

The Cambridge Companion to

RAVEL

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5 Harmony in the chamber music

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Ravel's popular, if somewhat misleading, identification as an 'impressionist' composer depends on three categories of his achievement: orchestral music, piano music and vocal music, including operas as well as songs. His chamber music is of another stripe, revealing another all-important side of his musical persona: it is classically based absolute music, without ties to texts, literary references or descriptive titles. In this regard as in so many others, he is like Debussy, but, while Debussy's chamber music frames his career at beginning and end, Ravel's chamber music follows his career throughout, providing significant landmarks at different stages.¹

Ravel's chamber music, like his piano music, inclines to formal variety, yet always as concisely and precisely as the classical masters whom he so much admired. One never finds the formal adventurousness and only seldom the textural experimentation that characterise the musical 'impressionism' of his most radical piano works like *Gaspard de la nuit*. Yet the essential wholeness of Ravel's personal style is never in doubt; the highly individual melodic idiom and the integrity of his harmonic language are unified between the chamber music and all the other works, in continuous evolution from the beginning of his maturity to the end of his career.

In its instrumentation and instrumental sound, Ravel's chamber music is often a reflection, though of course on a smaller scale, of his search for large timbral dimensions, as though the colouristic richness of his orchestral works could find an effective tableau in a chamber setting. The String Quartet and the *Introduction et allegro* have striking passages of very full and brilliant sound that one can easily imagine in a full orchestration (a point endorsed by the Tortelier orchestration of the Piano Trio). The *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1913) certainly counts as a chamber work in which the resources of the 'impressionist' orchestra are recreated with just nine players, but the dynamic range is small, and the instrumental colours mobilised with great subtlety in support of the highly expressive harmony. The contrast thirteen years later with the *Chansons madécasses* could not be sharper, with voice supported only by flute (doubling piccolo), cello and piano; this work – the very antithesis of 'impressionist' heterophony – shows variously a spare linearity, a percussive density and a thin, almost vanishing texture. The large-scale counterpart, orchestrationally speaking,

of the *Chansons madécasses* is the opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, completed the previous year (1925), which is a panorama of Ravel's orchestral styles. The resplendent richness of *Daphnis et Chloé* forms part of the sound of *L'Enfant*, but so does a chamber music-like vocal support: the two oboes with solo double-bass harmonics at the beginning (up to Fig. 2); the Princess's song in two-part counterpoint with a solo flute (Fig. 63⁻³); unaccompanied string solos with clarinets before the Cats' duet (Fig. 95). At one point, the Mother's voice is accompanied by a solo string quartet (Fig. 4), as dramatically and stylistically striking an instrumental function as the solo string quartet that appears fleetingly in the second movement of Mahler's Fourth Symphony.

Early Sonata for Violin and Piano

This student work, a single movement of 1897, was first published only in 1975, during the Ravel centennial year. It shows the twenty-two-year-old Ravel as a less accomplished composer than Debussy was at the same age when he won the Prix de Rome. As a sonata form it suffers from a disproportionately long and slow-moving development section; by way of compensation, the recapitulation is nicely varied and abbreviated. The harmonic language, on the other hand, is already original and well developed, with many harbingers of Ravel's later work. Most striking is the A minor tonality alternating with major, regularly inflected with the dorian raised sixth, F#, and the phrygian/Neapolitan flattened second, Bb. Orenstein has pointed out the melodic resemblance of the opening melody to a passage in the first movement of the Piano Trio, composed seventeen years later;² the harmonic resemblance is even more remarkable. At the same time, the very identification of A minor in this work points to Ravel's obsession, one might even say, with a characteristic A minor style that recurs in the 'Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant' of *Ma Mère l'Oye*, the Sonata for Violin and Cello, the Scherzo movement of the String Quartet and the Piano Trio.

Harmony and tradition in the String Quartet

Even the very title of Debussy's masterpiece of 1893, 'First String Quartet in G minor, Opus 10', had proclaimed an allegiance to the classical tradition in chamber music, and this may well have impressed Debussy's fellow composers in the Société Nationale de Musique (SN) even if they were not to realise that Debussy had never before and would never again use opus

numbers. In 1893, of course, Debussy was nearly ten years out of the Conservatoire but still relatively unknown. Ten years later, the twenty-eight-year-old Ravel, a late bloomer at the Conservatoire, found much to admire in Debussy's brilliant manipulation of sonata form and four-movement cyclic procedures. As Debussy's had done ten years before, Ravel's String Quartet (1902-3; rev. 1910) served to establish his reputation decisively at the beginning of his public career.

The outward features of Ravel's modelling on Debussy's Quartet are obvious enough: the flying pizzicato in the Scherzo; the beginning of the third movement in the key of the second, with an early modulation to a remote main key; the pervasive cyclic treatment of themes.³ Yet, today, it is the mere fact of Debussy and Ravel writing string quartets at all, ten years apart, that causes the two works to be paired so frequently on the same recording. (César Franck's String Quartet in D major, a cyclic model for Debussy's Quartet, is the only other French string quartet⁴ composed a quarter-century on either side of 1900 that is widely performed today.) Debussy supposedly said to Ravel, 'Don't change a single note of your Quartet', but this remark, if true, was surely more than a flattered response to sincere imitation, because Debussy, even recognising Ravel's obvious admiration, certainly would also have recognised how independent, and how different from his own, was Ravel's Quartet.

In dedicating the Quartet 'to my dear master Gabriel Fauré', Ravel acknowledged his debt in the music itself; the first eight bars of the first movement could easily have been composed by Fauré.⁴ Nevertheless, the beginning of the Quartet reveals much about Ravel's classical sense of harmony, and it is above all in harmony, even with a modern vocabulary, that Ravel shows the classical ancestry that marks his mature style. Much more strongly than in Debussy, Ravel's music is characterised above all by classical triad-based root progression and bass line, notwithstanding the abundant appearances of non-classical succession, with parallel chords, remote juxtapositions and chords whose essential structure is complicated by non-harmonic notes.

The opening bars (Example 5.1) can be heard as a succession of separate root functions changing every crotchet, with sevenths and ninths entering or leaving more or less without regard to classical stepwise resolution; but this would be a narrow view. In practice, one hears this mellow passage as harmony regulated by the primary tonal chords of I, IV and V and by the inexorability of the 'voice-leading'⁵ in the second violin and cello, in parallel tenths. The melody line in the soprano, with its abundance of small skips, shows the freest voice-leading in this texture; when the tonic note appears relatively infrequently in the melody, it is not as part of the tonic triad.

Example 5.1 String Quartet, I (bars 1-4)

Allegro moderato - Très doux

Example 5.2 String Quartet, I (bars 55-7)

The second theme, beginning at bar 55 (Example 5.2; Letter D), is treated even more characteristically. The underlying harmony is the tonic of D minor, but the melody, typically for Ravel, stresses something other than the tonic degree in a succession of repeated small motives; here the emphasised tone is E, the ninth above D; D itself appears in this melody only in passing. When the same melody appears in exactly the same register in the recapitulation (from bar 183), it is harmonised in F major, the two bass notes, C and F (instead of A and D), and the E now the seventh above F. Examined in isolation, this melody might well be heard as defining A minor with a phrygian flattened second (B \flat), but this beloved aural image does not appear with A minor harmonisation in this Quartet.

Other characteristic harmonic devices of Ravel's mature style make important appearances in this movement. One is the inverted ninth sonority. A few paradigms will show the principle of several related sonorities (Example 5.3). In form *a*, we see an ordinary diminished seventh chord whose seventh, G, is replaced by an appoggiatura, A; the A, on the other hand, is identical with the missing root of the complete ninth chord. Because the ninth in this sonority, B \flat , is now below the root, we call it an inverted ninth chord, drawing attention to the fact that this position is normally prohibited in classical harmony. Rewriting the third of the chord, C \sharp , enharmonically as D \flat (form *b*), we now have the diminished

Example 5.3 Chord forms

(a) app. (b) app. (c) app. (d)

d: inv. 9th F: V⁹ (9) F: V¹³ F#⁷ (#/b3)

seventh chord in a different key, F, in which the missing root is C, and the A is an appoggiatura to the fifth of the chord. If the D \flat appoggiatura ninth is replaced in this chord by C, the true root, then we have an ordinary dominant seventh with appoggiatura thirteenth (form c). Substitute for this bass a new root a tritone below, F \sharp , and a dominant seventh (as of B) results, with mixed major and minor third, B \flat being rewritten enharmonically as A \sharp . All four of these related harmonies are found in connection with variant statements of the main theme in this movement. Form a is hinted at in bar 46, form b at bar 25, form c in bar 2 and form d in the *fff* climax of bar 119. (Forms c and d can be combined in alternation in a descending chromatic sequence over a circle-of-fourths bass; the result, beloved of jazz composers, has one of its earliest appearances at bar 25 of 'Le Gibet'.)⁶

The secondary focus on A that we have noted in connection with the second theme of the first movement becomes a primary focus in the second movement, 'Assez vif – Très rythmé', where the A focuses the vigorous 'natural-minor' theme. (The term 'natural minor' equates essentially to the aeolian mode although it does imply a greater retention of tonal function.) A fandango style is apparent in the guitar-like strumming, but also in the phrygian flattened second, B \flat , that adjoins the A minor harmony from time to time. Secondary thematic material appears almost at the outset with an abrupt shift to C \sharp minor (dorian inflection); both themes are extensively developed in the contrasting Trio section as well as in the Scherzo proper.

The third movement, 'Très lent', is also the most wide-ranging in form, with the main sections of a simple ternary form surrounded and interspersed with recitative-like episodes, beginning with the A minor still echoing from the previous movement. The first main section, in G \flat major, recalls Fauré's *mélodie* style; it is answered by a cyclic reminiscence from the first movement. After another fantasia-like episode, the mutes are removed and the second main section appears, an expressive *cantabile* in Ravel's beloved A minor with a dorian raised sixth, F \sharp , and an accompanimental pattern arpeggiated across the four strings of the first violin. (The

Example 5.4 String Quartet: melodic comparisons

(a) IV (bars 186–8); I (bars 1–2)

(b) IV (bars 69–71); I (bars 55–6)

fortissimo climax of this section, 'Modéré' and 'passionné', is another of Ravel's aural images: almost note-for-note, this same melody and harmony reappears in *Daphnis et Chloé*, at the moment where Lyceion drops her second veil.) F \sharp major harmony makes a significant appearance in this A minor section, forming a tonal connection with the returning G \flat major that closes the movement.

The finale of Ravel's Quartet is the longest of the four movements in terms of bars (272). Once again, the A minor centring predominates over the nominal F major, beginning with the main rondo theme in 5/8 (a theme that resembles the main gesture in Debussy's finale). Contrasting subsections in 5/4 and 3/4 introduce subsidiary themes that, in both shape and harmonisation, recall first-movement material, as shown in the comparative illustrations of Example 5.4a and b. Even while ceding melodic primacy to the recurrent A, it is F major that achieves supremacy as the overall tonality. When the main rondo theme returns at the end, it centres on F, and the A is left for the uppermost voice of the final F major triad. (See also Woodley, 'String Quartet: comparison of recordings': Chapter 10.)

Bifocal tonality in the *Introduction et allegro*

For sheer amiability and relaxed sensuousness, no work by Ravel surpasses his *Introduction et allegro* for flute, clarinet, string quartet and solo harp. This all-important emblem of the harpist's soloistic repertory was written, according to Ravel's own testimony, in just a few days in 1905, on commission from the Erard Company, renowned manufacturer of pianos and

harps. Again it is worth comparing Ravel's work here with Debussy's: in this case with the *Danse sacrée et danse profane* for harp and string orchestra, written in 1904 for Gustave Lyon and the harp class of the Brussels Conservatory, and frequently paired with Ravel's in recordings. Debussy's dances are restrained and even austere, but no less sensuous in their subtlety, without so much as a hint of the harp's most characteristic gesture, the glissando; Ravel's is a brilliant virtuoso piece, making full use of the technical and timbral resources of the harp, with a lushness of colour that never becomes excessively emotional. In the small ensemble of seven players, Ravel was able to achieve a remarkably full instrumental sound, carefully employing arpeggios, multiple stops, colouristic changes and registral extremes in a way that would have done credit to a much larger group.

The *Introduction et allegro* is a good illustration of Ravel's mastery of bifocal tonality of relative major and minor, in which the G \flat major of the first theme of the 'Allegro' and the E \flat minor of the second theme are constantly associated and contrasted. The two keys are especially suitable for the pedal harp, particularly in a context that supports E \flat natural minor and a black-key pentatonicity. In a natural-minor context, E \flat minor only seldom receives tonicising support from its own dominant. Thus the listener's perception of G \flat major versus E \flat minor is constantly changing, often depending on whether the one or the other key-note is in the bass or in the melody, and constantly tending to associate the two keys aurally as a single 'superkey'.⁷

The sections of the 'Allegro' are well defined by these two keys and effectively developed, but the formal outline is closer to a three-part form than to a sonata form. The G \flat major first theme begins at bar 26 (Fig. 2), the E \flat minor second theme at bar 78 (Fig. 6) and, in lieu of a development, a third theme (based on bar 1 of the 'Introduction') in a slower tempo at bar 100 (Fig. 8) which combines with the first theme. This third theme, with muted strings, is like an interior slow movement of the type so favoured by Franck and his descendants; this in turn is followed by an intensification of the third theme alone in a single key, leading then to a tutti climax and a long cadenza for solo harp; only then does the first theme return in a formal recapitulation.

The climactic *fff* at bar 200 (Fig. 17), a succession of appoggiaturas over a diminished seventh chord, is another example of Ravel's favouring the inverted ninth sonority in structurally dramatic situations. We saw it at bar 119 of the first movement of the String Quartet, but Ravel had already used it in a startling chromatic cascade in bar 5 of 'Asie' in his *Shéhérazade* songs; in another year he would make a similar outburst the centrepiece of 'Oiseaux tristes', with important echoes in 'Alborada del gracioso'.

Example 5.5 *Introduction et allegro* (bar 328ff.; Fig. 28)

In the coda, the association of $G\flat$ major and $E\flat$ minor is strengthened by the simultaneous combination of their dominants, as illustrated by Example 5.5 (Fig. 28). The dominant root of $G\flat$ wins out in this duel of inverted ninth versus dominant thirteenth, $D\flat$ moving decisively to the $G\flat$ bass, but the $E\flat$ in the melody nevertheless remains strong. (We might compare these bars with bars 24–5 of the first movement of the String Quartet.)

(See also
Endnotes,
next
page.)

[This excerpt represents approximately half of my article as originally published in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, Cambridge University Press 2000. The remainder of the essay is easily obtainable in the book itself, which is still in print, and I urge you to buy it, or at least to borrow it from the library, in order to become familiar with the varied and informative analytical work by myself and ten other colleagues. I thank Cambridge University Press for granting permission to reprint this portion.]

5 Harmony in the chamber music

1 With the exception of the String Quartet (1893), a masterpiece for all time, and the three late sonatas (1915–17) that he completed out of a projected set of six, Debussy's instrumental chamber music is of relatively

lesser importance. Of the half-dozen pieces of chamber music from his student years, the Piano Trio, composed probably in 1880 or 1881, is a particularly well-constructed example. From the middle years, there are only the *Petite pièce* for clarinet and piano (1910), *Syrinx* for solo flute (1913) and the two *Rapsodies* for saxophone (1908) and clarinet (1910); these last two are really solo pieces with orchestra. The short fragments of incidental music to accompany recitations of Pierre Louÿs's *Chansons de Bilitis*, for two flutes, two harps and celesta (1900–1) constitute a special case.

2 Orenstein, *Ravel*, 144.

3 Another surprising debt to Debussy's Quartet is found in Ravel's *Alcyone*, his 1902 cantata for the Prix de Rome; Ravel's melody for the trombones where 'the ship is tossed by the waves' (p. 50) is a direct borrowing from the second theme in the first movement of Debussy's Quartet. It can be seen in Orenstein, *Ravel*, plate 22.

4 See also Kelly, 'Ravel and his immediate predecessors': Chapter 1.

5 For more on voice-leading – essentially 'part-writing' – see Mawer, 'Analytical aside': Chapter 7 (and Russ, Chapter 6).

6 See Walter Piston and Mark DeVoto, *Harmony* (London: Gollancz, 1978; 5/1987), 524; see also H. H. Stuckenschmidt, 'Debussy or Berg? The mystery of a chord progression', *Musical Quarterly*, 51 (July 1965), 453–9.

7 The great harpist Carlos Salzedo stated explicitly that the key of the *Introduction et allegro* was G♭ major: personal communication to the author, 1951. See also Mark DeVoto, 'The Russian submediant in the nineteenth century', *Current Musicology*, 59 (1995), 48–76.