Characteristics of Maurice Ravel's Compositional Language as Seen Through the Texture of his Selected Piano Works and the Piano Suite "Gaspard de la Nuit"

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CHARACTERISTICS OF MAURICE RAVEL’S COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE AS SEEN THROUGH THE TEXTURE OF HIS SELECTED PIANO WORKS AND THE PIANO SUITE GASPARD DE LA NUIT

By

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CHARACTERISTICS OF MAURICE RAVEL’S COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE AS SEEN THROUGH THE TEXTURE OF HIS SELECTED PIANO WORKS AND THE PIANO SUITE GASPARD DE LA NUIT

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This research is an instructional source for every pianist who studies Ravel’s piano music, for learning or teaching purposes. This essay focuses on the piano performance and musical interpretation aspects of Maurice Ravel’s selected piano works and the suite *Gaspard de la nuit*. The goal of this study is to open new horizons and possibilities for young pianists who seek to develop an individual artistic voice, musical creativity, imagination, and independent interpretation within the field of music performance.

The essay is organized into three chapters following the three introductory chapters. The fourth chapter introduces Ravel’s biography, highlighting his personal characteristics as an individual and as an artist. The fifth chapter presents a general analysis of his most significant compositions for piano. The sixth, and largest chapter is entirely dedicated to a detailed and descriptive analysis of Ravel’s piano suite *Gaspard de la nuit*, discussing characteristics of genre, harmony, rhythm, structure, and dynamic for each of the three movements. Included in this chapter are suggestions for: solving technical problems, specific recommendations for practicing, and approaches to sound production.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The process of successfully conveying information through musical texture and turning it into a source of communication appears to be possible only under certain conditions. These conditions are: a composer’s compositional mastery, a performer’s skill in creating a convincing interpretation, and a listener’s acuity for perception. In the Impressionistic era, music texture began to play an increasingly greater role as a significant source of communication between creators and interpreters. As composers continued to search for ways to make music even more expressive and communicative, pianistic texture became the platform for the expression of new coloristic, visual and narrative qualities, enabling music to become a source of expression in its highest form. One of the leading composers of the Impressionistic era, in this respect, was Maurice Ravel, and his piano suite *Gaspard de la nuit* is considered one of the most important and innovative compositions in the pianistic repertoire.

**Background/Environment**

An association between music and the related arts, established as a common practice during the late Romantic period, was further pursued and developed with fervor by composers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Works for piano by Ravel and Debussy are filled with specific intonations, rhythmic, timbral, and coloristic idioms that establish the programmatic nature of their music. Ravel and Debussy created a system of
organizing pianistic textures in a way that texture itself represents the musical-programmatic content of a composition.\(^1\)

Given the communicative weight the choice of pianistic texture bears in Ravel’s piano compositions, it is surprising that this approach of investigation—through textural analysis—has never been applied thoroughly in his music. There is a large amount of literature regarding Ravel’s life and music, as well as analytical studies of his individual works. However, the paucity of available research becomes increasingly apparent as we move from Ravel’s life and music to analysis of pianistic texture, and finally to the pianistic texture within *Gaspard de la nuit*. The research on specific piano works by Ravel is limited to a minimum number of articles and books written on the subject. More specifically, a dedicated study that examines exclusively *Gaspard de la nuit* through textural analysis has never been conducted.

*Gaspard de la nuit* represents the pinnacle of Ravel’s virtuosic writing as well as his truly programmatic compositional approach. The pianistic and textural innovations within this work contributed significantly to the development and establishment of contemporary pianism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

**Problem Statement**

Analysis of Ravel’s pianistic texture, its depths of musical expression, and its correlation with programmatic content in music, as a subject, lacks research materials. As Inna Vlasenko states: “There is a small amount of research dedicated to questions about

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\(^1\) Tatiana Roshina, *До Питання Про Драматургічну Семантику Фортепіанної Фактури і Неокласичні Тенденції у Творах Равеля* [A question regarding dramaturgical semantics of pianistic texture and neoclassical tendencies in Ravel’s works], (Кiev: Тематический сборник научных работ, 1991), 125-126.
interpretations of Ravel’s piano compositions within their stylistic and textural characteristics. Under such circumstances, it seems constructive to study Ravel’s compositional text and its performance interpretations within stylistic approach. The method of such investigation will combine aural and textural analysis within their metaphorical unity in Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit.*”

With the current scarcity of research concerned with the performance and interpretative matters in Ravel’s piano music, young pianists are left without suggestions as to how to approach and interpret Ravel’s piano texture for a successful performance. A research that compiles information written about Ravel and focuses on creating a guide for pianists and interpreters is desirable. The majority of books on Ravel are not written by pianists, and this may explain why their content remains focused on the biographical, theoretical, philosophical, and musicological arenas.

**Need for Study**

The goal of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of Maurice Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit.* The analysis will be divided into two categories: analysis of stylistic, expressive and narrative qualities of pianistic texture; and application to performance (technical and interpretive instructions). This study also intends to advocate the inclusion of an additional textural factor into analysis of music for the purpose of interpretation and performance within a specific musical genre.

The research will be focused on an analysis of Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit*, chosen because it is one of the most representative example for the present subject matter. The

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results of the study are intended to serve the following functions: an interpretive and performance guidance for *Gaspard de la nuit* as well as other piano compositions of the same genre; and as a case study of pianistic textural analysis for all musicians.

Through this study, it is hoped that the current state of negligence in performance-oriented studies on this important work will begin to be partially remediated. Since Ravel himself was a performer, there is a need for more materials focused on analysis of his piano music from the performer’s perspective. Furthermore, Ravel’s notoriously precise nature, including numerous anecdotal accounts on his relentless expectations for the strictest execution of the score, calls for more expanded investigation into the smallest elements of his music. Valery Smirnov writes:

Ravel was a great master. It would be most desirable if this statement could be understood not only as a characteristic of the composer’s technical skill at its highest quality, but also as acknowledgement of Ravel’s unique ability to find ways of expressing programmatic content through music within his individual approach.

Arthur Honegger commented on this matter:

My fascination for organizational precision in preplanning a composition, logics of voice-leadings, rhythmic accuracy, precision of structure and virtuosity of orchestration, allows me to conclude that there is no one that can express musical ideas as clearly and precisely as Ravel does.

A secondary aim of this study is to expose various thoughts from a significant body of works written by French, Russian, and Ukrainian authors, most of which are neither

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4 Smirnov, 6.

5 Ibid.
available in the United States, nor translated into English. There is a need for examining professional views representing a geographically wider spectrum.

Learning how to communicate through music is one of the most coveted skills to be achieved through musical education. *Gaspard de la nuit* was chosen as an example because of Ravel’s unique quality of detailed and expressive delivery of content through sounds in this piece. Ravel’s way of organizing pianistic texture and imbuing it with sound colors, sound effects, dynamics, timbres, and articulation transforms the tonal events to seemingly narrative and visual effects for the audience, if performed well. This study will thus focus on a detailed description of Ravel’s compositional approach and his technique of using varied textures to convey a programmatic effect. A general overview of Ravel’s life and personality as an artist will be provided together with a brief analysis of his major works for piano, as a frame of reference to the detailed study of *Gaspard de la nuit*, which is indispensable for the proper reading of the score.

This research will be an instructional source for every pianist who studies Ravel’s piano music, for learning or teaching purposes. A major section of this paper will be dedicated to analysis of *Gaspard de la nuit* from a performer’s point of view. It will provide knowledge and ideas for young performers and teachers concerned about interpretive approaches and ways of analyzing Ravel’s piano music. Included in this study will be suggestions for: solving technical problems, specific recommendations for practicing, and approaches to sound production. For many young pianists, this portion of the research might be more accessible and immediately practical since the author is a performer himself.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analysis of Pianistic Texture in Maurice Ravel’s Works

The literature category discussed below includes books and articles focused on analysis of Ravel’s pianistic texture. This category of sources will provide a significant body of information for the current study. Since this study will be mainly based on analyzing specifics of pianistic texture in Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit* and his other works for piano, three of the sources that will be closely reviewed in this chapter are purely pianistic studies, authored by piano professors at the National Music Academy of Ukraine: Lyudmila Kasianenko, Tatiana Roshina, and Valeria Jarkova.

A significant number of sources that will be used in this study are written by Russian and Ukrainian authors, and are available only in the original languages. Along with selected French sources that are focused on Ravel’s music, the entire bibliography will provide a variety of different opinions and contrasting methodological approaches.

A need for elaboration within studies about textural analysis and interpretation of a musical composition in Ravel’s piano works has only recently been raised. Therefore, the main goal of Kasianenko’s methodical study is to continue investigating the “theory of music texture” within Ravel’s piano music. In the preface to the book, Kasianenko

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6 Lyudmila Kasianenko, *Работа Пианиста над Фактурой* [A pianist’s mastery of texture], (Kiev: НМАУ, 2003).

7 Tatiana Roshina, *До питання про драматургічну семантику фортепіанної фактури і неокласичні тенденції у творах Равеля* [A question regarding dramaturgical semantics of pianistic texture and neoclassical tendencies in Ravel’s works], (Kiev: Тематический сборник научных работ, 1991).

8 Valeria Jarkova, *Авторське Слово в Творчестве М. Равеля* [Author’s word in Ravel’s artistic output], (Kiev: Kiev: Art Press, 2003).
explains: “The analysis of music texture, as a subject, derives here from the practical problems of contemporary piano performance.”

This research is fully dedicated to the pianistic texture and all of its components that, as the author suggests, should be considered in order to create an interpretation. Different styles of piano compositions and multiple types of pianistic texture are observed in this book with much detail.

In contrast to the article by Tatiana Roshina, where the author discusses the expressive qualities of Ravel’s pianistic texture, A Pianist’s Mastery of Texture presents an extensive study that compares pianistic textures in works by different composers. Ludmila Kasianenko’s research provides a guide for pianists that teaches how to interpret piano repertoire through its texture. Kasianenko organizes her research into several categories of analytical approaches that provide a wide spectrum of knowledge about pianistic texture. For example, some of the categories imply studying performing as a process of artistic creativity through manipulations of given textures. Another category surveys and categorizes the standard technical approaches and traditional interpretative techniques within different styles of piano composition. The next category examines the genre-specific applications of the technique of textural analysis.

Kasianenko’s A Pianist’s Mastery of Texture should be studied thoroughly in its entirety in order to effectively apply its underlying principles to any kind of analytical or practical project. The research is structured in a logical order covering broad subject areas, from the history of pianistic texture through its development to applicative

\[9\] Kasianenko, Preface to Работа Пианиста над Фактурой [A pianist’s mastery of texture], (Kiev: НМАУ Press, 2003), ix.
methods to contemporary piano performance techniques. The following topics are covered: musical text; verbal language and music; performing aspects and their relation to mechanism of aural attention and acoustic principles; texture and musical language; textural diversity and pianism; excursion into the history of the development of texture; pianistic ease in relationship to quality of sound within texture; mastery of articulation and its classifications; texture and dramaturgy in music cycles, sonata form, and miniatures; texture and declamation; and texture and programmatic context, among others.

The conceptual framework of this important study can be used as theoretical basis for teaching piano performance at advanced levels. Suggested methods of analysis and interpretation of pianistic texture can be useful as primary or supplementary approaches in a wide variety of musical-inquiry settings: teaching music interpretation, theory and history of music performance, musical analysis, music literature, and music history. To this end, my current study’s concomitant aim is the exposure of this approach through its application in Gaspard de la nuit. A careful examination of this approach will most likely lead many to discover new perspectives on practical options available for achieving musical dramaturgy and structural sense.

As mentioned above, in contrast to Kasianenko’s study, Roshina’s article primarily focuses on analysis of pianistic texture within works by Impressionist composers. More specifically, it highlights the inventions that brought about the possibilities for new timbres and coloristic variety by the use of pianistic texture in works of Ravel and Debussy. European pianistic traditions, and all the subsequent development of piano schools at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries,
are indebted to the development of French music and particularly to inventions by Ravel and Debussy. The secret of the appeal of this music to pianist-performer is in its characteristically diverse sonorities, colors, timbres, and expressiveness, idiomatic to the piano and piano alone.\textsuperscript{10}

According to Roshina, Ravel’s artistic output cannot be characterized by a single stylistic direction. Diapason of imagery, musical structures and expressive tools of the instrument used by Ravel are much wider than any singular stylistic classification. The customary approach to view Ravel’s compositional output as an evolution from Impressionism to Neoclassicism errs on oversimplification.\textsuperscript{11} Roshina’s study, thus, is invaluable to the current research as it discusses possibilities of analyzing Ravel’s music within different stylistic directions.

Jarkova’s \textit{Author’s Word in Ravel’s Artistic Output} presents an unusual approach to analysis of Ravel’s works, taking into consideration his personality, environment, cultural context and other life-related influences that impacted his establishment as an artist. The article provides additional important thoughts and ideas that are necessary for full and detailed analysis of Ravel’s music from this perspective. In order to answer questions about Ravel’s pianistic texture, it is important to understand his musical taste, his interests outside of composing, and his preferences in other art forms.

Material aspects of Ravel’s life and his personal attraction to all the innovations (from the epic technical and scientific inventions to the fashionable models of clothing) directly influenced his compositional creativity. Unfortunately, the spirit of the times

\footnote{\textsuperscript{10} Roshina, x.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.}
(late nineteenth to early twentieth century) and environment including the atmosphere of scandal and agitation that was greatly influential for Ravel’s inspiration is rarely taken into consideration by researchers when analyzing his music.\textsuperscript{12}

Different facets of Ravel’s complex personality are reflected in his compositions. The reflection of the composer’s humorous, mysterious and idiosyncratic personality manifests itself under different guises, but only through close and holistic examination of the following: titles of his compositions, choices of texture, articulation and dynamic markings, and musical caricatures. In Ravel’s own words:

If I could explain and prove the significance of my compositions, it would mean that they fully consist of obvious elements that are superficial and easily perceivable, that they can be easily approached by a formal analysis, and it would mean that they are not great creations of art.\textsuperscript{13}

**Ravel’s Life and Works**

This category will discuss two sources that are concerned with Ravel’s life and his personality: Rollo Myers’ *Ravel: Life & Works* (1960)\textsuperscript{14} and Stephen Zank’s *Irony and Sound: the Music of Maurice Ravel* (2009).\textsuperscript{15}

Myers’ book presents a biographical approach to analysis of Maurice Ravel’s music. The study covers a significant part of Ravel’s music and shows how it reflects the composer’s personality, life, and his philosophy on the function of musical expression.

\textsuperscript{12} Jarkova, vii.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.


Further, events from Ravel’s life are presented as biographical fact that could have influenced his artistic creativity.

This book presents an account of how Maurice Ravel’s musical language is directly related to his personal character, his beliefs and aesthetical concepts. It further proposes that extended knowledge of Ravel’s life and personality will answer many questions regarding analysis and interpretation of his music. For the purposes of the current study, a similar conceptual framework in analyzing Ravel’s music will be integrated into the process of textural analysis as described above. Myer also includes a brief analysis of *Gaspard de la nuit* and analyses of other compositions for piano by Ravel, the organization of which will be used as templates for the current analysis of *Gaspard de la nuit*.

The aim of Stephen Zank’s study appears to be to provide a larger perspective and understanding of Ravel’s compositional features. It presents a detailed analysis of Ravel’s main compositions for piano, chamber, and orchestral works. The focus is on Ravel’s music, involving the biographical materials as a secondary focus. Nevertheless, the author includes biographical facts that are closely related to Ravel’s compositional inspirations. Zank focuses on aspect of irony in Ravel’s musical personality as a connecting link throughout the analyzed works. An aspect of irony, here, is the organizational factor that outlines Ravel’s compositions within several subgroups: Simple Sound; Opposed Sound; Displaced Sound; Plundered Sound; and Sound and Sense. Thus, within each subgroup, analyses of different works are presented within a single musical criterion.
The book concludes that Ravel’s music is always fulfilled with multiple levels of expression: narrative, ironic, humorous, mystic, imaginative and emotional. The author proposes that analysis of Ravel’s works should include other important factors in addition to the commonly used counterpoint, harmony, orchestration, and such. For example, source of inspiration, metaphoric or ironic sense, and aesthetical approach to sound are proposed as possible analytical criteria.

The most directly relevant section of this work is the analysis within the Sound and Sense category. Of particular interest to the current study is that *Gaspard de la nuit* is analyzed here as well. Here, Zank examines the narrative and coloristic elements of Ravel’s music. His findings will be applied and discussed in the current study.

A very important source among the sources that address Ravel’s life is Nichols Roger’s *Ravel Remembered.*¹⁶ This source represents a collection of thoughts and impressions about Ravel by people who interacted personally with the composer. Selected content from Ravel’s personal letters is also included in the book. More specifically, the collection consists of Ravel’s correspondences with his friends and colleagues, as well as excerpts of personal statements from primary sources that captured professional opinions of Ravel’s contemporaries. This is therefore a valuable source for illuminating his personal idiosyncrasies and professional beliefs.

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CHAPTER III

METHOD

This chapter will be organized in accordance with the general structure and content of chapters four, five and six of this essay. The study will provide: knowledge of Ravel’s biography and stylistic traits; an analytical overview of his major works for piano; and a detailed analysis, with a special emphasis on texture, of his most prominent work for piano, *Gaspard de la nuit*.

The analysis that will be presented in this study aims to introduce an original holistic approach for analyzing and interpreting Ravel’s piano music through its textural language and compositional characteristics, combining approaches taken by aforementioned authors in the literature review. The ultimate goal of this project is to provide an analytical guide for young performers, which will consist of musical and interpretive suggestions, technical solutions and ideas, thus stimulating musical creativity and associative thinking within this particular style of music and beyond.

The current study will be organized into three chapters following the three introductory chapters. The fourth chapter will introduce Ravel’s biography together with identification of his personal characteristics as an individual and as an artist. The fifth chapter will be dedicated to the general analysis of his most significant compositions for piano. The sixth, and largest chapter will be entirely dedicated to the textural analysis of *Gaspard de la nuit*, with reference to the findings from above.

The content of the fourth chapter will be based on researched literature materials that are concerned with Ravel’s life, his personal compositional development, and his works in general. Related information will be drawn from Ravel’s personal letters where
he shares his ideas and preferences concerning his compositions. A general overview of the establishment of his style will be discussed and reviewed within selected piano, instrumental, and orchestral works.

The procedures for organizing the fifth chapter will be based on musical analyses of Ravel’s selected piano compositions. The analyses will provide general motivic, harmonic, rhythmic and structural features within his major piano works. Using the analysis, a relationship between textural elements within different pieces will be demonstrated and analyzed within the parameter of Ravel’s compositional techniques and textural language. Commonalities and dissimilarities of Ravel’s compositional style across different piano compositions will be discussed. Printed music scores of the selected compositions will be examined and compared. This would provide a number of answers concerning Ravel’s choices within the stylistic and technical aspects of his compositional decisions regarding musical expressiveness and performance characteristics of his music.

Chapter six will consist of a detailed analysis of the *Gaspard de la nuit*, where the texture of each piece will be examined within the following categories: characteristics of genre, form and structure, development of dynamic and rhythmic features, types of texture, harmonic features, and analysis of performance-related issues. Excerpts from the score of the suite will be used as a source of visual representation highlighting the results of the analysis. Additionally, the investigation will help the reader to understand coloristic, timbral, virtuosic, and sonic capabilities of the piano that were uniquely developed and expanded by Ravel. A rationale behind the recommended analytical approach will be presented in the study through musical examples and technical
suggestions. In addition to providing a comprehensive overview of the existing
scholarship and views regarding the analysis of *Gaspard de la Nuit*, the researcher will
share his own knowledge and ideologies regarding the matter. Specifically, performance-
related problems will be addressed by suggestions and recommendations concerning
technical and mental work that may improve the preparation process. Numbered musical
excerpts will be inserted in the text of this study for reference.
CHAPTER IV

MAURICE RAVEL’S BIOGRAPHY AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS ARTISTIC OUTPUT

Ravel’s artistic journey took almost forty years: from the end of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. That was a time of significant historical and cultural changes in the European art. At the end of the nineteenth century, European life was dominated by a relatively peaceful atmosphere. The main artists of the time felt the end of a cultural epoch and were affected by spiritual exhaustion. It seemed that the musical output in France came to a point of disorientation. Despite predictions of an artistic collapse at the end of the century, European culture continued to thrive and successfully develop in its multiple directions. Similarly to Impressionist painters-innovators such as Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro, who felt compelled to explore new tools of artistic expression, composers with analogous aesthetical models began to search for new forms of musical expression. Maurice Ravel was among the greatest innovators of that time, whose output had a great impact on the worldwide development of musical art.

Ravel was born in 1875, on the Côte d'Argent at Ciboure, a Basque town located close to the Spanish border.\(^{17}\) His father was originally from Haute-Savoie, and his mother, from the Pyrenees. Léon-Paul Fargue, one of Ravel’s closest friends, describes the composer:

> From his mother’s side he inherited a physique that was specifically Basque; the small stature, the thinness, the vivacity of his presence, the bony regularity of his face and the deep sockets, separated by the long aquiline nose, in which shone two eyes alive with understanding.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) Nichols, 25.

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 26.
Ravel’s family moved to Paris when Maurice was only three months old. His sensitive and loving parents instantly recognized their son’s musical talent and supported his artistic endeavors in every possible way. At the age of six, Maurice began taking piano lessons with Henry Ghys, and music theory and composition with Charles-René. Despite showing remarkable skills at the piano, Maurice’s musical achievements at that time were not regarded as an extraordinary talent. According to Charles-René, Ravel’s artistic personality gradually developed on its own, not requiring help or special training from his teachers.

In 1889, Ravel was accepted into the Paris Conservatory. He spent the first two years at the preparatory program, and was later accepted as a piano pupil of Émile Descombes and Charles-Wilfrid de Bériot. Along with pursuing studies as a piano major, Maurice was deeply interested in composition. At the Conservatory, he was a student of two outstanding pedagogues: with André Gedalge he studied polyphony, and Gabriel Fauré was his teacher of composition. Throughout his life, Ravel had always acknowledged them with honor and devotion. He dedicated some of his most remarkable compositions to them: his *Jeux d’eau* and the String Quartet to Fauré, and the Piano Trio, to Gedalge. Throughout the Conservatory years, Ravel became acquainted with his contemporaries: Erik Satie, Emmanuel Chabrier, and Claude Debussy. He developed a close friendship with Ricardo Viñes, who was a great pianist, famous interpreter and propagandist of Ravel’s music.

Ravel’s talent began to flourish in 1889, upon his attendance at the Paris World’s Fair—an International Exhibition in Celebration of one hundred years after the French
Revolution.\textsuperscript{19} The Fair was one of the most important cultural events in Paris at that time and a turning point in the history of French music. The exhibition exposed young Maurice to a vast array of artistic traditions within different nations from around the world. During the event, Ravel’s special attention was directed toward the music of Russian composers such as Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolay Rimski-Korsakov, and Alexander Borodin. The innovative thinking, variety of harmonic and orchestral colors in their works deeply affected the young composer. Multiple features of Russian music influenced Ravel’s future compositions.

The variety of interests, gatherings and friendships did not disrupt Ravel’s systematic practicing and intense learning of music theory and composition. He often cited Massenet’s words: “In order to create your own musical language, first, you should learn other existing techniques.”\textsuperscript{20} In 1895, Ravel composed \textit{Menuet antique} for solo piano, and \textit{Habanera} for two pianos. These works represent two main features characteristic to Ravel’s style: eighteenth century formal structures, and Spanish folk music. Ravel wrote about his \textit{Habanera}: “I consider that this work contains in embryo several of the elements that were to be most characteristic of my later compositions.”\textsuperscript{21}

In 1899, Ravel conducted the premiere of his \textit{Shéhérazade, ouverture de féerie}—an orchestral work which reflects the composer’s admiration for Russian music. During the same year, he composed the \textit{Pavane pour une infante défunte}—a piece for solo piano.

\textsuperscript{19} Myers, 16.

\textsuperscript{20} Aleksandr Stupel, \textit{Морис Равель} [Maurice Ravel], (Moscow: Muzyka Press, 1968), 19.

\textsuperscript{21} Myers, 22.
with elements drawn from Spanish traditions. These two compositions brought the young composer the first significant success and recognition.

During the last years of his studies at the Conservatory, Ravel participated in several competitions for the Prix de Rome, but unluckily, the judges were too critical to his works. The bitter disappointments of the negative results did not affect his tender and introvert personality. Throughout the most difficult times of his life, Ravel demonstrated exceptionally strong will and emotional control. Marguerite Long describes Ravel’s character:

Ravel’s integrity and loyalty were beyond reproach. He showed anger only when aroused by the discovery of dishonesty or some “dirty trick.” He never wanted to hurt those who bore him ill-will, indeed he was incapable of hurting. He was always free from untruth and malice.22

During this period, Ravel composed three of his greatest works: Jeux d’eau (1901), the String Quartet (1903), and the song cycle for voice and orchestra Shéhérazade (1903). Jeux d’eau is Ravel’s first piano masterpiece and is one of the most sophisticated and colorful compositions in Impressionistic music. Myers writes: “Jeux d’eau is generally considered to have inaugurated a new era in the evolution of the technical resources of the instrument.”23

The String Quartet, comprised of four movements (sweet – first, vigorous – second, dreaming – third, and briskly – fourth), reflects Ravel’s young artistic spirit. Shéhérazade was written on three poems by Tristan Klingsor: “Asie,” “La flûte

22 Nichols, 32.
23 Myers, 24.
“enchanteé,” and “L’indifférént.” Ravel considered the trilogy stylistically and spiritually
close to Debussy’s music.

Ravel’s circle of close friends consisted of major figures in the French music
world: Maurice Delage, the Godebski family, Erik Satie, Igor Stravinsky, Manuel de
Falla, and others. They were artistic personalities who highly appreciated Ravel as a
person and as an artist. His friends’ support was a crucial factor for Maurice at moments
of professional disappointments and failures. In 1905, the composer’s application for the
Prix de Rome competition was denied. The judging committee’s unreasonable dishonesty
was highly criticized and publicized in local newspapers. Many famous artists such as
Romain Rolland, Gabriel Fauré, and Claude Debussy addressed their criticism toward the
judges. Eventually, the scandal around the competition’s injustice led to serious changes
within the development of the music school in Paris. Musicians that represented
conservative thinking lost their professional and administrative power, together with their
positions at the most important musical institutions. That was a professional victory for
artists-innovators, and the rise of new artistic thinking. Despite the stress caused by one
of the biggest disappointments in his professional career, this was the most productive
and inspirational time for Ravel. He continued to compose and explore different genres:
symphonic works, opera, ballets, and chamber compositions, including instrumental, and
vocal pieces.

His opera L’heure espagnole, written in 1907, is a musical comedy based on text
by Franc-Nohain. This work was considered one of the most significant compositions in
the vocal literature of that time. Nonetheless, Ravel’s talent in writing instrumental music
overpowered even his masterful operatic achievement. His orchestral and pianistic
compositional output is entirely comprised of works that are widely recognized as true masterpieces.

One of the unique features of Ravel’s compositional genius is reflected through his outstanding mastery in arranging his piano works for orchestra. His absolute knowledge and understanding of orchestral colors helped him uncover new, even more beautiful facets in his transcribed works. One of the great examples of such transformation is the piano cycle *Mirroirs* (1904–1905), which includes the famous *Alborada del gracioso*, orchestrated in 1918. Stylistically, *Mirroirs* is similar to Debussy’s piano suites. However, Ravel’s music entails more dynamical and rhythmical intensity, even in the calmest moments. Around the time of the completion of *Mirroirs*, Ravel composed the *Sonatine* for solo piano, which by the nature of its texture and simple structure resembles the musical traditions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France and Europe.

Ravel’s *Rapsodie espagnole* for orchestra (1907), premiered in 1908 in Paris, is considered the pinnacle of his instrumental output created during that time. The composition could be treated as a suite based on four Spanish dance genres: I. *Prélude à la nuit*, II. *Malagueña*, III. *Habanera*, and IV. *Feria*. Manuel de Falla, one of Spain’s most important composers, highly regarded the piece and appreciated its truly nationalistic character. De Falla particularly admired Ravel’s sophistication in using rhythmical, modal-melodic and ornamental features of Spanish music.

One of Ravel’s favorite orchestration techniques is the separation of timbres by dividing the orchestra in groups of instruments with similar timbral qualities. He considered the orchestra as a rich pallet of colors and sonorities, which work together as
polyphonic or contrapuntal textures. His principle of timbral separation, partially borrowed from Rimski-Korsakov, was applied to his music with great taste and originality. Eventually, this technique became one of the main features of impressionistic orchestral works.

Between 1905 and 1910, Ravel completed a vocal cycle, *Histoires naturelles* (1906), comprised of five songs set on Jules Renard’s novels; and a cycle of five children’s pieces for piano in four-hands *Ma mere l'oye* (1908–1910), which was later transcribed and expanded into the ballet with the same name (1911–1912). The most significant composition created during that period was his piano suite *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908). This work inspired by the poetry of French poet-symbolist Aloysius Bertrand consists of three movements of mystic programmatic content.

Generally, Ravel’s individual compositional style combines absolute mastery of orchestration, use of advanced harmony with elements of jazz, implication of polytonal effects, and an ability to create musical sonorities that resemble characteristics of specific nations. Throughout his life, Ravel was in constant search for possibilities of exploring new colors and sonorities in music. However, when it came to musical form, the composer strictly conformed all of his works to the structures used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In 1911 Ravel wrote a new piano composition called *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, as an homage to Franz Schubert. The set of seven waltzes and a concluding epilogue comprise a complete piano suite. Despite bearing a similar title to Schubert’s collection of waltzes, Ravel’s miniatures do not have any stylistic resemblance with those of the Austrian composer. Although Ravel’s Valses are musically
far from romantic improvisations, there is an apparent influence of Romanticism in his collection. Soon after the completion of the set of Valses for piano, following the request of famous Russian ballerina Natalia Truhanova, Ravel created an orchestrated ballet version of the set, named *Adélaïde, ou le langage des fleurs*.

Ravel’s years of great artistic prosperity were shadowed by his father’s death, and his mother’s illness. The latter negatively influenced the composer’s own health. However, this unfortunate physical and spiritual condition did not last long. In 1909, Sergei Diaghilev, founder of the *Ballets Russes*, commissioned Ravel to write a ballet based on Longus’ novel *Daphnis and Chloe*. The libretto was adapted by famous Russian choreographer and dancer Mikhail Fokine. Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloé* was completed in 1912, and in the same year premiered by Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* in Paris. At the premiere, acclaimed Russian dancers Vaslav Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina danced the leading roles. Ravel commented on his intentions in this composition: “My idea was to create a musical image that would convey an atmosphere of true ancient world. But even more, I intended to depict ancient Greece, as seen by the French artists of the eighteenth century.”

During the prewar years, Ravel—who unfortunately had never received the *Prix de Rome*—became the pride of French music. Fulfilled with enthusiasm and great artistic plans, he began working on the Piano Trio, and intended to write a piano concerto. Unfortunately, the war interrupted these promising projects. Due to the composer’s fragile health and short height he was dismissed from military duties. Using this opportunity, Ravel rushed to complete his Piano Trio (1914). The music of the Trio is

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24 Stupel, 61.
filled with happiness and optimism, except for the third movement—a thoughtful and somber Passacaglia.

Ravel was eventually invited to serve in the army, where he spent three of the most difficult years of his life. Jourdan-Morhange writes:

He liked to tell a story about the war which had made a great impression on him. As a volunteer he had driven a truck in the area around Verdun and was involved in the most indescribable chaos and the most deafening uproar. The silence that followed the battle seemed to him supernatural: the fields were quiet, the sky was clear blue and suddenly, at dawn, a warbler began to sing. He was so moved by this unexpected song that he promised himself he would write a *mélodie* called “The unconcerned warbler.” But then, with the war and his illness, he never got round to it. 25

During this tough period, in 1917, he lost his mother. The only remaining family member that was close to Maurice at that time was his brother. The loss of his mother and the consequences of the war amplified Ravel’s psychological despair and further exhausted his health.

The postwar years brought about critical changes into French life and culture. The war weakened the country’s economy and people’s social spirit. New artistic inspirations, in the form of Realism in art, counteracted with the imaginative Impressionism and the sentimental Romanticism. Ravel’s attempts of deviating from his native impressionistic ideals can be observed in his piano cycle *Le tombeau de Couperin* (1914–1917, orchestrated in 1919). Each of its comprising six movements is dedicated to one of Ravel’s friends, deceased during the war. The fourth movement, *Rigaudon*, was composed in the memory of Pierre and Pascal Gaudin, Ravel’s brothers. As an entity, the suite was written as an homage to all French music of the eighteenth century.

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25 Nichols, 122.
Ravel’s deviation from impressionistic traits was only a temporary phenomenon. The latter was proven in 1920, when he completed *La valse*—a choreographic poem that intended to represent a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, and one of the last appreciations for the Romantic era. Manuel Rosenthal writes:

*La Valse* has two things in it. One is a tribute to the genius of Johann Strauss. Ravel thought that the waltz was a form which had always puzzled composers. […] The other thing we find in *La Valse* is at the end – and long before the end, from the start of the second half – a kind of anguish, a very dramatic feeling of death. […] I think that in the later part of his life many of Ravel’s compositions show that he had a feeling for a dramatic death – the *Boléro*, for instance.²⁶

The program of the poem accurately depicts an atmosphere of torment and chaos, which becomes an underlying platform for the waltz. For the first time in his works, through the programmatic nature of the composition, Ravel explored the symbolic image of a catastrophe—an element of significant impact on his future works. The magnitude of the composition was recognized by Glen Gould, who made a recording of his own transcription of the piece for piano solo.

Written between 1920 and 1922, the Sonata for Violin and Cello established a new stylistic turn in Ravel’s output. According to the composer’s description, the piece is “a complete rejection of harmonic appeal, and a free way for the domination of the melodic line.”²⁷

Ravel’s works written during the last twelve years of his life were defined by dramatism and ascetic rationalism. It was almost as if the realistic facet of his mature life took over the ease and naivety of his youthful inspiration. During these years, Ravel

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²⁶ Nichols, 62.

²⁷ Stupel, 88.
wrote the Violin Sonata No. 2 (1923–1927), a rhapsody for violin and orchestra *Tzigane* (1924), and a children’s one-act opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges: Fantaisie lyrique en deux parties* (1917–1925).

Upon Ravel’s return from a triumphant concert tour in the United States and Canada, the orchestral piece *Boléro* (1928) became the composer’s most popular composition. Hélène Jourdan-Morhange writes:

Ravel was extremely surprised at the mass success of *Boléro*. “They’re going to turn it into another *Madelon*, [the favorite song of the French soldiers during the latter part of the First World War],” he said, rather crossly; and deep down he felt that the obsessive, musico-sexual element in the piece was probably behind its enormous popularity. 28

The energy of its dance rhythms has never before been applied by Ravel with such weight and significance in his other works. *Boléro’s* two themes are repeated throughout the piece over a constant ostinato. Each repetition of the themes introduce a new orchestration that gradually becomes richer and more colorful. The work’s unstoppable movement and almost mechanical repetitions create a tremendous effect for its audiences. *Boléro* was originally arranged as a ballet, commissioned by Russian ballerina Ida Rubinstein. The ballet was premiered with great success in 1928 at the Paris Opera. However, the piece was surpassed by its orchestral version, which achieved worldwide fame and recognition. Ravel’s close friend, André Suarès wrote:

*Boléro* is the musical image of the underlying suffering which perhaps afflicted Ravel all his life, and which at the end became so terrible and cruel. [. . .] The obsession of the rhythm, the hallucinating insistence of the musical theme, and the deafening violence of its accents create a sort of Danse Macabre. Bolero is a

28 Nichols, 47.
confession of the nightmare which haunted Ravel, and of the dark anguish which
tormented his soul.\textsuperscript{29}

Ravel wrote only three more compositions after \textit{Boléro}. Among them are the two piano
concertos, composed almost simultaneously. The Piano Concerto for the Left Hand
(1929–1930), in D Major, was written for the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who
lost his right arm during the First World War. Following compositional traditions of
Liszt—whose music was highly admired and meticulously studied by Ravel—he created
a one-movement work mostly based on monothematic material that explores a wide
spectrum of Jazz harmonies. The work’s thematic content involves an unusually
passionate and poignant characteristic. As if ignoring his habitual restrain and skeptical
irony, through this piece, Ravel revealed his inner drama and psychological turmoil. The
Piano Concerto for the Left Hand is one of Ravel’s most emotional and dramatic
compositions.

After 1933, Ravel became heavily sick and was almost unable to compose. His
last completed work is \textit{Don Quichotte à Dulcinée} (1932–1933), a set of three songs that
were composed for a movie starring Feodor Chaliapin. Due to the composer’s
progressing illness and inability to write, the songs were not used for the film.

Maurice Ravel died in 1937, after a brain surgery. Manuel Rosenthal writes:

One day during the last months of his life he looked very sad and as a kind of joke
(a very bad joke, I have to say) I said to him, “\textit{Maître}, supposing that you were
preparing a musical programme for your funeral, what would you like to be
played?” And immediately he said, “\textit{L'Après-midi d'un faune}.” I said, “What a
strange choice for a funeral!” He said, “You know, it’s because it’s the only score
ever written that is absolutely perfect.”\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{29} Madeleine Goss, \textit{Bolero: The Life of Maurice Ravel} (New York: Tudor Publishing Company,
1945), 12.

\textsuperscript{30} Nichols, 101.
The influence of Ravel’s compositional output received international acclaim even when he was still alive. He was a paradoxical figure. His personality combined a need for company and friendships on one hand, and a desire for being alone on the other. Aestheticism—an important part of his compositional style—intermingled with his tender, vulnerable personality, and the sudden impulsiveness of his character. These personal features were indeed reflected in his music, where peacefulness and transparency often counteracts with tragic, and dramatic intensity.
AN OVERVIEW OF SELECTED PIANO WORKS BY MAURICE RAVEL

Ravel’s piano works were among his first published compositions. Without a doubt, he treated his pianistic output with special attention, and used the instrument as laboratory of his style. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the significance of Ravel’s piano works for the development of French music was rivaled only by his contemporary, Claude Debussy. Both composers innovated and developed the French piano music by using similar stylistic features: romantic pianism, and compositional traditions of the German and French composers-harpsichordists. Ravel’s piano repertoire reflects two main stylistic tendencies: Neoclassicism and Impressionism. Compared to Debussy’s music, the neoclassical traditions were explored in Ravel’s works in even greater detail. His compositions, which were created according to the standards of classical models, are defined by a spirited, temperamental, precise, and goal-oriented nature. While Debussy’s goal was to adjust the music’s form according to its content, Ravel’s intention was to control the emotional aspect of the music by creating a clearly defined frame of musical structure.

The evolution of Ravel’s compositional style as seen in his piano works can be characterized within two large time periods, separated by the First World War: from the end of nineteenth century until 1918, and from early 1920s to the end of his life. Furthermore, the first, prewar period can be divided into smaller segments of time that reveal Ravel’s various aesthetic perspectives and preferences of specific genres.

31 Smirnov, 196.
The years between 1889 and 1905 represent the composer’s first stylistic period. That was the time of Ravel’s initial musical education and formation as a young composer. The first piano works written during that period are: Sérénade grotesque (1892-93), Menuet antique (1895), Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899), Jeux d’eau (1901), Sonatine (1903-05), and the cycle Miroirs (1904-05). Selected works will be discussed later in this chapter.

During his studies at the Conservatory (1889-1900), Ravel received professional and strict education from a wide circle of musicians and composers for whom he showed great admiration. His extraordinary talent and artistic creativity were already firmly established during that time. In different periods of his life, Ravel focused his attention and drew inspiration from a variety of works by different composers. At the same time, he maintained the stylistic features acquired from past compositional experiences. For example, in the 1890’s Ravel was interested in works by Chabrier and Satie, and nevertheless, his compositions remained influenced by Faure, Liszt, Chopin and Mussorgsky.

A significant influence on Ravel’s pianistic output came from the music of Franz Liszt—one of the greatest virtuoso pianists of all time, and an important innovator within the art of piano playing. Liszt’s piano technique was based on a pictorial and romantic virtuosity that aimed to create a poetic image through musical sounds. In many of his piano works, Ravel masterfully applied the pianistic virtuosity adopted from Liszt and partially from Chopin. Examples of such works are: Jeux d’eau, Ondine, Scarbo, and Alborada del gracioso. Cascade-like passages or light, fast repetitions within the texture of these works were used to create, first of all, visual effects: images of nature, or
portraits of mystic figures. The latter pianistic techniques were used by Ravel strictly to express certain predetermined programmatic ideas, rather than to convey inner emotions that were typical for the Romantic era. In his book, Smirnov writes about Ravel’s style: “Ravel uses and redevelops the instrument’s possibilities of sound found by the romantic composers, for the purpose of conveying specific impressionistic contents.”

The stylistic elements mentioned above can be observed in Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* (Example 1.1). Its texture reflects Ravel’s findings of new coloristic and timbral effects. In the opening of the piece, in order to create an illusion of falling water drops, the composer uses the high register of the piano, *pp* dynamic, and wide intervallic relationships of perfect fifths and fourths within the melody and the accompaniment. Further fragments within the piece, where lower registers and faster note values are involved, create a visual representation of cascades or waterfalls (glissandi).


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32 Smirnov, 55.
From a performance perspective, the composition requires a consistent rhythmic pulse, without altering the tempo within the more virtuosic sections. A performer can achieve a constant forward movement through lightness and precision of fingertips, almost sliding over the keyboard. In order to uncover the richness of the work’s entire coloristic palette, and underline its subtle harmonic and dynamic changes, a pianist needs to possess a variety of approaches for tone production. Generally, the intended tone of the piece requires a delicate approach. The sound must remain light and transparent even within the fortissimo instances. The principles of sound production are based here on a soft and clear touch both in the high, as well as in the low registers of the piano.

Throughout his artistic journey, Ravel often interacted with elements of Spanish folk music, for which he developed a deep interest. Isaac Albéniz’s output, which reflects the most characteristic features of Spanish music, became the closest to Ravel. Albéniz’s most prominent work for piano, *Iberia*, was especially admired by Ravel. Roland-Manuel remarks: “We, indeed, can state that Ravel’s Basque descent was a powerful influence on his artistic personality.” In his compositions based on Spanish themes (*Alborada del gracioso*, *Vocalise-étude en forme de habanera*, *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, and etc.), Ravel masterfully uncovers the instrument’s coloristic potential for conveying a certain image, or atmosphere. *Alborada del gracioso* (Example 1.2), the fourth of the five movements comprising *Miroirs*, is filled with Spanish spirit, with all its dancing rhythms and colorful harmonies. The piece’s very opening reveals rhythmic, syncopated, and jolting chords that resemble the sounds of a guitar.

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The subsequent thematic material involves vocal elements with characteristic Spanish rhythms (Example 1.3). Within this fragment, the single melodic line imitates the recitative-like singing. Such texture requires an execution that will produce a soft and lyrical tone.

Example 1.3. Maurice Ravel, *Miroirs, Alborada del gracioso*, mm. 72-84.
The recitative line is interrupted by chords that resemble the sounds of a guitar and the rhythms of castanets. A successful performance of such effects requires a speedy pianistic approach and a precise execution of the rhythmic figuration. The fast section of the piece, which is associated with the Spanish dance *Jota*, maintains rhythmic precision and sharpness of sound. As described by Roshina, in order to successfully convey the intended effect of plucking the strings of a guitar, the pianist must use an approach termed “fingered *staccato*”—a touch that involves maximum dexterity of fingers. The essential technical difficulty of the piece is found in the fast repeated notes. In this context, the repetitions should not sound loud and motoric, but rather create a light and flawless line. In order to facilitate the technical challenge, a pianist must aim for simultaneous control and relaxation of the hand. The latter can be achieved by playing the repetitions with agile fingertips, approaching the strong beats with an active attack, followed by a lighter touch on the subsequent echoing notes.

In addition to being influenced by Spanish folk, Ravel showed great interest for the traditions of Russian music. He was particularly fond of Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Borodin’s artistry. Modest Mussorgsky’s music was of particular interest to Ravel. His fundamental artistic principles as a composer-realist often counteracted with the mystic and fictional images conveyed in his works (e.g. “Gnomus” and “Baba Yaga,” from *Pictures at an exhibition*), which, in essence, are close to impressionistic musical sketches. Mussorgsky’s compositions, and especially his remarkable piano cycle *Pictures at an exhibition*, encompass impressionistic elements such as juxtaposition of timbres and registers, a wide range of contrasting dynamics and articulations, and a great

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34 Kasianenko, 51.
variety of technical approaches for creating sound effects. In this sense, there are certain similarities between Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit*. Both compositions are not only of fictional nature, they are also of deep psychological content. Just as in Mussorgsky’s vocal cycle *Songs and dances of Death*, or in his symphonic poem *Night on a bald mountain*, Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit* personifies Death itself. Ravel’s seducing *Ondine* can be compared to Mussorgsky’s *Lullaby* or *Serenade* of Death. In Ravel’s *Le gibet*, the figure of Death is awaiting the hanged, just as in Mussorgsky’s *The field Marshal*, it is looking for the dead soldiers on the battlefield. In *Scarbo*, as in the *Night on a Bald Mountain*, Death takes the appearance of the Devil itself.

Ravel’s experience with Russian music influenced and shaped his perception of folk music as an important and inexhaustible source of artistic inspiration. For Ravel, the folk elements of Spanish, French, Italian, Jewish, Russian, Greek, and Scottish origins became subjects for permanent and scrupulous study. Within a certain folk culture, the composer cherished the aesthetical beauty of the mundane dance, and the expression of human vitality and pure emotion. Ravel explored the unique and distinctive features of a national spirit that is inseparable from the characteristics of each cultural tradition, the surrounding nature, and daily human activities.

The above mentioned elements established the importance of the dance genre within Ravel’s compositions. Dance rhythms are incorporated in his music with remarkable brilliance and variety. Such genre is found in many of Ravel’s one-movement works such as *Menuet antique, La valse*; the collection of *Valses nobles and*
sentimentales; as well as parts of a suite, as are Forlane, Rigaudon, and Menuet in Le tombeau de Couperin.

As previously mentioned, Ravel had already established a clearly defined aesthetical belief during the years of his studies. Roland-Manuel mentions: “During that period, Ravel began a long and insistent battle for the right of having an individual artistic path. The battle for the recognition of his creative independence lasted his entire life.”35 Only at the turn of the century, Ravel was regarded as one of the brightest and most illustrious composers of French music. His output was aesthetically close to Debussy’s music, but at the same time possessed an unparalleled individuality.

Despite the frequent criticism from the members of the National Music Society in Paris, Ravel kept his unwavering conviction in his own artistic goals. He dedicated long periods of time mastering each one of his compositions, thoroughly polishing and perfecting them to the most subtle details. It is for this reason that throughout his life, Ravel repeatedly revisited many of his works, reiterating existing thematic elements in his own transcriptions and orchestrations. Among many of his remarkable musical transformations are: the youthful Habanera for one piano in four hands (1895), which became the third movement of the Rapsodie espagnole (1907); Alborada del gracioso from Miroirs, orchestrated in 1918; the suite for piano in four hands Ma mère l'oye, transcribed as an one-act ballet in 1911-1912.

Ravel’s second compositional period started around 1905, and lasted until the beginning of the First World War. For him, this was a time of significant artistic ascent.

35 Roland-Manuel, 7.
Released of all academic commitments, he devoted his entire time to compositional creativity. In 1905, Ravel completed two new piano works: *Sonatine* and *Miroirs*.

The three-movement *Sonatine* brightly reflects the composer’s youthful optimism and spirited character. Through its light, melodiuous, laconic, graceful nature and compact structure, the piece is comparable to the Sonatas of Mozart and Haydn. In the *Sonatine*, following the Classical traditions, Ravel uses the first movement’s main theme as thematic material that serves as a foundation for the work’s structure, and is used as a connecting element throughout the entire piece. The theme’s texture is unique through the presence of the accompanimental figuration in between the melodic line, which is doubled in the soprano and bass (Example 1.4). The same theme is used in the middle section of the second movement, and is later dissolved within the closing passages of the finale. Neoclassical tendencies are also reflected through the genre of the second movement—a quintessence of French *Menuet* in its elegance and sophistication. The third movement of *Sonatine* is fervent and brilliant, and is mostly based on a toccata-like texture. Its energetic and vigorous movement is at times tempered by a calm melody—the first movement’s main theme.

Almost simultaneously with the *Sonatine*, Ravel completed *Miroirs*—a cycle of five descriptive pieces. Compared to the classical features developed in the *Sonatine*, *Miroirs* reflects the impressionistic facet of Ravel’s compositional style. It was typical of Ravel to be concomitantly writing two or more works of absolutely contrasting styles. A similar stylistic contrast is found in Ravel’s two piano concertos, concurrently written during the years between 1929 and 1931. In many of his compositions written roughly at the same time, the composer was able to naturally depict characters of completely contrasting natures. One of the most striking examples of such creative dichotomy is seen in *Ma mère l’oye* (1908-1910), a collection of five children’s pieces depicting a childish, naïve, and delicate character; and *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), his famous piano suite, with deeply psychological, dramatic and somber content.

In *Miroirs*, Ravel came stylistically closer to Debussy, who completed his first book of *Images* in the same year. *Miroirs* introduces significant textural and harmonic changes within Ravel’s compositional style. Compared to his earlier works, the cycle expands the range of harmonic modulations, and its form becomes more flexible. For example, *Jeux d’eau* is written in a slightly varied sonata form. Ravel does not follow the traditional tonal structure of a sonata, and the second theme is not contrasting with the first one, but in its essence, the piece does have a clear contour of a sonata. At the same time, *Oiseaux tristes* from *Miroirs* is based on a flexible binary form with a coda. In this instance, the work’s structure adheres to its content, and is not used as a predetermined compositional device.

The opening of *Oiseaux tristes* depicts a clear musical image. The first groups of B flats with accents on the strong beats can be interpreted as an imitation of the birds’
flapping wings. The latter is followed by two reoccurring figurations, which resemble intonations of the birds’ singing or chirping (Example 1.5). The piece’s texture is clearly innovative. The various layers of sound created by the sustaining of consecutive notes or figurations convey an atmosphere of suspension in the air. Echoes of such sounds create a spatial impression of a flight.


![Example 1.5](image)

*Une barque sur l’océan*, the third movement of the suite, is based on a free formal structure, and for the most part, it is dominated by harmony rather than melody. In this piece, Ravel once again addresses the picturesque water element. Throughout the movement, the shape of the arpeggiated passages in the left hand accompaniment and the doubled melodic line in the right hand create an image of the water’s ever-changing waves (Example 1.6).


![Example 1.6](image)
In *Une barque sur l'océan*, Ravel uses a wide spectrum of compositional tools for creating a musical image. In order to depict a truthful illustration of water through sounds, the composer uses almost the entire diapason of the instrument, a multitude of harmonic colors, swaying rhythmic contours, and climactic episodes that resemble sea storms. While performing the piece, a pianist is advised to hear the accompaniment’s texture as if being played on a harp. All its passages are built on continuously ascending and descending “waves” of sound. As mentioned by Roshina, the piece’s texture solicits a soft and velvety touch through the use of an elbow legato.36,37

Ravel’s impressionistic facet reflected in *Miroirs* achieved its apogee in *Gaspard dela nuit*—a trilogy for piano, based on Aloysius Bertrand’s poems. The piece was first performed by Ricardo Viñes in 1909. As one of the foremost interpreters of Ravel’s music, Viñes was also the one who premiered *Jeux d’eau, Sonatine*, and *Miroirs*.

Depiction of fictional images can be encountered in other compositions by Ravel, for example, in *Noël des jouets*, or *Ma mère l’oye*. In *Gaspard de la Nuit*, the fantastic characters acquire a new, deeper psychological layer. In this work, Ravel achieved a superlative compositional virtuosity of pianistic texture, which, through its layout, almost identically reiterates the expression, drama, and fictional images portrayed in Bertrand’s poems. For conveying a tense atmosphere, Ravel uses complex dissonant chords and juxtaposition of chromatic sounds (Example 1.7). In order to depict a fantastic image, the

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36 Kasianenko, 53.

37 The elbow legato, within the art of piano playing, is a technique that helps to connect a longer scalar or arpeggiated passage into a smoother and continuous unit. Within a long (two-, three-, four-octaves) arpeggio this technique allows to reduce the use of finger and wrist legato (less motion-economical techniques) and perform the passage within one large motion instead of breaking it apart. The point of elbow legato is to organize the motion of the entire hand gradually in such a way that the entire movement of the elbow will cover the entire passage going one direction.
composer applies the technique of sound suspension (Example 1.8), and extreme changes of dynamics and registers (Example 1.9).


![Example 1.7](image1.png)

Example 1.8. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Ondine*, mm. 73-74.

![Example 1.8](image2.png)

Example 1.9. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 90-94.

![Example 1.9](image3.png)

The Romantic aspect of the suite is revealed in moments of desperate emotional bursts (e.g. measures 32-35 in *Scarbo*), within its lyrical and flowing melodies (e.g. measures 3-14 in *Ondine*), as well as in the melodic and harmonic intonations that
convey subjective emotional expression typical of Romanticism: sorrow, pain, fear, and struggle. For illustrating an image of a motionless landscape or a feeling of numbness, Ravel uses uniformity of sound within chords built on fourths and fifths, or monotone repetitions of the same sonority (e.g. measures 1-5 in *Le gibet*). *Gaspard de la nuit* is a work worthy of being named one of the pinnacles of compositional mastery within the piano repertoire. The work will be analyzed in greater detail in the third chapter of this essay.

As previously mentioned, simultaneously with *Gaspard de la nuit*, Ravel worked on a cycle of five children’s pieces for piano in four hands, *Ma mère l’oye*. For Ravel, the work represents a point of departure for discovering new compositional techniques. In this piece, the composer strove to simplify the pianistic texture and present it in a maximally transparent and clear manner. The work’s sophisticated quality and its childish vulnerability are expressed through clear melodies, diatonic harmonic language, and waltz-like rhythmic figurations. At the same time, the simplification of texture did not diminish the suite’s vibrant and colorful depiction of musical imagery. Each movement is filled with distinctive simplicity, sincerity, and freshness of perception of life—qualities that have always defined Ravel’s personality.

In his *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911), Ravel expressed the romantic aspect of his compositional style. The composer himself disclosed his intention of creating a cycle of waltzes in a Shubertian style. Nonetheless, Ravel’s miniature pieces relate not only to the Viennese traditions of Schubert’s waltzes and landlers, but also to the later waltzes of Schumann and Chopin. As Smirnov states, “The virtuosity of *Gaspard de la nuit* is replaced in *Valses nobles et sentimentales* by transparent textures that underline
the harmony and the melody."38 In this cycle, the composer does not emphasize
virtuosity, but rather aims for new harmonic turns and rhythmic structures. By liberating
the boundaries of traditional three-beat waltz figurations, Ravel gives each piece an
individual and distinctive rhythmic character.

The chain of eight waltzes is connected through a number of reoccurring motives,
which are used as linking material throughout the entire cycle. It is possible that the idea
of creating an integral cycle was inspired by Schumann’s suites, such as *Papillons*, Op. 2.
Schumann’s output was undoubtedly appealing to Ravel. An example of such interest can
be seen, for instance, in his project of orchestrating Schumann’s *Carnaval*, Op. 9, in
1914.

During the prewar and postwar periods, Ravel has already established the main
principles of his compositional style. One of the elements that was drastically changed in
his later artistic period is the shape and length of his melodies. From the shorter melodic
segments of his earlier works, the composer transitioned to more complex, diverse, and
continuous lines. For example, in *Oiseaux tristes* the main thematic material is
represented through short repeated melodic segments, while in *Ondine*, the singing
melody flows over long, expansive phrases. In *Jeux d’eau*, the melody is integrated
within the overall pianistic texture and is not intended to dominate over the
accompaniment, as it is, for instance, in many numbers from *Valses nobles et
sentimentales*, and later in *Rigaudon* and *Menuet* from *Le tombeau de Couperin.*

38 Smirnov, 108.
The rhythmic figurations in Ravel’s works are highly active and diverse. Various combinations of polyrhythms, advanced meters, varied rhythmic structures, and rhythmic displacement, are techniques vastly characteristic of Ravel’s style.

His harmonies are unique through their complexity and profusion. The composer greatly expanded his vertical harmonies to up to twelve notes within one chord, by using sonorities based on a combination of seconds and fourths, and advanced alterations (e.g. *Le gibet*). In addition, Ravel extended the range of his textures to the piano’s entire registers, and made frequent use of stratification of various layers of sound (e.g. *Ondine*, *Scarbo*, *La valse*).

Ravel’s works are very well constructed, rationally laid out, and often tend to adhere to ternary structures. For example, in *Gaspard de la nuit*, all the movements are in ternary form. The same can be stated about the suite *Le tombeau de Couperin*, where *Rigaudon* and *Menuet* follow a traditional ternary organization.

*Le tombeau de Couperin* (1917) is one of the landmarks in Ravel’s compositional output. The composer himself stated that the piece is not as much an homage to Couperin, as it is for the French music of the eighteenth century.\(^{39}\) Through this piece, Ravel revives the traditions of the eighteenth century French art of honoring the deceased. Each movement of the suite is dedicated to one of his friends, whom he lost in the War. As Kasianenko states: “The classical musical traditions are instilled here with psychological depth, and a fine understanding of the piano’s potential for colorful sonorities.”\(^{40}\)

\(^{39}\) Ivan Martynov, *M. Равель* [M. Ravel], (Moscow: Muzyka Press, 1979), 113.

\(^{40}\) Kasianenko, 106.
The suite follows an original cyclic form, and allows for flexibility in choosing the grouping of the movements. In her book, Kasianenko analyzes a couple of grouping possibilities. One of them consists of three groups: the first one comprised of the *Prélude* and *Fugue*; the second, of three contrasting dances *Forlane*, *Rigaudon*, and *Menuet* (the latter movement, according to Kasianenko represents the core of the group and of the entire suite); and the third group comprising the *Toccata*, which forms a structural arch with the similarly instrumental first movement, *Prélude*. In this manner, the structure of *Le tombeau de Couperin* combines principles of a suite with elements of the sonata form, and thus defines the dramaturgical role of each movement or group within the cycle. The movements of the suite share similar elements of harmony, melodic intonations, and texture, and are connected through a common tonal center. For instance, the main key of the suite is e minor. Four of the six movements (*Prélude*, *Fugue*, *Forlane*, and *Toccata*) are written in the same key of e minor. The remaining two movements are written in a relationship of a third to the original key: *Rigaudon* in C major, and *Menuet* in G major. Another innovative element in the suite is Ravel’s treatment of the figurative texture, which acquires a melodic importance, as seen in the *Prélude* (Example 1.10). A similar role of the pianistic texture will be later encountered in Ravel’s Sonata for Violin and Piano, and his Piano Concerto in g minor.

Forlane, the third movement of the suite, is characterized by special charm and elegance. Its comprising sections are very similar to each other due to the movement’s predominantly monothematic material. The entire piece retains a uniform dance-like rhythmic contour based on dotted figurations (Example 1.11a). The only exceptions are the brief middle and closing episodes, which are based on even eight notes and thus create a contrast to the prevailing dotted rhythms (Example 1.11b).


Example 1.11b. Maurice Ravel, *Le tombeau de Couperin*, III. *Forlane*, mm. 64-68.
The entire *Forlane* is dominated by a highly delicate and graceful melody. Marguerite Long mentions: “Pianists often forget that *Forlane* is an animated and lively dance. […] Its three episodes and refrains should be performed in exactly the same tempo, with the exception of the slightly fluctuating movement of the last section.”

The *Toccata*, with its distinctive optimistic tone, represents a brilliant ending to the suite. Its texture is comprised mainly of repetitions and chordal *martellati*. The entire movement is based on a gradual amplification of dynamics and texture, thus conceptually resembling the composer’s famous *Boléro*. Despite its rhythmic intensity and constant forward movement, Ravel’s *Toccata* should not be treated by pianists as a motoric piece, analogous to Prokofiev’s Toccata, or the Finale of his Seventh Sonata. This composition clearly encompasses elements of romantic origins, as in, for instance, the episode shown in Example 1.12. Following a constant and perpetual direction, a sorrowful and lyrical melody is introduced. As if interrupting the music’s flow, the tuneful line adds a new emotional layer, at the same time without losing its toccata-like textural configuration.


During the postwar period, Ravel’s artistic activity did not diminish. In 1920, he composed *La valse*, a choreographic poem that continued the tragic theme of the postwar disorientation. In this composition, the waltz element transforms into a hypnotic and

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irreversible swirl, accompanied by tragic melodic intonations. Martinov writes: “The war changed Ravel in many ways, and the latter found its reflection in the music of La valse.”

La valse includes an introduction, a chain of waltzes, and a return to the introductory material, which initially appears as the recapitulation, and later evolves into a new developmental phase. By using the structure of such a common genre as the waltz, Ravel underlined his special attitude and respect toward the Romantic epoch of the past century. Although its pianistic texture incorporates an astonishingly rich pallet of orchestral colors, La valse is defined by a clear melodic contour. Intonations of expanded melodies are distinctly heard through the piece’s highly dissonant harmonies. By their beauty, these melodies resemble Strauss’ famous waltzes.

Despite the postwar devastation, the subject of tragedy did not dominate Ravel’s output. Together with such compositions as his Sonata for Violin and Piano (1923-1927), the song cycle Don Quichotte à Dulcinée (1932-1933), the rhapsody for violin and piano or orchestra Tzigane (1924), and the one-act opera L’enfant et les sortilèges (1917-1925), during this period, Ravel completed the Piano Concerto in G major, a work that epitomizes the composer’s optimistic aesthetic beliefs. The G major Piano Concerto is one of the brightest examples of neoclassicism in Ravel’s music. Through its concise and transparent layout, liveliness and effortless vitality, it is comparable to the Sonatine.

During his last compositional period that lasted from the end of the 1920’s to the beginning of the 1930’s, Ravel generalized all of his artistic principles. Although neoclassical tendencies are observed more frequently in Ravel’s postwar compositions,

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42 Martynov, 175.
they did not conform to a single stylistic model, but were rather examples of a synthesized artistic concept.

The main works written during the last period are *Boléro* and the two piano concertos. The composer’s multidimensional compositional style was especially reflected in the piano concertos, his last works. In her book, Marguerite Long cites Ravel: “That was an interesting experiment, to plan and complete both concertos.” The author continues with her own thoughts: “There is a certain antagonism between the two concertos. […] Of course, this was a sort of a challenge, […] not for promoting himself, but rather for finding and developing new tools for expression.”

Although the two concertos were composed almost simultaneously, they are stylistically completely different. The G major Concerto was written in a sort of Mozartean style, with its lighthearted and dazzling outer movements, and a calm, thoughtful, and tenderly lyrical Adagio. At the same time, the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D major is totally different. It is a deeply emotional and tragic work with a complex, intertwined texture. Author Martinov mentions: “Using the limited possibilities of a single hand, Ravel achieved to create a piano part that is all-encompassing, emotionally rich, and at the same time brilliant, virtuosic, and appealing for the performer and the listener.” The work’s richness of texture allows even a single hand to convey an impression of abundance and grandeur through music (Example 1.13). The plethora of pianistic texture is comprised of various virtuosic techniques: two or more voices over accompaniments that cover almost the entire range of the piano, with the exception of the

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43 Long, 92.

44 Martynov, 253.
highest register; chordal phrases in combination with sharp articulations, chromatic and arpeggiated passages.

Example 1.13. Maurice Ravel, Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, in D major, mm. 53-56.

Ravel’s compositional career relates mostly to the first half of the twentieth century. His unique artistic thinking was reflected through great stylistic diversity in his works. Despite its integrity and individualism, Ravel’s style involves a variety of elements from different historical eras, and features from various nationalities. The composer often turned to techniques of expression that were typical to other cultural eras: elements from French composers-harpsichordists, Domenico Scarlatti, early Classicism, Romanticism, and Baroque.

Generally, Ravel’s musical language embodies elements of polystylism. During his entire artistic career, Ravel was under the direct influence of Impressionism and at the same time showed an inclination toward neoclassicism. While he absorbed and showed preference for numerous artistic directions during the various periods of his life, Ravel was able to create an integral individual style. Ravel’s neoclassicist facet involves features of both neoclassicism and impressionism. His genius is reflected through his
talent of combining conflicting stylistic elements within a single, individual musical language. According to Sviatoslav Richter, Ravel’s compositions are “too dynamical and temperamental, for being called typical impressionistic; and too colorful for not being called so.”

Ravel’s works are defined by fullness and brightness of color, radiance of the harmonic language, and an optimistic mindset. Moreover, for Ravel, archaism was a universal source of inspiration. The composer’s admiration for antiquity was often reflected through his use of ancient diatonic modes and plagal cadences (e.g. *Menuet antique*, *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, *Sonatine*, and selections from *Ma mère l’oye*). The roughness and rigor of certain layers of sound in Ravel’s works are achieved through the use of complex chord structures (usually sevenths, ninths, and elevenths), unprepared suspensions, and *appogiaturas*. Despite their complexity, the chords are perceived as unified sonorities that serve as a coloristic and timbral enrichment of the melodic lines.

Another unique feature that delineates Ravel’s style is his perception of nature and the surrounding environment as essential sources of inspiration. However, most often, the depictive aspect of his music complied with the rational planning of its structure. Roland Manuel mentions that “Ravel tried to organize the sounds in an order that was pleasant for the ear. When the music achieved an order that was successfully perceived by the emotional senses, the composition was complete on both structural and expressive levels.”

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45 Stupel, 77.

46 Roshina, 137.
Within his pianistic output, Ravel’s extensive use of symbolism was drawn from the musical rhetoric underlying a certain work. The importance and meaning of tonality in music has become a common practice ever since the ancient cultures. Inspired by traditions of the late Baroque and Romanticism, Ravel frequently used the well-known symbolic keys for creating his own ideas and musical images. Representative examples of such tonal depictions are: C major (the closing key of *Ma mère l’oye*); G major (*Pavane pour une infante défunte, Menuet sur le nom de Haydn, Valses nobles et sentimentales*, and Piano Concerto in G major); and f-sharp minor (*Menuet antique, Habanera, Sonatine*, and *Une barque sur l’océan*).

According to traditional views, C major is associated with elements of light and clarity. G major was established as a type of pastoral key, or one that conveys resentment. F-sharp minor is often used in combination with F major and was perceived as another pastoral sonority.

A general overview of Ravel’s piano compositions reveals a predominance of major keys over the minor ones. In terms of tonality, his compositional strategy adheres to the orchestral treatment of the piano. From a figurative perspective, Ravel’s music reflects the neoclassical principles of a clear and optimistic worldview, followed by the musical figures of the early Viennese school.

Dramatism and distress characterize Ravel’s works to a lesser degree. Hence, the keys of f, g-sharp, b-flat, and b minor are less often encountered in his compositions. These tonalities are more typical for the dramatic works of the romantic composers, as well as Beethoven. From the major keys, Ravel made less use of B-flat, E-flat, or A-flat—the ones most favored by the Viennese classics and particularly by the romantic
composers. The “romantic” tonalities are present in Ravel’s works when the composition is intended to address stylistically romantic musical images (e.g. *Miroirs*, *Gaspard de la nuit*, and the waltz *À la manière de Borodine*). The more somber miniatures are written in flat keys of darker tone qualities, such as e-flat minor, or D-flat major (e.g. *Noctuelles*, *Oiseaux tristes*, and *Le gibet*). As such, Ravel’s artistic choice of a work’s tonal center corresponds to its narrative intentions.

For the performer of Ravel’s music, it is important to aurally assimilate his characteristic compositional figurations and techniques. Knowledge of Ravel’s key elements used in different compositions aids a deeper understanding of his artistic thought and helps highlight his stylistic individuality. There are a number of common figurations used in many of his works. Passages or smaller segments of descending thirds often depict the singing of birds, or the chirping of an insect (e.g. *Oiseaux tristes*, *Petit poucet* from *Ma mère l’oye*, and *Grillon* from *Histoires naturelles*); ascending and descending arpeggiated passages usually illustrate the motion of water (e.g. *Jeux d’eau*, *Une barque sur l’océan*, *Ondine*); fast repetitions express features of dance, restlessness, or excitement, (e.g. *Scarbo*, *Alborada del gracios*).

Another technique used by Ravel to unfold his themes, is through polyphonic development. The most representative composition of such texture is the *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. The work’s main theme evolves through constant sequencing of its opening turn. This concept is implemented in other compositions by Ravel, where the musical unity expands from a small thematic segment (e.g. *Le gibet*, *Boléro*). A similar compositional device for Ravel is the motivic development—a method that originates from the school of harpsichordists. Ravel masterfully uses the tools of expression
characteristic to the old polyphonic traditions. The frequent syncopations provide the
music with rhythmic coherence and eloquence.

An important element often encountered in Ravel’s piano works is the toccata-
like texture (e.g. the third movement of the Sonatine, certain episodes in Scarbo, Toccata
from Le tombeau de Couperin, the finale of the Piano Concerto in G Major, and the
middle section of the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand). For Ravel, a possible inspiration
of such textural layout comes from the motoric character of the Italian school of keyboard
music (Scarlatti); the romantic virtuosity of Liszt’s etudes (Transcendental Etude No. 2,
and the Paganini Etude No. 4), as well as Camille Saint-Saëns’ Toccatas.

Generally, Ravel’s compositions are characterized by a clearly defined genre,
logical assembling of climaxes and their resolutions, and an integral construction of
thematic material and musical structure. In addition, his output reflects dance-like
features of French and Spanish folk origins, clarity of form, orchestral compositional
thinking, and a deep connection to traditions of Classical and Romantic music.
CHAPTER VI

ANALYSIS OF GASPARD DE LA NUIT

‘Gaspard de la nuit’ is one of the most astonishing examples of instrumental ingenuity to be found in the work of any composer.

Alfred Cortot 47

The piano suite Gaspard de la Nuit was composed in 1908. It consists of three movements: Ondine, Le gibet, and Scarbo. Vlasenko describes the work:

This cycle represents the expressionistic direction in Ravel’s compositional output. Its music introduces the subconscious spheres of human imagination. The musical images represented here are symbolic elements which, within the aesthetics of arts, would be considered as opposite to ‘beautiful’. These elements are: hallucinations, and visions of a psychically damaged imagination. Symbolism of horrible and unnatural images did not inspire artists-impressionists; however, such images were cultivated by some romantic composers (e.g. Idée fixe in Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique, hallucinations in vocal repertoire by Schubert and Mussorgsky). Ravel’s ideas for writing Gaspard de la nuit are very much inspired by similar, mystic qualities. 48

Gaspard de la nuit combines impressionistic elements that focus on a subjective reflection of the environment and expressionistic qualities that reflect the inner world and subconscious impulses. Emotional intensity constantly grows from the first piece to the last. Ondine possesses a lyrical-Romantic quality. It stands out as a poetically characterized piece in combination with a programmatic content that is clearly based on fantastic and mystic images. Le gibet introduces the tragic atmosphere of a realistic picture of war and execution. At the same time, it represents an image of death, a symbolic meaning of life and death, and perhaps life after death. Scarbo, where expressionistic directions are expressed the most, introduces images of mystic and

47 Myers, 163.

48 Vlasenko, 82.
unrealistic nature. These images seem to be created by a “sick” imagination or by a fear of an imaginary personage. In Scarbo, all the mystic images possess especially exaggerated expressionistic qualities. Although all three movements are considered to be of the highest virtuosic level, Scarbo is truly an apogee of virtuosity of the whole cycle and of Ravel’s entire pianistic output.

Ravel’s idea for creating Gaspard de la nuit was inspired by Aloysius Bertrand’s book of poems. The book was introduced to Ravel by his close friend, Ricardo Viñes. Hélène Jourdan-Morhange and Vlado Perlemuter describe the French poet in a very poetic manner:

Not many musicians know Aloysius Bertrand. He was a strange figure of the romantic epoch when gothic images and fantasies where fashionable. Ravel, who at that time was interested in works by Edgar Allan Poe, was attracted by the charismatic Bertrand and his infernal visions and ideas. Bertrand worked on his miniature poems with great precision and attention to details. One can imagine that the ‘jeweler of words’ (as Bertrand was called by Sainte-Beuve) would attract the jeweler of sounds! The three poems that were chosen by Ravel are not similar to each other, but their musical conception and structure makes the listener believe that they were originally created as a whole.  

Gaspard de la nuit is one of the few of Ravel’s compositions that combines features and traditions of several different stylistic directions: Impressionism, Romanticism, Neoclassicism and Expressionism. Each one of these styles is reflected within the piece in a certain way. However, Neoclassical and Impressionistic characteristics dominate within the larger context of Gaspard’s nature. As mentioned in chapter five, Ravel’s entire repertoire consists of Neoclassical and Impressionistic traditions.

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The Neoclassical facet is used here as a fundamental tool for creating the musical structure. The sonata form is applied within each piece as well as within the entire cycle. Although the traditional structure of a sonata is modified here in a much freer way than the purely Classical model, clear structural contours and logical organization of harmonic and melodic lines convey a sense of strict form. Impressionistic traditions are shown through Ravel’s compositional technique, colors and sound effects that create a visual picture of an environment (river, sunlight, wind, night, bell, castle, water, splashes, etc.). The personages possess romantic and realistic characteristics throughout the entire cycle. Typical human feelings such as emotions, fear, sorrow, anger, or nervousness are represented through mystic and unrealistic characters. Vlado Perlemuter, who studied with Ravel, wrote:

> When I was working on Scarbo with Ravel, he said to me, “I wanted to produce a caricature of Romanticism.” But he added under his breath, “Maybe I got carried away.” He also said, with a slight air of mockery, “I wanted to write an orchestral transcription for piano.”

A possible interpretation of Ravel’s statement could be that Expressionism and Romanticism (stylistic directions not typical for Ravel) influenced this piece as much as others, more characteristic for Ravel’s compositional style. Expressionistic features are reflected, first of all, through extreme emotional intensity throughout the suite and particularly in Scarbo.

This work can truly be considered one of the most romantic, tragic, and deeply personal compositions within Ravel’s entire repertoire. In Gaspard, the intimate feelings expressed through music are not masked by Impressionistic effects. Extreme musical

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50 Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, 36-38.
expressiveness and implied emotional attachment in this piece creates an overwhelming
effect on the audience if performed with enthusiasm and dedication. In a letter to Ida
Godebski from July 17, 1908, Ravel writes: “After too many long months of gestation,
[...] *Gaspard* has been the very devil to write, which is only logical since He is the author
of the poems.”\(^{51}\)

Gaspard is much more unified as a cycle than collections of pieces such as
*Miroirs*, where all the movements are aesthetically and compositionally different from
each other, but the overall impression is that of a potpourri than a singular cycle
consisting of parts, each bearing a significant structural role. Although the three
movements of Gaspard can be performed separately and treated as individual pieces, the
grandiosity and intensity of a complete statement will be lost unless it is heard as a
whole. Mystical symbolism in Ravel’s music and specifically in Gaspard is partially a
new version of the “Mephistopheles” idea often reflected in Liszt’s works.

Structurally, the cycle can be treated as a Classical sonata that consists of three
movements: the two faster movements *Ondine* and *Scarbo* (first and last movements in a
sonata), arching the slow *Le gibet* (second movement of a Classical sonata).

The level of virtuosity of pianistic writing in Gaspard is a pinnacle in Ravel’s
repertoire, if not the entire piano repertoire. Throughout the suite, musical text should be
observed by a performer within its musical-technical connection with the narrative and
programmatic nature of the piece, making the burden of execution both more difficult and
easier depending on the performer’s natural orientation.

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\(^{51}\) Myers, 162.
Ondine

Poem

...I thought I heard
A vague harmony enchanting my slumber,
And near me spreading a murmur like songs
Broken by a voice, sad and tender.

CHARLES BRUGNOT – Two Spirits

Listen! Listen! It is I, it is Ondine, who lightly brushes
with water drops the resonant diamond-shaped panes of your window,
lit by the dull rays of the moon; and here, in her silk dress, is the lady
of the manor, who muses from her balcony on the beautiful starry night
and on the lovely sleeping lake.

Each wave is an Ondine swimming in the current; each current
is a pathway winding towards my palace; and my palace is built fluidly,
in the depths of the lake, in the triangle of fire, earth, and water.

Listen! Listen! My father whips the croaking water with a green
alder branch; and my sisters caress with arms of foam the cool islands of
grasses, of water lilies, and of gladiola, or tease the decaying bearded willow,
fishing with a line!

After murmuring her song, she begged me to receive her ring on
my finger, and be an Ondine’s husband and to visit her palace with her and
to become the king of the lakes.

And when I told her that I loved a mortal, sullen and vexed, she
shed a few tears, burst into laughter, and vanished in a sudden shower that
streamed white trickles down my blue stained glass windows.52

52 John T. Wright, Louis Aloysius Bertrand's Gaspard de la Nuit; Fantasies in the Manner of
Rembrandt and Callot: Translation, Introduction, and Notes (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of
America, 1994), 61.
Genre

As a genre, *Ondine* can be interpreted as a song or a ballade. Its texture consists of: a lyrical and declamatory melodic line that persists throughout the entire piece; accompaniment figurations that surround the melody; and recitative-like melodic segments.

The main melodic theme, which is varied throughout the piece, is stated in a form of couplets: as a single-voiced (m. 3-14), double-voiced in octave (m. 45-50), triple-voiced in two octaves (m. 71-72). If *Ondine* were assigned lyrics, it could probably become a major work in the vocal repertoire. Its singing nature is the distinctive feature that differentiates *Ondine* from the other two movements of the cycle. In this respect, the piece does not have a refrain in the traditional sense of the term, but instead, it has a number of couplet-episodes that are based on motivically similar melodies. The representations of such moments can be seen in the climactic episodes (m. 56-59 and m. 63-68), anticlimactic disappearances (m. 33-37 and m. 85-88), and statements of grief and charming singing lines (m. 23-28). Additionally, there are several episodes that are created to depict only the imaginative-visual effects of the poem (m. 73-80 and m. 89-92), where a listener can imagine water splashes, reflections of light in the water, water drops and waves calming down after a storm.

Structure

The structure of the piece can be treated as a standard sonata-allegro form. The couplets can be grouped and combined together into three sections that follow the formal principles of a sonata. A representation of the movement’s structure is shown below (Table 2.1).
Table 2.1. *Ondine*: structural organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Comprising Material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-14</td>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Main Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-41</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Main Theme (mm.15-32) and Second Theme (mm. 33-41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43-72</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Main Theme, Second Theme, Climax based on new material and Second Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73-80</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Improvisatory material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81-84</td>
<td>Recapitulation</td>
<td>Main Theme (minor dominant relationship to its statement in the Exposition), absence of Second Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85-89</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Recitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89-92</td>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>Improvisatory material</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dynamics**

Although there are two major episodes comprised of massive textures that accumulate into powerful sonorities (the first episode is a climactic part in the development section and the second episode is comprised of the fervent parallel passages in the coda), soft dynamics are dominant throughout the composition. The main dynamic marking throughout the first theme is *ppp*. A subtle *crescendo* to *pp* relates more to expressivity of phrasing rather than to an actual change in the level of sound. The connecting episode is marked *ppp* as well, but its animated character allows the dynamic changes to fluctuate more actively within the episode. The second theme is very similar to the main theme by its flawless and continuous quality. The *crescendo* marking here, as in the previous instance, should be interpreted as a way to express the character with more intensity and aliveness rather than to add more weight to the sound.
The $f$ dynamic appears for the first time only in the middle of the development section, where the second theme is stated in two-voices an octave apart in the high register of the piano. The development section is based on contrasting dynamic ascents and descends that create a general line of dramatic intensity that finally leads to the climax of the piece. Following the climax, an improvisatory episode comprised of light glissandi and brilliant passages leads to the recapitulation.

The Coda represents an extreme contrast of two dynamic levels, from $ff$ to $ppp$ within a single page of musical score. Such contrasts, not only within the dynamic markings, but also within tempos, articulations, rhythms, and harmonies in general are characteristic features of Expressionism in music.

**Rhythm**

The innovative features of *Ondine*’s rhythmic aspect is found mostly in its accompanimental material. In the very opening of the piece, a pattern of even thirty-second notes introduces a complex syncopated rhythmic figuration that consists of two asymmetrically arranged elements: a chord and an added note to the chord (Example 2.1). In metrically displaced alternation, these patterns of chords and the added note create a unique rhythmic figure that can be associated with flickering water.

Ondine includes a number of polyrhythmic figurations. For example, measures 67 and 68 introduce polyrhythmic passages between two hands where a group of six thirty-second notes interacts with seven thirty-second notes (Example 2.2).

Example 2.2. Maurice Ravel, Gaspard de la nuit, Ondine, mm. 67.

Later, similar rhythmic configurations of five against seven and five against six are introduced. A number of episodes involve accompanimental material consisting of long passages that surround the melody in an absolutely free rhythmic structure and that are not restricted by rigid metric organization or measure lines. For example, a melodic line that consists of even eighth notes is accompanied by scalar and arpeggiated passages that appear to exist in a different timeframe (Example 2.3).

Example 2.3. Maurice Ravel, Gaspard de la nuit, Ondine, mm. 44-45.
These rhythmic effects play an important role in the programmatic structure of the composition. They create a visual representation of the water element that does not have acute angles and interruptions. In addition, these off-time passages are responsible for harmonic language of the entire piece creating a continuous harmonic accompaniment for the melodic statements.

Ravel’s intention to eliminate a static and square quality of a musical phrase by experimenting with rhythms and metrical combinations is reinforced even more in his implication of multiple meter changes throughout the piece. Through means of meter alterations, the effect of continuousness affects larger units of musical structure such as long phrases or entire episodes. Lack of strict metrical limitations allows for musical phrases and sentences to develop and become complete in a more organic way. At the same time, Ravel does not use overcomplicated rhythmic patterns and schemes, in order to avoid making them too obvious and overly important. In this case, meter changes create musical shapes instead of musical interruptions. Due to Ravel’s superb craftsmanship, a listener seems to hear a one continuous meter throughout the piece.

**Texture**

Generally, the type of texture in this piece can be considered as homophonic. At the same time, *Ondine’s* texture is significantly different from the standard understanding of homophony in music. An important characteristic of this texture is that the independent melodic line is tightly connected with the texture of the harmonically fulfilling accompaniment (Example 2.4). In contrast to compositions that strictly follow the rules of standard homophony, the melody and the accompaniment in *Ondine* do not depend on specific homophonic frames. Throughout the piece, the accompanimental
material possesses too many rhythmic, harmonic and expressive values to be dominated by the melody. This factor makes them equally important, strongly interconnected and inseparable.

Example 2.4. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Ondine*, mm. 1-2.

When the melodic line is placed in the low register of the piano, the accompaniment immediately moves to a higher register, and vice versa (Example 2.5). In other instances, Ravel places the melody within the accompanimental material, which simultaneously surrounds the melody in both the lower and higher registers (Example 2.6). This innovative compositional tool brings both parts to the closest timbral interaction and tonal integrity.

Example 2.5. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Ondine*, mm. 48.
Throughout the movement, both hands are often involved in simultaneously playing both melody and the accompaniment. For example, in measures 67-68 (Example 2.2, in the Rhythm subsection), the diapason of the thick accompanimental material covers a range of five octaves and the melodic voice should be projected through the massive thirty-second note passages.

Generally, Ondine is dominated by a texture that consists of passages, arpeggios and double-notes, as well as chordal constructions. At the same time, compared to Jeux d'eau and Une barque sur l'océan, the depiction of the water element within the texture of Ondine possesses a different aesthetic meaning. Within the former works, water is presented as an illustration of nature in its ordinary form. In Ondine, it becomes an integral part of the fictional character and reacts to the protagonist’s actions and emotions. The work’s richness and transparency of texture is strongly dependent on the dramatic content of Ondine’s vocal line.

**Harmony**

The absence of a bass line as a harmonic foundation in the first half of Ondine creates a special effect of suspended and floating sonorities. Throughout the piece, Ravel uses an innovative technique of juxtaposition of functionally different chords over a
single bass, which creates an unusual general harmonic color. As seen in measure 60 (Example 2.7), two contrasting sonorities—a C-sharp major and later an e minor chord—are juxtaposed on a sustained C-sharp bass. A general sonority of these harmonies creates an effect of a cluster. A similar example is found in measures 81-82 (Example 2.8), where the main theme is introduced over a G-sharp bass (G-sharp minor triad), and is later superimposed by a G-sharp Major triad. This kind of tonal instability creates a sound aura with a variety of harmonic colors.

Example 2.7. Maurice Ravel, Gaspard de la nuit, Ondine, mm. 60.

Example 2.8. Maurice Ravel, Gaspard de la nuit, Ondine, mm. 81-82.

An important role in revealing the entire coloristic pallet of the piece’s harmonic language is played by the pedaling. Certain episodes in Ondine require one pedal for an entire measure. This acoustical technique leads to an overlap of two or more dissonant
harmonies. In such instances, harmony can be interpreted as a horizontal line that forms a separate layer of sound within the overall texture (Example 2.9).


Performance aspect

For a performer, this movement presents an entire complex of difficulties: timbral-coloristic organization of sound; technical virtuosic skills; and sense of rhythm within flexible time and movement.

Just as *Jeux d'eau* or *Une barque sur l'océan*, the performance of *Ondine* implies an overall effortless, flowing, delicate, transparent and clear sound of the piano. However, in certain episodes found especially in the lower and middle registers of the instrument, the narrative content of the piece requires a deeper and richer quality of sound.

The *staccato* articulation is entirely absent in this movement. In those instances when dots are notated in the score, the sounds are intended to be suspended over the overall texture, and the sonorities should be sustained with the right pedal. After all, the image of Ondine itself does not imply dryness, percussiveness, and sharpness of sound.

Projecting a flawless melodic line is a performer’s main challenge in *Ondine*. Permeating the entire movement, the melody should be interpreted as a textural layer that dynamically and expressively dominating over the accompanimental material and
attracting listener’s attention throughout. Intonation-wise, it should sound somewhat
deepener, more significant and colorful that the “water” accompaniment. In order to
overcome this challenge, it is suggested to a performer to practice constantly
concentrating his/her attention on the melody. A performer is encouraged to divide the
entire melodic material into smaller elements (sentences, phrases, broad statements) and
practice shaping them in such a way that they sound as complete and logical ideas first,
without the accompaniment. Later, a reduced or a half-projected version of the
accompaniment can be added, maintaining full focus on every note of the melody.
Another way to improve this issue is to apply two opposite exercises. First, allow the
timing and shape of the melody to have total domination over the accompaniment, so that
the accompaniment metrically would precisely follow the melodic contours. Then, make
the accompaniment shape dominate over the melodic line, while still listening to a
projected melody.

Technical virtuosity in this movement requires a high level of performance
mastery. As Ravel’s other works related to the water subject, Ondine incorporates
common elements with Liszt’s style of textural configurations: accompaniments based on
repetitions, double-note passages, and parallel and contrary motion passages in both
hands.

In Ondine’s very opening, the figurations in the right hand create a clear challenge
for the performer. This pattern requires not only technical mastery of repetitions, but also
extreme rhythmic precision in combination with an extremely soft dynamic (m. 1-14).
When practicing these passages, it is recommended to maximally minimize the motions
and time between the chord and the single note. The motion of going back to the chord
after the note needs more of a physical effort therefore the time-saving between these two units should be observed even more carefully. To find an aural control of stillness and equality in sound will most likely provide more stability in playing these passages, rather than practicing motoric repetitions with exaggerated finger movement to achieve muscular strength and independence of fingers. Additionally, it is important to find an angle of the hand that will help play the three notes of the chord as one unit, thus spending the energy of one finger instead of three. By using light and short articulation (only for practicing), an effect of bouncing could be achieved. Eventually, in medium and fast tempos, a performer will have to physically control lesser number of notes than his/her fingers will actually project.

Another, no less challenging example of technical difficulty is found in the climactic section of the piece, where double-note passages cascade against the ascending chordal melodic line (m. 58-62, Example 2.10). A suggested approach to this technical difficulty would be to practice keeping the same soft dynamic throughout the entire passage in the right hand. It is important to avoid making the double-notes heavier and thicker in sound and touch throughout the passage. The required crescendo has to be performed by the bass line in the left hand and its sonority supported by the sustaining pedal. Concentrating on the top-voice in the double-note passage will help maintain a smoother line, since this voice has less finger substitutions and bumpy shifts than the lower voice, which requires frequent use of the first finger. Slow practice with constant moving of fingers is necessary, thus leaving the interval sooner for the shifting side than the top voice in preparation for the next interval. Especially for the big shift that occurs
every forth interval, this will simplify the task of making a single large motion from this passage, instead of many chunks within a run.

Example 2.10. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Ondine*, mm. 61.

Another type of technical difficulty is presented by the work’s permeating accompanimental texture, which is diffused throughout the piano’s entire diapason. This task involves quick swapping of hands from one position to another through the use of the first and fifth fingers. For a performer, examples of such challenges require a vast amount of technical work. The difficulty of the accompanimental passages throughout the piece is playing long two to three octave arpeggios as flawless lines. A recommendation for practicing such passages would be to locate all the groups of notes that correspond to one hand position. Find the turning points between those groups (a major hand turn from fingers one to four, five; or four, five to one). Play the passage slowly following these dynamics: every note on *mf*, and the note after the turn, *subito pp*. Play the passage slowly following these articulations: every note on *staccato*, the note before and after the turn, *subito legato*. These exercises will compensate for the undesirable physical moves inherent in the execution and eventually will lead to a state where the difference between positions will not be noticeable in the outcome at the required tempo.
At the same time, in its essence, the piece’s ultimate goal should not be delivery of technical brilliance. A masterful performance should not transmit virtuosic repetitions, but rather a gentle murmur of water; it should not exhibit extreme velocity of fingers over fast passages, but convey the image of moving waves, reflecting the shape of the element.

An important factor in performing *Ondine* is the pianist’s choice of timing and rhythm within the musical flow. Many times throughout the piece, one eighth or sixteenth note is played against figurations of five to ten notes (m. 57, 60, 71, 79). By paying excessive attention to organizing the rapid accompanimental figurations, a pianist risks to lose the unity of the melodic phrases. Becoming fixated on each one of the small values within the accompaniment, or stretching it for technical convenience or as expressive manipulation is inappropriate in this context and may result in fragmentation of the work’s general flow.

By addressing the artistic intentions of the piece and the descriptive possibilities of its pianistic texture, a performer could find the key elements that will aid in solving the piece’s technical and musical challenges.

*Le gibet*

The second movement of the cycle can be considered one of Ravel’s most tragic compositions. According to Martynov: “This piece introduces ‘dramatic accents’ of an intensity never heard before in Ravel’s music. This work stands out as one of his most tragic and expressive. *Le gibet* presents Ravel as an aesthete with an extraordinarily sensitive ability to perceive the environment and reconstruct it within musical expression, a poet of the most delicate nuances, and a master of the tragic sphere.”

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53 Martynov, 85
The image of Death is depicted in *Le gibet* as if wondering through the lonely and somber walls of a medieval castle. Under the endless ringing of a bell, it walks around a square where a hung body sways metrically.

While writing Gaspard, Ravel was deeply affected by his father’s severe illness. During this period, thoughts about life and death became deeply infiltrated in his mind. Possibly, this could be one of the reasons why the suite and *Le gibet* in particular filled with tragic atmosphere, depth, and exposure of inner emotions.

**Poem**

*What do I see moving around the gallows?*

**FAUST**

Ah! Is what I hear the night wind howling, or the hanged man sighing on the gibbet?

Could it be a cricket singing, hidden in the moss and the sterile ivy which the woods covers itself out of pity?

Could it be a fly hunting and sounding its horn around those ears that are deaf to the slaughterer’s triumph?

Could it be a beetle plucking, in its uneven flight a bloody hair from its bald skull?

Or could it be a spider, embroidering a length of muslin as a scarf for that strangled neck?

It is the bell that tolls from the walls of a town beyond the horizon, and the corpse of a hanged man that glows red by the setting sun.54

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54 Wright, 123.
Genre

The origin of Le gibet’s genre is not as clearly defined as it is in Ondine. In this movement, Ravel combined elements of a funeral procession with singing melodies, and features of antique dances: sarabande and chaconne. Certainly, the characteristic triple meter of a sarabande does not correspond to the quadruple time of Le gibet. However, the piece shares similar features of textural layout (chordal), an atmosphere of procession, and a sorrowful character.

Le gibet has a clear resemblance with elements of a funeral march, considering its quadruple meter, and a strictly even pace that interacts with short melodic motives that are based on dotted rhythms (m. 6, 7, 10, and 11). Due to its mostly polyphonic layout, Le gibet encompasses traits of a Middle-Ages chorale (m. 3-5), with its characteristic wide arrangement of intervals (fourths, fifths, octaves). Relating more to the movement’s character than to its stylistic properties, the features of a sarabande are combined here with elements of a livelier dance—the habanera, which in this case appears in an unusual musical context. Author Stupel writes: “Only the lonesome bell sounds quietly and evenly, on an unchangeable B-flat, permeating the entire piece, on a syncopated rhythm, resembling figurations of a habanera. The ‘Habanera of Death’ sounds frightening in its cold indifference. The sound of the bell is surrounded by complex, dissonant chords and short, expressive phrases, unusually poignant for Ravel.”55 In addition, the rhythmic ostinato created by the bell figures certainly reflects Ravel’s neoclassical tendencies.

55 Stupel, 54.
Texture

The two main characteristics of the texture in *Le gibet* are: multi-layered (chordal) and polyphonic writing. Wide chords arranged between both hands create a spacious sound platform that is constantly permeated by a monotone and syncopated B-flat ostinato (Example 2.11). This lonesome single-note line is an independent textural layer that is stated with insisting rhythmic precision throughout the entire piece, creating a mechanical effect.

Example 2.11. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Le gibet*, mm. 12-14.

At the same time, the spacious chordal building blocks create a separate textural layer with its own melodic line that is located in the top voice of the chords. Within the vertical sonorities of these chords, Ravel often introduces up to ten voices, including the ostinato. The pedal point, representing the sound of a bell, is encountered throughout the piece either in unison, or in octave, on a B-flat, or its enharmonic equivalent A-sharp.

In measures 28-30 (Example 2.12), one of the few episodes in *Le gibet* where texture becomes more transparent, the only remaining voices are the bell motive and a single voice in the soprano, which continues the melodic line of the antecedent chordal passages.

In her book, Kasianenko mentions: “Texture, as one of the main means of expression in this piece, is a crucial factor that determines the character of musical interpretation.”

*Le Gibet*, as the entire Gaspard, is characterized by intense expressiveness and narrative depiction through pianistic texture. The bell motive, as one of the essential ideas of the piece, is present here not only within the syncopated *ostinato* in the middle register; it is also supported by low sounds of a bell, written as whole notes in the bass (m. 23, 27, and 28).

Essentially, the movement does not encompass accompanimental texture, even in fragments where melodic lines are distinctly enunciated (m. 20-25). On a very soft dynamic, *ppp*, the juxtaposed layers of complex sonorities create an afflicting impression of a lifeless and cold fog or twilight.

In measures 28-34, a quiet and lingering melody sounds as a confession, a farewell to life. In approaching this episode, Ravel clears the tonality in a way, by removing all the key signatures and shifting the time from a four-four, to a six-four meter. Ravel’s decision of liberating this episode from the multi-layered texture assigns the melody a special depth and transparency of sound (Example 2.12).

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56 Kasianenko, 109.
An innovative textural element in *Le gibet* is represented through the bell ostinato, which does not only permeate the entire movement as a sound effect, but also becomes one of the symbolical centers of the piece. It is difficult to find a composition in the piano repertoire written before Ravel that is constructed in the manner of *Le gibet*. The uniqueness of the ostinato is also reflected through its seamless intermingling with the general texture. The bell motive complements and immerses within the overall sonority, thus enriching the harmonic and rhythmical language of the piece. The illustrative expressiveness of the bell sound can also be associated with heart beats, or a swinging rope.

A similar idea of building an entire piece on a monothematic material resembles Ravel’s *Boléro*, where the repetitive melodic and rhythmic contours are maintained from the beginning to the end.

**Harmony**

Harmony plays an important role in creating the intended atmosphere in *Le gibet*. The piece’s harmonic language is marked by complexity, fullness, and dissonance. In essence, the piece does not follow a clearly defined tonality, but is rather based on interplay of chords that possess different tonal characteristics.

Resembling the techniques of counterpoint, the vertical harmony in *Le gibet* is often built on intervallic relationships of fourths and fifths. These sonorities convey emotional instability, and at the same time an impression of spatial amplitude. The bell ostinato mentioned above, and its tonal counterpoint in relation to the piece’s overall harmonic plan is illustrated in Example 2.13. As seen in this example, the unaltered sound of the bell figures is not a part of the main harmony. By being juxtaposed with the
chordal texture, it adds a special dissonant flavor to the general harmonic progression. It also creates a number of perfect fourths and perfect fifths sonorities within vertical constructions of the chords which remind of the medieval spirit of this piece.


In other instances throughout the piece, the harmony is heard through slowly moving chords, which are acoustically juxtaposed in their progression, over a single sustained bass note (Example 2.14).

In his book, Martynov provides a detailed harmonic analysis of this example:

The ascending and descending chordal lines are based on a collection of six notes: a whole-tone scale starting on A-flat, with a lowered C-flat. In measures 23 and 24, the harmony is founded on a different group of pitches: all the comprising notes of an octatonic scale, sounding simultaneously. Such complicated harmonies in Ravel’s music possibly emerged under the influence of Rimsky-Korsakov, whose name was often associated with the octatonic scale. In any case, the principle of modal construction was new for Ravel.57

Concomitantly with modal harmony, Ravel makes use of chromatic figurations. In measure 22 (Example 2.15a), within the descending thirds in both hands, the chromatic and octatonic scales are framed by an A-flat ostinato in the bass and the continuous B-flat motive in the higher register. A similar chordal configuration in measure 25 is built on a bass line that moves in intervals of fourths and fifths (Example 2.15b). The chromatic movement remains in the top voice of the chords, most of which, in combination with the bass note, form seventh chords with an added sixth. The overall sonority creates a harmonic impression of a dominant anticipation.


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57 Martynov, 86.
Within only four pages of *Le gibet*, Ravel masterfully incorporates a variety of expressive tasks and ideas. Without diminishing the richness of harmonic color and textural layout, he creates an artistic image that emerges from a single sound, which later becomes a framing background for the entire piece.

**Structure**

*Le gibet* is written in a ternary form with an additional episode. The movement’s main theme consists of two similar melodic segments, sounding alternately. The first melody—“Gallows theme,” as labeled by Jourdan-Morange—is stated in multiple voices in the lower register; and the second, in two voices in the higher register (m. 3-11).

The second theme, full of grief and agony, continues the Gallows theme, which appears here slightly varied rhythmically (m. 12-19). Consisting of two identical configurations in different keys, the theme represents a three-measure episode, where the somber and enigmatic sound of the bell is continued on *pp*.

The transitory section (m. 20-27) lacks expressive melodic lines. This fragment prepares the listener for the central and most melodic episode of the piece (m. 28-34). Following this section, the reprise is introduced in a similarly subtle manner as the previous episodes. The second theme here is expanded by a small melodic segment (m. 35-39). It becomes interrupted by progressions of suspended chords that originate from the transitory episode. The chordal passages are subsequently followed by intonations resembling the movement’s first theme (m. 40-42).

The Gallows theme returns in the last measures on *pp*, thus forming a structural arch for the entire piece. The unchanged solitary sound of the bell in the last three measures of the work dissolve in the silence from where it emerged at the beginning.
Performance aspect

*Le gibet* is described in Jourdan-Morhange’s book: “Everything here is defined by an emotional focus. From beginning to the end, the sound of the bell remains constant and invariable. […] The truth is that the piece requires true mastery and absolute control of the keyboard. While the expressive melody is played by two hands, the bell must sound differently. One must find the appropriate, distinct sound for the one note that completes the piece’s harmonic pallet.”

For a performer, a masterful depiction of all of *Le gibet*’s illustrative possibilities requires constant emotional tension and an extreme focus of attention. Almost the entire piece implies a deep and muted type of sound. Throughout this movement, the sonorities are sustained on the right pedal for long durations of time and thus create an echoic atmosphere. The great necessity for sophisticated pedaling here is most often determined by the bass notes, which represent the fundamental part of the harmony. Within certain episodes, the profound and sustained sound of the bass notes absorb the dissonant sonorities of the remaining texture. For a colorful interpretation of such thick texture, in several cases, and especially in episodes where chords are suspended over long base notes for several measures (m. 21-24), a pianist may apply a vibrating type of pedaling. Whenever a performer needs to achieve a long multi-chordal sustained line, without creating a noisy and overly-dissonant sonority, it is recommended to use vibrating pedaling. This process of pedaling is a three-step procedure: having the pedal pushed all the way down (when a full-sound sustainment is needed); releasing the pedal half-way up (when new layers of sound are added); finding a difference between holding the pedal

58 Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, 28.
half-way up and three-quarters-way up and vibrating the foot within this distance (when
the entire sonority needs to be maintained but none of the previously played material has
to be clearly heard and projected). Although this process requires an attentive
physiological practicing (foot vibrating movement and sensing of the pedal depth), it
must be accompanied by an application of aural skills. The effect of using this type of
pedaling will depend on the aural attention to the sound and a performer’s acoustical
interpretation of a given piece or a section.

Despite its somber character, Le gibet must not involve states of indifference,
passiveness, or calmness. From an illustrative perspective, the softer, more even, and
monotone the piano could sound the more intense the atmosphere would be. Another
important element for performing this piece is the ability to produce multi-timbral
sonorities of the instrument. When heard separately, each voice entails its own, unique
color. Jourdan-Morange mentions: “It is quite difficult to convey all the different timbral
effects, having only two hands.”59 The various colors of sound in Le gibet suggest
sonorities associated with woodwind instruments with a sourdine, or a half-singing voice.

In order to avoid open or bursting tones, it is appropriate to use the soft pedal of
the piano. Conveying orchestral colors through the sound of the piano is one of the
greatest pianistic skills that is expected from every high-caliber performer. Although this
process is only an imitation of instrumental colors, it possesses a specific timbral effect
and a variety of tone-associations with orchestral sonorities. In many instances of
pianistic writing, it is more important to be able to show a number of different colors and
different sound approaches than to actually imitate a particular orchestral instrument. If a

59 Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, 29.
performer will be able to really show a convincing difference in sound between *p*, *pp* and *ppp*, it would be already a great input into the expressiveness of the music. This difference of dynamic levels will instantly create three different tones and possibly three different sound-associations with orchestral colors. It is recommended to tirelessly experiment with a variety of sound approaches within a single phrase or a motive. It is suggested to practice a single musical phrase while experimenting with: degrees of keyboard depth; length of pressure on the keys; differences in hand position and muscular concentration (relaxed or tense); depths of pedaling and lengths of pedaling; dynamic ranges; speed of attack; and varying the combination on all of the above. These practicing points used separately or combined will help a performer discover new timbres and tones of the piano that can be later associated with related orchestral instruments that should be chosen for a particular musical segment.

Another important task for the performer is a clear differentiation of the layers of sound within the pianistic texture, and a synchronic performance of such layers. Within any given chord, there is almost always a line that possesses a highlighted expressive intonation. In *Le gibet*, within a chord in a single hand, two voices are often juxtaposed: the chord’s top voice, and the sound of the bell (m. 12, 13). In such instances, a performer must rely on his/her listening sensitivity and independence of each finger. In this case, for a performer, it is suggested to use the following exercise: choose a section where both hands play constant patterns of thick chords (four to five notes per chord). Repeat the patterns multiple times. Each time, choose a random finger to project a melodic line while others accompany the “soloist”. Changing the focused finger for projection acts as focal point for concentrating on the necessary aural feedback to vary that particular tone
against others, eventually enables the performer to control all the tones better than practicing the same proportion all the time. Once again, aural concentration is a very important factor for success in this task.

The main challenge regarding the articulation in *Le gibet* refers to the constant demand of a flawless *legato*. The desired effect is impossible to achieve only by using the sustaining pedal. In this case, it is necessary to employ a fingered *legato*.

Accomplished French pianist, Marguerite Long writes: “A realization of all the expressive and technical details in this piece is a maximally difficult task. One will need a jeweler’s magnifying glass for not missing a single element.”60

**Scarbo**

**Poem**

*He looked under his bed, in the fireplace, in the trunk—no one. He could not understand how he had gotten in, how he had gotten out.*

HOFFMANN – *Nocturnal Tales*

Oh! How often have I heard and seen him, Scarbo, when at midnight the moon shines in the sky like a silver crown on a blue banner strewn with golden bees.

How often have I heard his laughing murmur in the shadow of my alcove and the grating of his nail on the silk curtain of my bed.

How often have I seen him come down from the ceiling, pirouetting on one foot and rolling through the room like the spindle fallen from the distaff of a witch.

Did I believe he vanished then? The dwarf was growing bigger between the Moon and me, like the tower of a Gothic cathedral, a little golden bell swinging on his pointed cap!

But soon his body turned blue, diaphanous like candle wax, his face grew pale like the wax of a candle stub—and suddenly he was extinguished.61

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60 Long, 105.

61 Wright, 124.
**Genre**

*Scarbo’s* impetuosity and constantly changing nature makes it difficult to characterize the piece within a single genre. Nonetheless, the work incorporates characteristic elements of two important and influential genres within the history of classical music. One of them is the toccata. Its characteristic features such as dexterity, percussiveness, virtuosity, clarity, and reoccurrence of material appear in *Scarbo* in moments filled with intensity, fierceness and sarcasm (Example 2.16). Such episodes are characterized by an effortless type of sound, combined with extreme contrasts of dynamics and articulations.

Example 2.16. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 51-56.

Often, features of toccata reappear in varied versions, as if they were differently orchestrated (m. 51-64, m. 104-108, m. 335-336, and m. 339-340). In some instances, the chordal layout of the toccata-like theme acquires a more massive and projected sonority (Example 2.17).

![Example 2.17](image)

The second stylistic feature in *Scarbo* is the dance-like character that implies the other genre that influenced Ravel. The triple meter of the piece (3/8), its fast tempo, the repetitiveness of the melodic contour with accents on the first beat in the accompaniment—at various times resemble elements of the fast Spanish dance *Jota* (Example 2.18).

Example 2.18. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 90-100.

![Example 2.18](image)

In this case, according to the descriptive qualities of the intended artistic image, the dance acquires a resolute and even menacing character.
Within the dramatic development of *Scarbo*, frequent juxtapositions of contrasting characters are encountered: eccentricity and ferociousness, intense drama and mysterious suspense. In addition, traits of Romantic impulsiveness, with intonations of pain and desperation are present throughout many episodes in the piece, as in, for instance, measures 32-35 (Example 2.19). In this episode, the melodic figuration conveys a feeling of incompleteness, creating an impression as if something is about to break out, and then suddenly disappears. Dramatic eruptions of this kind are repeatedly encountered in *Scarbo*. Throughout the piece, such episodes are characterized by certainty and clarity of tonality and harmony.

Example 2.19. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 32-36.

Throughout the piece, the Romantic stylistic features are presented in constant amplification of emotional and dynamical intensity. The special expressiveness and incandescence of one of the episodes preceding the climax is created by the juxtaposition of two contrasting thematic materials: declamatory (m. 314-317), and dance-like (m. 318-319). By interrupting one another, they suspend the constant forward-moving flow of the piece. Smirnov writes: “Ravel underlines the fantastic character of *Scarbo* by using an elevated type of expression. […] He recreates the anxious state of the sub-consciousness, from which such disturbing images emerge.”
Texture

The illustrative quality of texture in Scarbo is reflected through a wide variety of musical images and sketches. The piece describes impressions and fears that appear in the darkness of the night, with its strange noises, knocking and buzzing. In Scarbo, the hero’s fear and ill psyche create somber visions that transform into hallucinations. The ghostly images become so massive, colorful and significant, to an extent that they create the impression as if the devil himself controls them; but at sunrise, the illusions are gone.

Scarbo involves a homophonic-harmonic type of texture. Despite its transparency and lack of polyphony, the pianistic texture in this piece achieves its full descriptive potential.

For the most part, the texture in Scarbo is based on martelatti and repetitive figurations. By its predominant layout comprised of fast and acute repetitions (almost vibrations) that creates a mystical and disturbing image, the piece shares common features with Prokofiev’s Suggestion diabolique or Liszt’s Mephisto Waltz. In Scarbo’s dance-like theme (m. 94-103), there are similarities with the main theme of Balakirev’s Islamey, and the rhythmic contour of Scriabin’s Ninth Sonata. The repetitive texture is often comprised of a continuous line of sixteenth notes in the left hand, and syncopated, intermittent chords in the right hand. This construction creates an especially clear and fixed rhythmic pulse.

From the very first page of the piece, the pianistic texture clearly demonstrates its figurative and representational purposes and possibilities in this respect (Example 2.20). As if something moved in the dark (m.1), followed by silence; the short moment of quiet
anticipation followed by anxious repetitions, with an accent on the first sound—all of this creates an impression of fear and numbness.


Later (m. 23-29), the atmosphere of anxiety is continued through an acute chordal tremolo. Here, within a very short period of time, the tremolo emerges from silence, amplifies to an extreme dynamical level, and disappears once again into nowhere, as if something horrifying suddenly appeared and instantly disappeared.

Texture in *Scarbo* is clearly distinct from the flowing melodiousness of *Ondine*. Nevertheless, fragmental motives, with their unexpected turns, syncopations, accents and interruptions, are an essential part of the piece’s texture. As seen in measures 121-130 (Example 2.21), impressions of mystery anticipation are masterfully depicted through suspended chords and repetitions of a single note (E) within three octaves, on a *ppp* dynamic. The dry, acute chords within the texture reflect the appearance of *Scarbo*, and its sudden disappearance (120-122).
Example 2.21. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 121-133.

In addition to the main, repetitive texture, the piece incorporates chordal figurations (m. 228-234) and virtuosic passages over the entire keyboard. They create intense waves of sound, with their characteristic extreme increase and decrease of dynamic: *ppp* – *f* – *pp*.

The excerpt below (Example 2.22), consisting of several layers of sound, exhibits the instrument’s full coloristic pallet. The rich texture in this episode involves unique chordal passages, moving over the entire keyboard.


An original textural innovation in this piece is seen in the passages build on major seconds in the right hand, in the last section of the piece (Example 2.23).
The pianistic texture in *Scarbo* often involves sonorities that imitate orchestral colors. In her book, author Jourdan-Morhange writes: “The three introductory notes are the core of *Scarbo*’s main theme. Ravel wrote in my score: ‘as a contrabassoon,’ (m. 1) and later: ‘as a small drum’ (m. 2-6). […] And here Ravel told me: ‘as timpani’ (m. 366-371).”\(^{62}\) It is possible to find more similarities between the pianistic texture in *Scarbo* and sonorities of other orchestral instruments. For instance, the passages in measures 228-234 resemble the sound of a harp; the repetitions in measures 94-108 sound as a xylophone, and etc. In the closing episode, imitating the sound of strings (m. 616-623), the texture in the right hand depicts an image of rustling leaves and sparkling rays of light.

**Structure**

In his book, Smirnov states: “*Scarbo* is written in a sonata form, without deviation from its classical organization. The piece’s clearly defined form does not interfere with the demonic character of the music.”\(^{63}\) The formal structure of *Scarbo* is based on the development of a series of themes or motives: 1. The first motive consisting of three ascending notes (m. 1); 2. The same motive transformed into an extended melody of a

\(^{62}\) Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, 30-31.

\(^{63}\) Smirnov, 84.
romantic character (m. 32-35); 3. The third, toccata-like motive divided into two parts (m. 52-56); 4. A motive with elements of a dance in triple meter emerging from the toccata motive (m. 96-99); 5. Six syncopated chords with a delay on the second chord (sometimes with an added chord).

Throughout the piece, these motives are developed in a variety of ways. Their multitudes of transformations create an element of improvisation within the organization of musical form. For instance, one of the unique features of the Exposition is that the two themes (in this case, the first and second motive) are stated twice in various ways. The first statement of the first motive (Example 2.24) instantly creates an atmosphere of darkness and horror. Its second statement is a Romantic outburst. The first statement of the second motive (Example 2.25) is sporadic, mysterious, and sharply articulated. Its second statement reminds of a tarantella.

Example 2.24. Maurice Ravel. Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo. First motive, mm. 1-10.
Example 2.25. Maurice Ravel. Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo. Second motive, mm. 52-57.

The constant thematic diversity in combination with fragmentation of form disguises sonata form used in Scarbo. A clear arrangement of the piece’s form is, first of all, an interpretive challenge. It is based on the performer’s ability to organize the work’s climactic sections in correlation to the logical development of its narrative climate.

**Rhythm**

A precise interpretation of Ravel’s rhythmic markings in Scarbo directly impacts the depiction of its artistic image. The work’s passionate and impulsive flow depends on the preservation of its clear and strict rhythm in all of its forms. If strictness of tempo and rhythmic markings are ignored for an exaggerated freedom of interpretation, the intended musical narration and imagery may suffer.

The rests in this piece are of major importance, since they directly represent a continuation of action in music. The accents and syncopations, very often encountered in Scarbo, may be symbolically called the mystical dwarf’s language of gestures. The rhythmic foundation of the piece derives from dance origins. It requires an artistic ability to depict special musical characteristics through rhythmic feel, typical for the fast, energetic dances such as Jota or Tarantella.

Although polyrhythm in Scarbo is not as clearly manifested as it is in Ondine, the piece incorporates complex rhythmic juxtapositions in both hands. For instance, there
are: three eighth notes against five sixteenths, and three eights against four sixteenths (Example 2.26). The piece’s triple meter is at times hidden within ten sixteenth notes in a single measure (Example 2.27), and its juxtaposition with the left hand accompaniment, which divides the measure into two beats (Example 2.28)


Example 2.27. Maurice Ravel. *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 249-251.
Example 2.28. Maurice Ravel. *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 460-467.

Performance aspect

Without a doubt, the musical and technical difficulty of the entire Gaspard would challenge any pianist. This is especially true if a performer would try to precisely interpret all of the composer’s markings written in the score. In her book, Long cites Ravel: “I do not ask for pianists to interpret my music. For me, it is enough if they play it.”

The brilliant virtuosity in *Scarbo* is entirely directed by Ravel’s artistic intention. The transcendence of the musical images depicted in the piece predetermines its transcendental pianistic difficulty. As previously mentioned, the texture of *Scarbo* is filled with repetitions, long arpeggiated and chordal passages, figurations entirely comprised of intervals of major and minor seconds, wide leaps, sudden changes of
registers and dynamics, challenging articulations and complex rhythmic shapes. The practicing suggestions in the following paragraphs will be based on the example below:

Example 2.29. Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 90-100.

For a reader’s better understanding of the proposed technical recommendations, it is reminded that the tempo here is extremely fast and the musical material presented in this excerpt (particularly measures 94-100) represents one of the main motivic developments and is repeatedly varied throughout the composition. The large chords in the left hand in measures 90 and 92 can be practiced as arpeggiated chords (for most performers they must be arpeggiated, due to hand size). In order to accurately place the top note of the left hand chord exactly on the beat, the arpeggiation should begin slightly before. Slow practice of starting to play the chords earlier will become a habitual action when it is played in fast tempo. It will help avoid inaccuracy and an aggressive sound-attack, in case of a faster speed.

Measures 94-100 introduce a challenge of fast repetitions on the same note—a technique very often encountered in *Scarbo*. First of all, it is recommended to keep the cross-handed position (as it is implied by the composer) even in case of practicing hands
separate. This way, the pianist will get used to the unusual position of the hands and its increased pressure within the given technical difficulty. Obviously, it is the right hand that has to overcome the challenge; however, the cross-handed position could provoke a pianistic inconvenience for the left hand too (because of the right hand, or vice-versa). Although the sound of the repeated notes has to be ideally sharp and crisp, it could be dangerous to overuse the *staccato* articulation for this particular example, for both practicing and performance. In order to mentally control and support the repeated notes for the sake of avoiding an actual motion-attack per each repeated note, it is recommended to divide this line into smaller motives. Instead of viewing this motive as being comprised of eleven separate notes, it is suggested to think of this figuration as two repeated notes followed by three ascending notes, then three repeated notes followed by three descending notes (Example 2.30). It is desirable to connect the moving notes within this pattern, since this will not reduce the effect of sharpness and crispiness in the final tempo. The remaining single-note repetitions will maintain a staccato effect for the entire line, even with the connecting links inside.


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To overcome technical challenges within the piece, a pianist must patiently work on developing or mastering the pianistic skills required to accurately execute such complex texture. At the same time, it is important to explore, understand, and solve the artistic-interpretive tasks of the piece. This process necessitates that pianists are in the receptive frame of mind for imagination and creativity. This is essential for allowing immediate reaction and response to all the unexpected turns in the music and to maintain a sense of proportion and balance, and at the same time having the courage ready for risk-taking.

Within the aesthetics of sound in Scarbo, a pianist must not exclude using acuteness of touch, and aim for extreme contrasts within the changes of dynamics and articulation.

Example 2.31. Maurice Ravel, Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo, mm. 32-36.

The melodic line in Example 2.31 contains a hidden technical challenge that could be harmful to the quality of the passage if not carefully observed and approached. This is a very passionate and dramatic moment that requires intense sound and extreme dynamic outburst from a performer. A dangerous part of this episode is that the single-voiced passages in the left hand are moving quickly across wide intervals and are texturally weak in terms of sound projection. Being recognized as the moving line that supports the general crescendo, they may automatically but erroneously inform the
pianist to overstress the possibilities of the left hand and therefore negatively impact the control over the sound at high dynamics. It is recommended to concentrate the dynamic growth within the right hand chords and keep the left hand increasing its dynamic only up to the third beat of measure 32 and first beat of measure 33 (especially). The same idea applies to the third beat of measure 35 and the first beat of measure 36. Two highlighting points of the arpeggios (the highest notes of the runs) will be at a higher risk of being missed or acquiring a harsh tone if played with extreme intensity and edgy sound projection in an attempt to satisfy the dynamic markings in the score.

The difficulty of pedaling in this piece often consists of maintaining a certain timbral color while hearing a clear and focused sound. A long echoing pedal is required only in the expanded episode of the recapitulation (m. 430 and on), where the layout of the musical material resembles the texture of *Ondine*.

A precise interpretation of the complex rhythmic figurations within the piece’s texture will only enhance the expressivity of the depicted musical images. For instance, in measures 162-167 (Example 2.32), the quick chordal segments divided by short rests, with accents on the weak beats, create a complex syncopated figuration. In some interpretations, such rhythms sound somewhat plain, which causes not only slackness of the motive itself, but also loss of pulse within the flow of the larger musical unit.
Example 2.32. Maurice Ravel. *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 159-170.

The passage work in this piece involves vitality and crispiness of sound (Example 2.33). In this case, ease of touch is recommended, as if sliding, without an actual attack in the higher and middle registers of the passage.

Example 2.33. Maurice Ravel. *Gaspard de la nuit, Scarbo*, mm. 227-236.
Certain similarities may be found within the dance-like repetitive figurations in *Scarbo* (m. 94-108), and the repetitions in *Alborada del gracioso*. Firmly focused, and at the same time flexible fingers, resembling a plucking action, might possibly facilitate this particular technical challenge for a performer.

Orchestral thinking is a necessary skill for every pianist who works on this piece and who wants to achieve great performance results. One of the most interesting orchestral effects is found in measures 2 - 6, as previously mentioned—the sound of a small drum. The long repetition over one note would possibly appear a less challenging technical task, if not regarded as a certain number of strictly measured thirty-seconds, but rather perceived as one single, vibrating note. In this case, the use of a single finger for the entire repetition would help achieve a maximally even sonority of vibration (without lifting the finger, and holding it one position on a pressed key).

Generally, a performer’s goal of conveying orchestral colors through the sound of the keyboard can only enrich the pianistic arsenal of coloristic and timbral tools used for artistic expression. Effects of orchestral sonorities may be found in almost every episode in *Scarbo*. 
CONCLUSION

Music texture reflects a composer’s individual approach in choosing a unique musical language that aims to deliver information to a performer and eventually to a listener. Of the compositional vehicles through which the musical expression is delivered, music texture may be one that is most reflective of the composer’s artistic individuality. As in painting, analysis of texture is essential to understand, as it is what carries the information. This process of delivery, in music, is carried out by the performer who needs to receive the intended musical message through the score, before it is executed accordingly to reach the listener’s ears. Therefore, the analysis is of particular importance to every musician who interacts with it—composer, performer, and listener.

Based on the example of Maurice Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit*, this research suggests a potential approach for a performer’s investigation within the process of learning any piece, using musical and technical knowledge that will allow him or her to create an individual interpretation. It is desirable that every pianist with serious and responsible intentions for professional performing to thoroughly investigate every possible area surrounding any composition chosen to be learned and performed. It is the author’s belief that in order to play a piece, a pianist must know its fundamental elements: the artistic intentions and stylistic features as represented in the score, and the composer’s personality and general musical language.

Ravel’s extraordinary personality and the unique dedication to his compositional life deserve limitless curiosity and exploration from the musical society around the world. The fact that he so carefully and patiently worked on all of his compositions, planning and choosing micro details in order to create an artistic completion tells that music was
truly a language for this master. It seems that his expectation from performers to follow and execute all of his markings with extreme precision was an attempt to point out that his musical language is not an abstract formula, but rather a very clear, understandable, and meaningful way of communication.


