

Maurice Ravel's Life And Piano Works : Sonatine

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, there were reactions against the Germanic romantic music known as the Wagnerian style. Many national schools were founded, and many composers responded in different ways. One of these was Impressionism, which is one movement of attractive and unconventional nationalistic music. Maurice Ravel, a key impressionist composer, produced an attractive music direction to be studied, including his solo piano masterpieces such as Sonatine. Despite the traditional form of this song. Its harmony, melody, accompaniment texture, and concept were very different from the German style until it eventually became a valuable masterpiece to be studied for playing, self-study, or as a selection for teaching in Thailand to create a variety of classical music classes. This article aims to introduce Maurice Ravel in brief and to present the analysis of Sonatine for self-study and for teaching support.

Keywords: Ravel / Impressionism / Sonatine / Form and Analysis

Maurice Ravel's Life And Piano Works

Maurice Ravel was one of the virtuoso pianists and one of the most important composers and performers in French musical history. His unique style created a combination of new elements and traditional Classical music genres. Joseph Maurice Ravel was born on March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France. His father, Pierre Joseph, was a Swiss engineer and

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his mother, Marie Delouart, was Spanish. However, he grew up in Paris because his family moved three months after his birth. His brother, Edouard, was born three years after the Ravels had settled down in Paris. Having support and encouragement from his family.

Ravel began piano lessons at the age of six with Henri Ghys, and shortly after that he started composition class with Charles-Rene. In 1889, Ravel entered the Conservatory de Paris at 14 as a piano major and studied with Eugene Antioime. He studied there until 1895 and returned in 1897 for further study composition with Gabriel Fauré. Around 1902, during his school time in Conservatoire, Ravel joined a group passionate in the art that referred to themselves as the Apaches (Orenstein, 2003: 3). It became a huge benefit to him. Not only did Ravel gain more knowledge, but various members of the group also became his long-term friends and future colleagues.

The Apaches used to meet regularly on Saturdays, at first at the home of Paul Sordes or at that of Tristan Klingsor, who wrote the texts for his song-cycle *Schéhérazaïde*. The Apaches supported Debussy's style and also went to numerous contemporary music recitals. The group did many activities such as talking about painting, poetry, and also performing music which Ravel first performed his pieces, such as *Jeux d'eau*, *Oiseaux tristes*, and *Sonatine*. During his years at the Conservatoire, Ravel studied with Gabriel Fauré, and tried several times to win the Prix de Rome. However, he never won the prize. In his letter to Kiriak on the 21st of March 1900, Ravel talked about his failure.

Ravel's music reflects many influences from various styles. Starting with the 18th century French classicism beginning with Couperin as in *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Next, the 19th century French sensibilities of Fauré and Chabrier are reflected in *Sérénade grotesque*, and *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. *Jeux d'eau* and the String Quartet were the evidence of Satie and Debussy. Moreover, the grand works

Gaspard de la nuit and *Concerto pour la main gauche* hint obviously show the influence by Liszt and Chopin. Furthermore, he mentioned Saint-Saëns, Schubert, Stravinsky and Schönberg as inspirations for many pieces. Ravel revered Mozart as a composer who perfectly achieved the clarity and pureness that he sought in his own compositions, and he remarked once that his own music was “quite simple, nothing but Mozart.” (McCarrey, 2006).

Conversely, Ravel is kind of person who always invents new ways of composition. Once, during the interview with Olin Downes, he stated “If I ever did a perfect piece of work, I would stop composing immediately. One just tries, and when I have finished a composition, I have ‘tried’ all I can; it’s no use attempting anything more in the same direction. One must seek new ideas.” (Downes, 1927).

Because of that when his music was compared to Debussy by critics, Ravel rapidly refuses to accept that Debussy’s music reflects his style of music. He declared himself an ‘anti - Debussy’ but honor Debussy as “the great creative influence in modern French music.” (Zank, 2016). During his school year, Debussy was Ravel’s hero. He and the Apaches joined almost every performance of Debussy’s works. At the same time, Ravel’s name looked like a forbidden word to Debussy. Every reference he makes to Ravel, comes with sarcasm. Moreover, he complained in the letter to Louis Laloy, “I agree with you Ravel is extraordinary gifted, but what annoys me is the attitude he adopts of being a ‘conjurer’, or rather a fakir casting spells and making flowers burst out of chairs” (Mawer, 2000: 241). However, if we analyse the piano works of Ravel and Debussy, we cannot refuse that there are many similarities. For instance, *Jeux d’eau* and Debussy’s “water” pieces or *Miroirs* and Debussy’s *Image* book II, and *Pavane pour une Infante defunte* which he dedicated to the Princess Edmond de Polignac. Ravel

uses elements of Debussy's new harmonic style, parallel chord and unresolved dissonance (Kirby, 2003: 286).

Ravel met Gershwin during Gershwin's visit to Paris in 1928, The purpose of his was to study composition with Nadia Boulanger. He also asked Ravel for lessons, but Ravel rejected him and asked "Why do you want to become a second-rate Ravel when you are already a first-rate Gershwin?" (Smith et al., 1995: 272). Maurice Ravel was impressed with the Gershwin's' abilities, commenting, "Personally I find jazz most interesting: the rhythms, the way the melodies are handled, the melodies themselves. I have heard of George Gershwin's works and I find them intriguing." (Smith et al., 1995: 42). Ravel shows this influence of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue in his Piano Concerto in G. Furthermore, he shows his appreciation of American jazz in L'Enfant et les sortilèges, Sonate pour violon.

Piano pieces are one of the most terrific works by Ravel. He composed nine pieces for piano solo which are Menuet antique (1895), Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899), Jeux d'eau (1901), Sonatine (1905), Miroirs (1905), Gaspard de la nuit (1908), Ma mère l'oye, 4 hands (1910), Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911), Le tombeau de Couperin (1917). Although Ravel's pianistic concepts are derived from many composers, there is beauty in his pianistic texture. He was a master of using tone color, and his melody is finesse and brilliant. He created his unique style that can be divided into two general groups, impressionism and later neoclassical. The very first evidence of impressionism style is Jeux d'eau, composed in 1901 which made him became well-known as a composer. The piece shows many impressionism characteristics:

The coloristic use of dissonance, here arpeggio Figureurations involving simultaneous seconds along with unresolved sevenths: the loose linking of episodic passages: the use of glissandos and chromatic

scale-run: and irregularities in rhythm that disturb normal material order (Kirby, 2003).

The other impressionist works of Ravel are *Miroirs*, and the masterpiece, *Gaspard De La nuit*, the three pieces set inspired from the poet by Louis Bertrand (1807-1842). Moving from Impressionist to Neoclassical, *Sonatine* is only one of his sonatas. The piece is in the traditional large form with three movements. Next, *Le tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel's most important Neoclassical piano solo work. It is present in the French suite style in the eighteenth century. Last, *Pavane pour une Infante defunte*.

All in all, most characteristic of Ravel's unique style are: a fondness for clear formal structures, a carefully score rhythmic line, a harsh dissonance filled with consecutive major and minor seconds, uses of full keyboard range in both hands, a lot uses of the thumb on two notes simultaneously, and extensive use of pedal. Ravel was first and foremost a composer for the piano. His solo piano pieces always appear in the most concise, finished musical form, as near to technical perfection as is humanly possible.

Even though Ravel was a huge international success as a virtuoso pianist and outstanding composer, he was a very private person. Indeed, he had many close friends; he never married and lived alone in his cabin at Montfort-L'Amaury, near Paris. In 1932, Ravel was in a taxi crash. After the accident he still worked the on *Don Quixote* project and went on tour of Spain and North Africa. However, later his physical condition declined, and he suffered more, which made him unable to compose talk. In 1937, he consented to a brain operation that was unsuccessful, On December 28 his sixty-two years of life ended. His funeral took place at the cemetery in Levallois Perret on December 30 with the present of numerous friends, colleagues, and famous composers such as Arthur

Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and Igor Stravinsky in attendance.

Ravel's Sonatine for Piano

Sonatine is a French word of 'Sonatina.' The definition of sonatina from the Oxford Dictionary of Music is "little sonata. A short sonata, usually lighter and easier (but several 20th-cent. sonatinas, e.g., by Ravel etc. are technically difficult)" (Rutherford-Johnson et al., 2013). Very few sonatinas contain great music, but Ravel's Sonatine is a notable exception. It is a masterwork that is filled with the essence of the French touch and represents Ravel's Neoclassicism at its best.

Ravel's Sonatine is masterpiece of the new elements such as melody, harmony etc. that laid into traditional large form, sonata. Ravel dedicated Sonatine to his dear friends, Ida and Cipa Godebski; Later on, Ravel composed *Ma Mère l'oye* for their child too. Indeed, it was composed for a competition which was held by the magazine *Weekly Critical Review* in 1903. The competition requirement was the first movement of a piano sonatina that was no longer than seventy-five measures; the total prize was one hundred francs. Unfortunately, the competition was canceled because of the company's bankruptcy. Two years later, Ravel completed the second and third movements and Sonatine was printed in September 1905 by the Durand music publishing company in Paris.

Durand became Ravel's selected publisher and held the rights to his works until lately. At that time, The Durand offered Ravel a lifetime allowance. Madame Paule de Lestang gave the world premiere of this work in Lyon, France, on March 10, 1906. It was premiered in Paris later by Gabriel Grovlez at one of the concerts from the series of the *Société Nationale de Musique* at the *Schola Cantorum*.

After Sonatine became popular, Ravel frequently performed the first two movements, *Modere* and *Movement de Menuet*, his concert

programs in Europe and during his tour to America in 1928. Sonatine is perfect evidence of the Neo-classical style because Ravel reused the sonata form which was popular style in Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven's time. On the other hand, it was replaced with a character piece in the Romantic era.

Sonatine is a cyclical work which thematic material uses primarily the interval of the perfect fourth and opens fifth. Ravel was meticulous in specifying dynamics, phrasing, and tempo changes, but he was less precise about pedaling and indicated no fingerings.

The fundamental compositions of Ravel's Sonatine are surprisingly traditional and simple that adds to the impressionist components, ornamentations to this traditional architecture. The piece is in three movements: Modéré, Mouvement de Menuet, and Animé.

The first movement, Modere, is in F sharp minor, Aeolian mode, which is a transposition of Aeolian mode and is written in sonata-allegro form. Starting with the Exposition, the first theme is heard in measures 1-12 in the i-v-iv-VI-VII-v-i chord progression (Figure 1). The short second begins in measures 13-19. (Figure 2) Before the tiny transition which leads to a repeat exposition, Ravel puts cadences on the measures 19-20 in form of iv- V – i which has returned to F sharp minor.

The musical score for the first movement, Modéré, is in F sharp minor, 3/4 time, and is marked 'Piano' and 'Modéré'. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows measures 1-12 with a chord progression of i-v-iv-VI-VII-v-i. The second system shows measures 13-19 with a chord progression of iv-V-i. The score includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'pp subito'.

Figure 1: Chord Progression (Measures 1-12)

| Scale Degree | Chord |
|--------------|--------|
| i | F#m |
| v | C# |
| iv | B |
| VI | D |
| VII | E |
| v-i | C#-F#m |

Figure 2: Chord Progression (Measures 13-19)

| Scale Degree | Chord |
|--------------|-------|
| iv | B |
| V | D |
| i | F#m |

5 *mf*

6

7

8

9

10

11 *f*

I B.C.
F¹¹

VII E¹¹ IV B¹¹ VI D¹¹ I B.C.
F¹¹

VII E¹¹ IV B¹¹ VI D¹¹ VII E¹¹ IV B¹¹ VI D¹¹

E¹³ (A major: V¹³)

Detailed description: This figure shows the first theme of a sonatine, spanning measures 5 to 11. The music is in a key with two sharps (D major or F# minor) and a 3/4 time signature. The notation includes a treble and bass clef with a grand staff. Measure 5 starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. Measures 6-10 feature a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth and thirty-second notes. Measure 11 begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Chord symbols are provided below the bass line: I B.C. F¹¹ in measure 8; VII E¹¹ IV B¹¹ VI D¹¹ I B.C. F¹¹ in measure 9; and VII E¹¹ IV B¹¹ VI D¹¹ VII E¹¹ IV B¹¹ VI D¹¹ in measure 10. Measure 11 is labeled with E¹³ (A major: V¹³).

Figure 1 Sonatine: First theme

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

Rall.

a Tempo

Andante

p

Rit.

Un peu retenu
très expressif

ppp

Detailed description: This figure shows the beginning of the second theme, spanning measures 11 to 17. The music is in the same key and time signature as the first theme. Measure 11 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. Measure 12 is marked *Andante*. Measure 13 is marked *Rall.* (Ritardando). Measure 14 is marked *a Tempo*. Measure 15 is marked *Rit.* (Ritardando). Measure 16 is marked *Un peu retenu* and *très expressif*. Measure 17 is marked *ppp* (pianissimo). The notation includes a treble and bass clef with a grand staff.

Figure 2 Second theme beginning

Likewise, measures 29 and 34 amount to ornamented prolongation of the more fundamental, Phrygian-half cadential formula. These measures constitute a dominant, F-sharp anticipation of the B minor tonality in measure 34; the Ennaturals and G-naturals in the bass and soprano lines expand outward to meet it. The resolution of the G-naturals in the bass is delayed, so there is an ornamental misalignment of the resolution, but both pitches resolve to F sharp. After exposing this more fundamental structure, clausula-like expansion of the E-naturals and G-naturals is clearly reminiscent of Renaissance and baroque Phrygian cadential formulas.

Moreover, the G-naturals in the following measures (measures 29 and 30, accompanying part) emphasize and embellish the continuation of this Phrygian cadential sound as the E- and G-naturals prolong the context, which had been established in the preceding measures. The proof is the B minor (Aeolian), circle progression resolution in measures 34. Then, the development section covers measures 26-55. The first theme is developed in measures 26-39; the second theme occurs in measures 40-55. (Figure 3).

The figure displays a musical score for measures 29 through 34. The score is written in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). Measures 29 and 30 show a Phrygian Half Cadence with notes G# and A. Measures 31 and 32 show a continuation of this sound. Measures 33 and 34 show a Dominant Prolongation with notes G# and A. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *mf* *très expressif*. Below the score, there are labels for the harmonic structure: "B minor: iv⁶ e V F# iv⁶ e V Phrygian Half Cadence" and "Dominant Prolongation i b".

Figure 3 The cadence and Dominant Prolongation

Then, the development section covers measures 26-55. The first theme is developed in measures 26-39; the second theme occurs in measures 40-55 (Figure 4).

Last, the recapitulation from measures 56 to 84 is a repetition of the exposition with the appropriate key changes. Overall, the main melody is in the top voices, the parallel fifth accompaniment in the left hand; which produces a rich melody with the sense of impressionism. For the performance practice, the opening section needs a little pedal, and should concentrate on the top voice melody. A person should be careful not to play the accompaniment too loud and balance the melody by playing the top voice in forte or mezzo forte; let it sing out. Also, he or she should be concerned about the articulations and dynamics such as accent in upbeat, *pp subito* in measures 3, *Rall...*, *Anime*, *très expressif*. This piece requires a flexible wrist and the uses of the thumb. Therefore, the hand should be rotated without stress. Ravel's recommendation regarding this movement was "to avoid emphasizing the rhythm: the theme would become vulgar"

41 42 43 44

Poco rit. - - a Tempo

D major: V¹³
A¹³

E Pedal →

45 46 47 48

ere - - scen - - do e acce -

Up a fourth Up a fourth
D Resolution

49 50 51 52

- le - ran - do **Animé**

Up a fourth Up a fourth Up a fourth Up a fourth

Figure 4 The second theme of development section

In contrast with the first movement, *Mouvement de Menuet*, is in D flat major. Later, Ravel used the opening theme of this movement in his *Rhapsodie for harp* (Mawer, 2000). The second movement bears a spiritual similarity with Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*. Both of them are modal, antique, and utterly delightful. However, Ravel did not put the Trio, which is a traditional form along the Minuet. Ravel told his pianist friend Marguerite Long to play this minuet in the tempo of the minuet of Beethoven's *E-flat Piano Sonata, Op. 31 No. 3*" (Orenstein, 1995)

The movement begins with a four-measure melody phrase (Figure.5); it is repeated in a series of elegant alteration. Ravel still used the open fifth interval in a melodic line.



Figure 5 Sonatine, second movement: measures 1-4

The middle section is an adaption from the first movement theme in a ternary meter (Gillespie, 1972). The form is sectional and might be described as a rondo-like: A B C A B A (Figure 6).

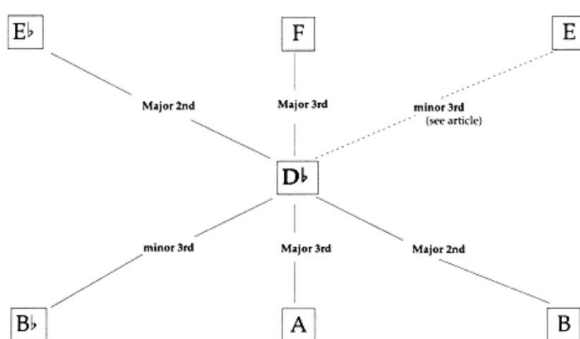


Figure 6 Ravel: Sonatine, II. Tonal Axis (Gillespie, 1972)

In the first A section, measures 1-12 present a modulation from D-flat major to F minor. The B section begins in measures 13-33 which the impressionistic motif's style presented by the whole tone color. The C section, measures 33-52, serves as a linking passage that could be thought of as taking the place by the trio in a more traditional form. The measures 53-64 is a returning of the opening motif, modified to end in the tonic; it can be specifying as a comeback A section. The ending section is a B theme return which is located from measure 65 to the end of movement. Mouvement de Menuet should not be performed in a thick sound and less used of pedal. Ravel highlights accents in the

upbeat of the theme as he did mentions in the first movement. These accents, tied with a tempo to avoid this movement becoming a waltz style.



Figure 7 Sonatine, third movement: introduction measures 1-3

Nevertheless, Ravel recorded the first two movement of the piece for the Welte-Mignon Company in 1913; he never recorded the last movement. John Gillespie states his opinion “his failure the last movement of Sonatine was probably due to his own pianistic limitation.” The last movement, Animé, is brilliant it, sounds like the modern toccata, and is written in the sonata- allegro form. However, many critics thought Sonatine’s form should be the combination between rondo and sonata rather than a traditional sonata form. The first three measures can be considered as an introduction (Figure 7). It opens with the Dorian mode transposed. Then, the Exposition (A) begins in F sharp minor key, Ravel put the accents mark plus the staccato très marqué which means very accented (Figure 8).

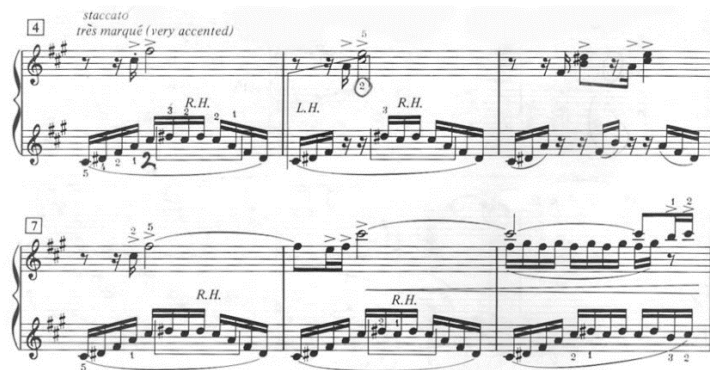


Figure 8. Sonatine, third movement: Exposition measures 4-9

The B section started in measures 37-53 followed by the codetta in measures which Ravel transforms the first movement's principal theme into a 5/4 meter (Figure 9). He marks *Même mouvement tranquille* to make sure that the pianist knows it.

44

Même mouvement tranquille (In the same elegant and expressive mood of the opening of the first movement)

37

p

R.H. R.H.

Rit.

Plus lent (Very slow)

39

Figure 9 Sonatine, third movement: Exposition measures 37-41

Next, the development in measure 60-105 is very long and difficult. Then, the recapitulation brings back both A and B theme from the Exposition. Last, the long coda leads to the majestic finale. The Animé is the longest and the hardest movement of Sonatine. According to Ravel, it is suggested to begin the measure 162 softly in order to build the crescendo to make a grand successful finale. Good technique is required with appropriate fingering. Fingerings is the key to success in performing for this movement. The articulation and dynamic are also important. The meter should be considered carefully. Ravel wrote many meters in this movement: 3/4, 5/4, 2/4. Moreover, the consistence of three-eight notes group and four-sixteen notes group is needed.

Conclusion

No one has ever doubted Ravel's talent. He was a wonderful performer, a great composer, and a superb orchestrator. He was one of

the most important French composers. His music admiration and respect of performers and researchers; it is also very popular with the audiences. Thought to be a 'vanguard' influential during his lifetime. Ravel is today viewed as a relatively conservative Neo-Classical and post- Impressionist of French tradition. His piano works are recognized as masterpieces in music world up until now. They are chosen by many famous pianists all the time. Sonatine is one of his most significant piano solos, with a touch of impressionist, beautiful melody and harmony in a traditional musical form.

This article is not only intended to examine the overview of Ravel and Sonatine but also to introduce both the composer and the composition. It also presents the work that can be used as basic knowledge in self-study for students who would like to know more about Ravel and Sonatine, and for teachers as a distinctive and unique teaching style. This piece is recommended for the pianist who will have received much pleasure for Ravel's incredible contribution to the repertoire.

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