of Perlemuter's score, "Dans l'esprit d'une valse de Schubert" (in the spirit of a waltz by Schubert), along with the single word "simple" in the first bar.⁷¹ The movement is certainly Schubertian in terms of its conventional waltz accompaniment and repetitious melody; however, the harmonic content is far from simple. There is an intimate, dreamlike quality to the work in spite of its perplexing and ornate chromaticism that seems to collapse in on itself as phrases unfold. Ravel insisted that one must resist the temptation to add excessive rubato to its intricate

⁷¹ Paul Roberts, *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (Milwaukee, MI: Amadeus Press, 2012), 165.

lyricism, and that the character of the movement would reveal itself through a minimally affected performance.⁷²

The tempo is marked "Presque lent - dans un sentiment intime" ("Almost slow - with an intimate feeling"). Perlemuter cautions that the accompaniment in the left hand could easily lead one to play the piece too fast, reinforcing Ravel's view that the pulse of the piece ought to remain consistent.⁷³ Perlemuter's 1960 recording demonstrates a clear contradiction between testimony and execution. He applies rubato in a manner that offsets each measure's center of gravity by minutely elongating the first beat of the left hand, then compensates by anticipating the offbeat of the second quarter note, effectively restoring balance to the tempo. Ravel plays in a more conservative fashion, maintaining a regular pulse overall, but still adorns the eighth notes of the melody with faint, nearly indiscernible rhythmic pushes and pulls. A steady, expressionless rendering of this movement enhances its forlorn character, and gives it an entrancing sense of motionlessness.

Waltz No. 6:

The sixth waltz is evocative of a scherzo with its chromatically ascending melodic line that leaps into staccato major seconds. Perlemuter referred to its rhythm as "one-legged," alluding to the hemiolic de-synchronization between the hands, and

⁷² Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 49.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 50.

claimed that it daunted him in performance as much as any movement in the set.⁷⁴

The left hand switches every two bars between hemiola and standard waltz meter, which functions to both support and juxtapose the right-hand melody.

Marked *Vif*, the brisk tempo allows for the left hand hemiola pattern to maintain its waltz feel, extending the three-beat pattern across two measures instead of just one, not unlike in the fourth movement. Ravel was adamant that the duple left-hand part stand out, and that it should not affect the more conventional triple pattern of the right hand. Perlemuter asserts that the key to accomplishing this lies in careful articulation of the slurs, staccatos, and ties marked in the score. Clear execution of the staccatos on the third beat of the melody, while avoiding emphasis on the second, helps to achieve independence of melody and accompaniment.⁷⁵

Ravel's performance exhibits these rhythmic attributes along with an uncharacteristically pronounced rubato in Mm. 7-8 and Mm. 15-16, clearly contradicting his own instruction: *Cédez à peine – Barely* slow down. Both Perlemuter and Ravel demonstrate a noticeable tendency to hurry through beats 1 and 2 of the primary theme as they emphasize the upward slur in each measure. This affectation nearly changes the rhythm of these figures from a succession of three quarter-notes to sound as a duple pattern of two eighth-notes followed by a quarter.

⁷⁴ Vlado Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 51.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

Waltz No. 7:

The *Valses nobles et sentimentales* reaches its culmination in the seventh movement, the most complex and technically challenging of the set. Ravel referred to it as “the most characteristic” waltz of the suite, alluding to the lilt of its rhythmic gestures, as well as the variety of moods drawn from the preceding movements.⁷⁶ Organized into three contrasting sections, the work encompasses a broad range of textures, and requires a nimble technique.

It begins with a brief introduction, borrowing a melody from the prior movement’s penultimate bar, which is echoed three times, each slightly more distant in volume. Ravel insisted that each repetition sound distinctly different, and that the third should languish into the preamble’s final statement, a sequence of chromatically ascending augmented triads that serve as a jumping-off point for the following waltz section.⁷⁷ In his piano roll recording, Ravel begins the movement at a tempo nearly identical to the previous movement, perhaps to emphasize a connection to the sixth waltz. He then gradually decreases in volume and tempo with each repetition, clearly contradicting his dynamic markings. Perlemuter departs less from his initial tempo but plays markedly softer on the final iteration, adhering to Ravel’s notation.

The section that follows was described by H  l  ne Jourdan-Morhange as the most “Viennese” of the set, evidenced by the stylistic lift off the third beat and the

⁷⁶ Maurice Hinson, foreword to *Ravel: Valses Nobles et Sentimentales for the Piano* (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1998), 11.

⁷⁷ Vlado Perlemuter and H  l  ne Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 53.

graceful leap and fall of the melodic line atop the two G# dominant chords in Mm. 19-20.⁷⁸ Ravel's staccato and subsequent tenuto markings over these chords, as well as their peculiar tie-marks leading to rests, provide the performer a clear guide to the stylistic nuances of this movement. The tenuto-marked chords in M. 20 and M. 23 are treated with a nearly imperceptible elongation of the beat in both Perlemuter and Ravel's performances. The leap-fall dynamic continues through Mm. 39-66, gradually growing in volume and culminating in a festive orchestral climax, texturally reminiscent of the dancehall-like first movement.

The Trio section that follows departs from the previous section in both texture and mood with tonally and rhythmically opposed content between the right and left hands. A single-voiced melody occupies the top notes of the downward-arpeggiating right hand chords, which functions as a thread to tie together these disparate elements. This melody was described by Ravel to be a series of unresolved appoggiaturas, as opposed to a bitonal E major counterpart to the F Major accompaniment in the left hand.⁷⁹ Ravel emphasized to Perlemuter the importance of bringing out this melody while maintaining a soft dynamic until the gradual crescendo beginning at M. 87.⁸⁰ Ravel's performance exhibits a slight increase in tempo beginning at M. 78 and again at M. 90, corresponding logically with the subsections of the passage. Perlemuter's

⁷⁸ Vlado Perlemuter and Hèléne Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 55.

⁷⁹ Maurice Hinson, foreword to *Ravel: Valses Nobles et Sentimentales for the Piano* (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1998), 11.

⁸⁰ Vlado Perlemuter and Hèléne Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 55.

performance of this section is notably faster and could nearly be set to a metronome, with scarcely any change in tempo.

The seventh waltz marks the final introduction of any new thematic material, and embodies much of the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic range of the first six movements.⁸¹ In addition to the clearly Viennese melodic and rhythmic characteristics throughout the A section, the B section bears a striking textural resemblance to Chopin's Waltz in Ab Major, Op. 42,⁸² perhaps reinforcing Ravel's assertion that this movement was the most "characteristic" waltz of the set.

Epilogue:

Hinson aptly describes the *Epilogue* as, "an uncanny sonic landscape that transports the listener to a state not unlike having just awoken from a dream, in which details can only be vaguely recalled."⁸³ Thematic material from the prior waltzes appears scattered throughout the movement, ominously entering between iterations of a seven-triad series with octave grace notes chiming above. The old and new themes rest upon an unceasing knell of bass notes that serve to harmonically link the otherwise disparate material.

Ravel insisted to Perlemuter that careful pedaling and strict adherence to the quarter-note pulse was necessary to maintain a sense of continuity throughout the

⁸¹ Paul Roberts, *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (Milwaukee, MI: Amadeus Press, 2012), 166.

⁸² Maurice Hinson, foreword to *Ravel: Valses Nobles et Sentimentales for the Piano* (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1998), 4.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 4.

movement, deviating only when indicated in the score.⁸⁴ Both Ravel and Perlemuter took a neat, metronomic approach in their performances, even placing the octave grace-notes firmly on the beat. They also adhere to the nearly ten deviations in tempo marked in the score, allowing for their own unique finessing of time to show forth.

Conclusions

What could account for such stark discrepancies between Ravel's instructions to Perlemuter and his own playing? At the time of H  l  ne Jourdan-Morhange's 1950 interview with Perlemuter, thirty-five years had elapsed since Ravel's piano roll recording, and twenty-seven years had passed since Ravel and Perlemuter's collaboration. Even in the relatively short, eight-year period between Ravel's recording and his period of study with Perlemuter, a great deal had changed in Ravel's life. In 1915, at the age of forty, he entered the Great War by joining the Thirteenth Artillery Regiment of the French Army as a lorry driver.⁸⁵ He was discharged shortly after due to illness, and upon returning home, Ravel's mother died, causing the composer to fall into "a horrible despair."⁸⁶ Musicologist Stephen Zank remarks that, in the aftermath of these life-changing experiences:

⁸⁴ Vlado Perlemuter and H  l  ne Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, trans. Frances Tanner (London, UK: Kahn & Averill, 2005), 57

⁸⁵ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 108.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

Ravel's emotional equilibrium, so hard-won in the previous decade, had been seriously compromised. If not everything, nearly everything had changed.⁸⁷

Ravel's experiences in World War I forever affected him. His compositional output slowed to about one major work per year, and those close to him noted a major difference in his physical and mental fortitude.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Ravel produced some of his finest works during his post-war years, and after the death of Debussy in 1918, his popularity grew to the point that he became generally regarded as the leading French composer of the era.⁸⁹ All the while, a gradual transformation of performance practice trends in the musical world was underway, slowly shifting away from the excesses of the Romantic era, in which the individuality of the performer was paramount, and towards a more removed, more restrained approach to musical rendering, in which the performer served more as a nonpartisan interlocutor between the composer and the audience. Could the traumatic events in Ravel's personal life, along with the transformation of performance practice trends during the 1920s and 1930's have influenced his performance style, as well as his overall convictions about how his works ought to be conveyed? Perhaps Ravel's newfound reputation as a composer of international repute swayed him towards a more orthodox approach to his music. We can never know for sure, but what can be said for certain is that Ravel

⁸⁷ Stephen Zank, *Maurice Ravel: A Guide to Research* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group 2005), p.11.

⁸⁸ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 109.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

clearly demonstrated a greater conservatism with regard to interpretations of his works as he got older.

And so, the question remains. From where does a modern performer of Ravel draw influence? From the younger, more brazen, less inhibited Ravel the performer? From the older, more restrained, more dictatorial Ravel the composer? Must we pick just one? Of course not. There shouldn't be just one answer; but rather, an interpreter can derive from these sources a broadened range of expressive possibilities, an enriched understanding of the idiom they are inhabiting, and a deeper appreciation for the multitude of unique historical performance practices at their disposal. Underneath the younger Ravel's seemingly turbulent playing, there is a purposeful method of phrasing that is achieved by using every expressive tool in his arsenal. Even with the shortcomings of the recording medium and Ravel's lacking technique, his use of dynamics, tempo, pedaling and articulation come together to enliven phrases with musicality in a manner that enhances and highlights form – one of, if not the most valued of Ravel's compositional predilections. Deeper listenings to Perlemuter's recordings demonstrate a similar approach, albeit in a far more restrained form. The music is still served by his less-is-more approach, which is a testament to Ravel's mastery of subtlety in his compositions. No matter what elements a modern performer draws upon from this spectrum of possibility, an engagement with the invaluable sources discussed here can give them a clearer sense of what expressive devices were authentic to both the creator and a conveyer of this unique music, however much freedom or restraint they choose.

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