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A Bridge over Troubled Water: *Le tombeau de Couperin*

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Abstract

Le tombeau de Couperin was composed during a turbulent time in the life of Ravel, a time when he had been emotionally scarred from the effects of war and had lost both his mother and many of his close friends. This composition may have served as the only friend whom Ravel felt comfortable enough to share with his innermost feelings. Autobiographical in nature, this piece follows the transition from Ravel's carefully nurtured childhood and youth to serious maturity in his post-war adult life. There is personal emotional depth found in this piece, although at first it may appear somewhat hidden behind the classically ordered form and impressionistic harmony. *Le tombeau*, begun in 1914 and finished in 1917, serves as a bridge between Ravel's pre- and post-war music.

Keywords

Le tombeau de Couperin, Ravel

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A Bridge over Troubled Water:

Le tombeau de Couperin

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When you're weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all.
I'm on your side.
When times get rough
And friends just can't be found,
Like a bridge over troubled water,
I will lay me down.
~ Paul Simon

Simon and Garfunkel's critically and commercially acclaimed seventies hit, "Bridge over Troubled Water," may represent Maurice Ravel's sentiments portrayed in his solo piano work, *Le tombeau de Couperin*. *Le tombeau de Couperin*, hereafter referred to as *Le tombeau*, was composed during a turbulent time in the life of Ravel, a time when he had been emotionally scarred from the effects of war and had lost both his mother and many of his close friends. Autobiographical in nature, this piece follows the transition from Ravel's carefully nurtured childhood and youth to serious maturity in his post-war adult life. There is personal emotional depth found in this piece, although at first it may appear somewhat hidden behind the

classically ordered form.¹ *Le tombeau*, begun in 1914 and finished in 1917, serves as a bridge between Ravel's pre- and post-war music.

The emotional depth and musical construction of *Le tombeau* may be directly linked to Ravel's early musical experiences greatly influenced by his parents' nurturing. Born in southwestern France in a Basque village in 1875, he was the first child of Pierre Joseph Ravel and Marie Delouart. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to Paris. His father, an engineer by profession, and his mother, closely connected with the high fashion industry as a model, greatly influenced Ravel. Due to his mother's interest in fashion, Ravel held high regard for what was not only aesthetically pleasing but also meticulous in workmanship as exemplified by his engineering father. In his music, "Ravel used to say everything that had to be done, but above all...what was not to be done."² He was attentive to creating scores with explicit details on the use of pedal, fingering, and dynamics among other things, so those who performed his work knew exactly how he did and did not want the composition to sound when performed.

The impact his father had on him and his compositions is demonstrated by the attention Ravel required of himself in every detail. His father, an amateur pianist, helped to advance Maurice's musical upbringing by sending him to his first piano teacher at the age of seven in 1882. Five years later Ravel began to study harmony and produce his first compositions of variations based on works by Robert Schumann and Edvard Grieg. He continued his musical training in piano and harmony at the Paris Conservatoire in 1889, but after failing to win any significant prizes while there he left the Conservatoire in 1895. After this he decided to dedicate himself to composition and returned to the Conservatoire in 1897 to study composition with Gabriel Fauré. These early musical experiences spanning Ravel's childhood through early adulthood helped to shape his career as a musician.

After Ravel decided to devote himself to music composition, he attempted to win the Prix de Rome between 1900 and 1905, with his musical works. This was an annual scholarship for exceptional artists

¹ H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel: Variations on His Life and Work*, (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1968), 173-174.

² Vlado Perlemuter and H el ene Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel According to Ravel*, (White Plains, NY: Pro/Am Music Resources, 1988), 3.

determined through a strict elimination process. He took this competition very seriously and entered his compositions five times, yet he was never selected for the award. The general public believed this was an erroneous decision on the part of the jury based on Ravel's high standing in the Société nationale de musique (National Society of Music).³ Ravel had already established himself as a reputable composer in the Société nationale. He accomplished this in 1901 with his solo piano composition, *Jeux d'eau*, and in 1904 with his String Quartet in F Major. Ravel's inability to conform to the Conservatoire's standards frustrated him, and he became apprehensive of their authority. Even though Ravel was unable to win the Prix de Rome, he had already begun to distinguish himself as a notable composer through some of his early compositions.

Through the continued assistance of Fauré, a few of Ravel's works began to be performed at the Société nationale. While he was recognized as a distinguished composer by many of his supporters, other critics were not convinced his compositions were composed in a style unique to himself. Instead he was condemned by critics for being only an imitator of Debussy. They even began to claim that Ravel plagiarized Debussy's works. This soon became the stereotypical argument concerning the two composers.⁴ While Ravel acknowledged his respect for Debussy as a composer, he claimed his music was developing a new kind of music separate from the style of Debussy. Even though Debussy served as an idol for Ravel in his days as a student at the Conservatoire, Ravel believed Debussy lacked discipline in regard to his use of compositional form.⁵ His music lacked structure. While Debussy created musical impressionism, which some considered to the point of exhaustion, Ravel remained faithful to classic structures by renewing them through his use of harmony.⁶ Nevertheless, the public rarely ceased to compare the compositions of Ravel and

³ The National Society of Music was founded in 1871 in an effort to continue the works of the French tradition. This was accomplished in concerts by the presentation of works by living French composers and through the resurrection of French music from the past.

⁴ M.D. Calvocoressi, "Maurice Ravel." *The Musical Times* 54, no. 850 (1913): 785 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/907706>.

⁵ Deborah Mawer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14-15.

⁶ Alfredo Casella, "Ravel's Harmony." *The Musical Times* 67, no. 996 (1926), 125, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912946>.

Debussy. Due to these conflicts among the public, Debussy and Ravel grew distant from one another despite their early appreciation for each other's compositions. It had become too hard for them to create compositions that the public would value as unique works, each in their own style.

As Ravel was establishing himself as a distinctive composer, he decided to join a group of literary, musical, and artistic colleagues called the Les apaches ("The Ruffians") who met to share ideas on literature, music, and art. This group included the music critic, M. D. Calvocoressi. Calvocoressi later published critiques on Ravel and his works, saying, "being remarkably purposeful, shrewd, and cool-headed, he has deliberately yielded to his nature, as every true artist should."⁷ Ravel's familiarity with literary compositions is evident in his musical works. This is observed specifically in *Le tombeau* as he uses the structure of Malayan *pantun* poetry in many of the movements including the Rigaudon.⁸ *Pantun* poetry often starts and ends with the same line, and the Rigaudon begins and ends with the same two identical measures. This is just one example of his use of *pantun* poetry within *Le tombeau*.

In 1909, Ravel took it upon himself with the help of a few others, including Fauré, to found Société musicale indépendante (Independent Music Society). Ravel's decision to break from the Société nationale was due, in part, to the fact that it was directed by the Schola cantorum, a school which emphasized studies in counterpoint and composition in the classical form through historical studies. The Schola cantorum was "distinctly hostile" towards him, and Ravel sought independence from their restricting authority.⁹ The Schola cantorum viewed Ravel as an outsider and this led to discord between Ravel and some of the members in the Société nationale. In an effort to publicize and perform French and foreign modern music without any exclusion of genre or style, Ravel founded the Société musicale indépendante. This was different from the Société nationale de musique which sought only to promote French music.

After World War I broke out in the summer of 1914, Ravel attempted to enlist in the Air Force as a pilot many times but was denied for being

⁷ Calvocoressi, "Maurice Ravel," 785.

⁸ Mawer, "Cambridge Companion," 89-90.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

four pounds underweight. Feeling strong ties to his country and a desire to serve, Ravel finally became a driver for the motor transport corps in March 1915. It was then that he served behind the lines at the Battle of Verdun, the longest and most brutal battle in the history of warfare.¹⁰ While Ravel suffered little physical harm, this experience affected him mentally for the rest of his life. In September 1916, Ravel became ill with dysentery. While he was recovering in Paris, his mother died in early 1917, leaving Ravel devastated. His relationship with his mother had been closer than any other relationship in his family. Despite these hardships, Ravel continued to compose. During this time Ravel developed an interest in the familiar classical forms of past French music as a form of refuge for his emotions while also becoming more receptive to the musical traditions of Europe beyond his French homeland.¹¹

This piece serves as a link between his early and late compositions.¹² Due to his poor health, he limited himself to composing only orchestral works, mostly orchestrations from his own previously written solo works, from the beginning of 1918 to the end of 1919. He no longer composed any solo piano works after this time. Even *Le tombeau*, Ravel's last solo piano work ever composed, was later orchestrated in 1919 (except for two of the movements), showing the significance this piece portrayed as unique among Ravel's compositional output. *Le tombeau* was a result of the compositional change in Ravel's style brought about by the war, his sickness, and his mother's death.

Following the composition of *Le tombeau*, Ravel came to be regarded as the leading French composer of the day after the death of Debussy in 1918. He was recognized by the French state with the presentation of the Légion d'Honneur, the highest decoration in France. Ravel's dislike for decorations, however, led to a public refusal of this honor which led to further dissension between him and the members at the Société nationale.¹³ Ravel may have come to an earlier conclusion that he did not need affirmation as a composer through decorations; therefore, he may have resented those who tried to affirm him in that way. Erik

¹⁰ Paul Roberts, *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel*, (Milwaukee, WI: Amadeus Press, 2012), 109.

¹¹ Mawer, "Cambridge Companion," 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 242.

¹³ His dislike of decorations may have been a result of never being awarded the *Prix de Rome*.

Satie, a fellow French composer and pianist in the early twentieth century, commented on Ravel's refusal by saying, "Ravel declines the Legion of Honor, but all his music accepts it."¹⁴

Ravel died in Paris on December 28, 1937, a few years after his tour abroad, following an unsuccessful brain operation. He had suffered from insomnia following the war, and after being involved in a car accident in 1932, his condition only worsened. His friends continued to take him to concerts until his hospitalization, but by 1935, Ravel was often unable to sign even his name. Further frustration at his inability to translate the music in his head to paper only increased until his death at the age of sixty-two.

While the life of Ravel ended with an unfortunate stretch of poor mental and physical health, studying his musical output, specifically *Le tombeau*, will provide greater insight into his life as a person and a composer. Ravel had expressed his desire to compose a suite for piano in a letter written prior to the start of World War I to Alexis Roland-Manuel, a French composer and critic as well as a pupil and close friend of Ravel. In the title of this suite, *Le tombeau de Couperin* ("The Tomb of Couperin"), *tombeau* literally refers to a 'tomb' which is set as a monument. The monument was not a specific honor to Couperin, but rather it was written as homage to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French composers. This reflects his earlier close ties to the *Société nationale* which sought to elevate all French music.

Ravel's return to early baroque forms was due to the seriousness of the oppression he felt with his life following the war. With the horror of war still fresh in his mind, he turned to the comforts found in the familiar eighteenth-century forms and used it as a protective shelter with which to guard his emotions.¹⁵ Ravel's use of traditional form in this piece demonstrates his genuine faithfulness to the classic structures. Previously considered a man who preferred to keep his emotions to himself, the experiences of the war and the loss of his mother had psychological effects on his life which, in turn, affected his music. The events in Ravel's life succeeded to fulfill his pre-war wish to compose a piano suite, finally completed in 1917, making this work one of Ravel's most personal creations and most nationalist work.

¹⁴ Stuckenschmidt, "Maurice Ravel," 167.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

Ravel's "interest in the outwardly changing forms of contemporary creativity stood in constantly exciting contradiction to his loyalty to tradition."¹⁶ *Le tombeau* is a suite of dances from the baroque and classic styles with modern inflections. This suite contains a Forlane, a Rigaudon, and a Menuet. These dances are framed by an opening Prelude and Fugue and a closing Toccata. Each of the movements in this suite utilizes both old and new compositional techniques.

The Forlane is based on the oldest of the dance forms used in this suite. Its origin is the Italian *forlana*, a lively folk dance, which later became a French aristocratic court dance from 1697-1750. The traditional *forlana* exhibited balanced, four-measure phrases in a 6/4 or 6/8 time signature, repetition of phrases with dotted rhythms and simple harmonies, and was typically in rondeau form. While Ravel's Forlane is in 6/8 meter with lilting rhythms of dotted-notes giving it a dance-like feel, it is quite vague concerning the downbeats of the measures. Sometimes the theme's opening beat is written as a downbeat as demonstrated in Ex. 1. Other times it appears in the measure as an anacrusis as observed in Ex. 2. This suggests indecisiveness concerning the meter.

Ex. 1. Illustration of melody beginning on down-beat (m. 1)¹⁷



¹⁶ Stuckenschmidt, "Maurice Ravel," 155.

¹⁷ Maurice Ravel, *Le tombeau de Couperin: Suite pour piano*, (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser, 1918), 10.

Ex. 2. Illustration of melody written as an anacrusis (mm. 156-157)¹⁸



Oftentimes it is hard to distinguish whether the piece is in 9/8 or 6/8 meter because of the misplaced opening theme within certain measures and also through the displacement of accents written in the score.¹⁹ The displaced beats in this modern adaptation of an archaic dance reflect the modern approach to structure in the early twentieth-century.

The Rigaudon is based on an ancient French dance in duple meter adopted by many early composers including the French composer Rameau, the English composer Purcell, and the German composers, Bach and Telemann. It was also a lively folk dance of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like the *forlana*. In this suite, the Rigaudon is in duple meter and is driven forward energetically by the sixteenth notes in the ‘A’ section of this movement. While this is a dance in duple meter, it sounds very irregular and hard to predict. In the ‘B’ section of this piece, beginning in measure thirty-seven, the left-hand begins a pattern that changes every four measures as shown in Ex. 3 which is then immediately repeated. Unlike the left hand the melody in the right hand does not follow the four-measure pattern; instead, the melody continues beyond this pattern. At times the middle of the melodic phrase continues over the pattern found in the accompaniment.

¹⁸ Ravel, “Le tombeau,” 15.

¹⁹ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009), 180-181.

Ex. 3. Recurring four m. accompaniment with melody (mm. 37-50)²⁰

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Moins vif". It consists of two systems of music. The first system has a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass clef staff with a recurring accompaniment pattern. A black rectangular box highlights the first four measures of the bass staff, showing a consistent rhythmic and harmonic pattern. The second system continues the melody and accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4.

Since the melody and accompaniment fail to align themselves with each other, it produces a feeling of uncertainty in the rhythmic structure of the piece which affects the melody. The ambiguity of the rhythmic structure shows the exploration of Ravel's compositional style.

The Menuet was originally a French dance adapted for the court in the seventeenth century. *Menu* in French means "small," which represents the small, delicate steps used in this dance. Used by composers from Lully onwards, it became an optional movement in many of the instrumental suites. Ravel's Menuet is in the traditional triple meter of the original French dance. The direct modern influence of the war may be seen through the use of "birdsong" in this piece.²¹ Ravel once recounted his time at war when he had witnessed the most deafening noise of war during the battle at Verdun. He described the silence which followed as being otherworldly. This was especially true when he heard the calls of the birds which filled the stillness of the countryside. It is believed that Ravel endeavored to emulate the peace he experienced after the storm of the war in this movement. Ex. 4 represents the sounds of birds in the air heard in the ornamentation of the right-hand chords throughout the piece. The calm is clearly felt by the immediate change to a major key, in measure seventy-three, from the previous section which was in a minor key and maintained a constant droning low bass. The Menuet is thus unmistakably influenced by both archaic elements from the original French Menuet and modern impressions taken from personal experience.

²⁰ Ravel, "Le tombeau," 17.

²¹ Roberts, "Reflections," 111-112.

Ex. 4. Menuet (m. 73)²²

The Prelude is the first piece in this collection in keeping the traditional placement within the baroque suites. The harmonies are much different from traditional Baroque preludes which present the tonic key from the beginning of the measure. From the start of this piece, it is hard to distinguish the key center. It strongly suggests both E minor and G major within the opening four measures. Not until the final chord of the piece are we given the answer: the piece is in E minor. The tonal haziness of the prelude exemplifies the tonal qualities of late Romantic impressionism which focused on color instead of direction.

Also in traditional order, the Fugue immediately follows the Prelude as the second piece in the suite. As with J. S. Bach's preludes and fugues in his *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Couperin also presents the Fugue in the same key as the Prelude. This Fugue follows conventional form as a contrapuntal composition in three voices with the subject presented in the tonic in the first two measures. The second entrance of the subject is in measure three which occurs on the dominant in the usual manner. The Fugue is very chromatic due to the new harmonies Ravel was incorporating in his music. Impressionistic composers used chords to create sound rather than to provide movement in the music. Even Marguerite Long, the pianist who premiered this suite, chose not to perform the Fugue in later performances based on its difficulty.

The Toccata is one the oldest names for a keyboard piece and is the last piece in the suite. Since *toccata* means "touched," this form of keyboard music was traditionally used to portray the performer's touch through rapid movement across the keys. The touch in this piece is very different from that of the harpsichord suites and is better suited to the

²² Ravel, "Le tombeau," 22.

Romantic piano. Rapid repetition of the same note found in this Toccata would be difficult on the harpsichord at the fast tempo required of this piece since the reaction of the keys is much slower on a harpsichord. Along with the different touch dictated by this piece, tonal ambiguity, similar to the Prelude, is also found in this movement. Instead of ending the Toccata in its beginning key of E minor, Ravel chooses to end the suite in a triumphant E major. This piece is the most virtuosic piece of this set and is often compared to the works of Liszt as a sign of excellence in workmanship, once again hailing back to his father's advice.

The impact the war made on this set of pieces is also observed through the dedication of each of the six movements to men who lost their lives serving in WWI. The Prelude is dedicated to Jacques Charlot, a cousin of Ravel's publisher Jacques Durand. Jean Cruppi was the dedicatee of the Fugue. Cruppi had been influential in the publicity of Ravel's *L'heure espagnole* in 1911 in persuading the Opéra-comique to perform it. Gabriel Deluc was an old friend who was memorialized in the Forlane. The Rigaudon is in memory of Pierre and Pascal Gaudin, brothers of Marie Gaudin who had been a close friend to Ravel since his earlier years. The connection with the middle syllable of Rigaudon and its dedication to the Gaudin brothers may or may not have been unconsciously dictated.²³ The Menuet is dedicated to Jean Dreyfus, the son of Ravel's wartime godmother, Madame Fernand Dreyfus.²⁴ She was the stepmother of Roland-Manuel, his pupil and friend. The Toccata is devoted to the memory of Captain Joseph de Marliave. Marliave's wife, Marguerite Long, was a professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire who later played the premiere of *Le tombeau*. The personal dedications Ravel made to each of these men exemplify the lasting impact the war made on his life.

Even the cover on the original Durand edition of this suite illustrated by Ravel demonstrates the honor he sought to convey through his music to both his wartime friends and early French composers. The cover illustration also shows the impression his mother had on him as he sought to create an aesthetically pleasing cover for his piano composition.

²³ Stuckenschmidt, "Maurice Ravel," 173.

²⁴ It was typical during the war in France for ladies to adopt soldiers as "war godchildren."



Fig. 1. Cover of the first printed edition illustrated by Ravel²⁵

The illustration in Fig. 1 shows a baroque urn-shaped vase on a raised pedestal. Flowing drapery and a small branch of laurel complete the picture. Under the words of the title, *Le tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel's familiar monogram, his initials written in block-letters which run together, is placed prominently right above the drapery. The laurel used in this drawing is an evergreen tree or shrub once used by ancient Greeks to award the victors in the Olympic games. It was a form of honor, recognition of achievement. The laurel in this illustration may have been a way to honor himself as a composer rather than receiving tribute through the decoration he had previously rejected while it also gave honor to his wartime friends and early French composers.

While *Le tombeau de Couperin* is not Ravel's most popular musical composition, it remains a significant piece in his output as a composer. This piece provides a greater understanding of Ravel's life as portrayed through the music in both the classic forms and current compositional ideals. *Le tombeau* was composed during a time of turmoil which had left him mentally troubled which later led to physical debilitation. This piece was his "bridge over troubled water." *Le tombeau* serves as a bridge which connects the end of his solo piano works to his orchestral

²⁵ Ravel, "Le tombeau," i.

compositions. It also succeeds as a piece which channels many different influences throughout his life. This includes the influence of his parents, the transition from the Société nationale to the founding of the Société musicale indépendante, and his time in war which culminated in a piece of musical brilliance. It was through this piece that he was able to channel his emotions in a constructive way, easing his mind, which gave him occasion to project himself as a composer. As Simon and Garfunkel say in their hit song, “Your time has come to shine...Like a bridge over troubled water, I will ease your mind.” Ravel, indeed, shone as a composer in his last solo piano work, *Le tombeau de Couperin*.

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