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Simplicity and Mastery. Meter and Rhythm in Part II of the *Concerto for piano in G major* by Maurice Ravel

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Abstract: *The present study is a tribute paid to Maurice Ravel's musical ingenuity and craftsmanship as is evident in the second part the Concerto for Piano Orchestra in G major. The composer expands the conceptual interpretation of metre and allows it a freedom similar to that of rhythm. Within this context, a comparison with geometrical shapes and the angles from which they can be viewed can easily be accepted. Ravel shows how abstract metric thinking is completely assimilated by the expression of the aesthetic experience he aims at conveying to the public. Thus, music has an ethereal slightly melancholy texture, pervaded by a unique French "flavour".*

Keywords: *rhythm, metre, geometry, design*

1. Argument

When listening to this musical piece in any other form than *live*, the music lover will certainly be overwhelmed by the beauty of the music the great French composer envisioned. However, the aesthetic impressions and feelings of the listener in the concert hall are definitely superior to those of someone listening to the same piece in a recorded version; the latter is an experience which is repeatable but unfortunately always the same. The uniqueness of the *live* version leaves a profound impression and can shape the sensitivity of the person who, seated in the front rows, intently, yet relaxed, listens to the music proposed by the interpreters. Each time the piece is performed in concert again, as if freed from the burden of the (far from insignificant!) technical difficulties of Ravel's score, the piano soloist, the conductor and the musicians in the orchestra always experience different

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feelings in relation to the wonderful world of sound they call to life. Each time, their interpretive version is influenced by an invariable element: the immanent beauty of the music, which is a genuine treasure that the talented musician can constantly refine, but can never distort.

All three parts of the inspirational concert are instances of an overflowing musical imagination and of masterful compositional craft; however, part II is set apart from the others for the particular simplicity of the musical discourse. The impression given by Part I and III is that of tumult, perhaps due to technical challenges which all the performers have to face; the second part reveals a delicate, subtle, deep, ethereal musical world, such as only a French composer could imagine! The artistic act is subjective in the absolute sense and its expressive quality is converted into aesthetic emotions, which engender ideas that can be easily misunderstood and therefore immediately refuted, contradicted, denied.

Consequently, it is easy to understand why, in the lines below, I aim to investigate musical characteristics that are clearly determined and identifiable in the score and, therefore, undisputed, as well as issues that may constitute the beginning of other interpretations and well-argued debates.

An in-depth analysis of the musical scores of a concert piece may include references to various aspects of the musical whole. Some of these aspects are listed below: the technique of the soloist instrument; the technique of the orchestral discourse (more or less involved in the creation of the musical whole); aspects related to harmony, polyphony, homophony, registers, colour, dynamics, rhythm, metre. Undoubtedly, beyond these aspects, others can be discussed that are related, for example, with programmatic elements, with folkloric or archetypal influences or with other stylistic dimensions related to the composer's sources of inspiration.

The aim of the present paper is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of the second part of the concert. The intention is to point out the metre-rhythm binomial and some of its ramifications in the second part of the Concert for piano in G by Maurice Ravel, thus encouraging further debate and the exchange of ideas on this topic.

I cannot move further without mentioning the reason for writing this paper: in my capacity as a conductor, I had to engage with the French composer's music and with the piano version by pianist Bertrand Giraud[2]. The study of the score, followed by the rehearsals and especially the experience of the first night concert were so intense that they led me to express in writing the enthusiasm and appreciation of the piece that I had the joy of conducting.

[2] Symphony Concert at the Brasov Concert Hall, on 30th March 2018. An evening with French music: Gounod, Ravel, Saint-Saëns. Soloist: Bertrand Giraud; conductor: Leonard DIMITRIU.

2. Analysis

Ravel's musical expression is apparently classical, limpid and unsophisticated. I am fully convinced that they are the very qualities that impress the listener, who does not see the score and has no direct access to the originality and ingenuity that it encodes. Only a careful researcher of the musical text – the conductor and the pianist among them – can identify certain highly sophisticated conceptual compositional aspects.

The first 33 bars of the second part of Ravel's Concert in G are performed by the piano soloist, in a sort of cadence*, avant la lettre*, which precedes the segments that form a tripartite segment, **A B A'** with Coda. However, the musical atmosphere is very far from what a cadence of the soloist instrument should convey. Virtuosity is replaced by simplicity, the tension by an Olympian calm.

In relation to these very features, at a first cursory glance it could be said that everything is simple, easy, that the pianist is not faced with any problem... It is not exactly so, as the metric system chosen by the composer, namely 3/4, raises a number of problems. Apparently, there should be nothing to discuss in this area, especially as both the metre and rhythm (ternary) for the right hand of the piano soloist are straightforward. A discreet, sweet and undulating melody, clear as a mountain spring, is woven along 34 bars of the piano right hand staves.

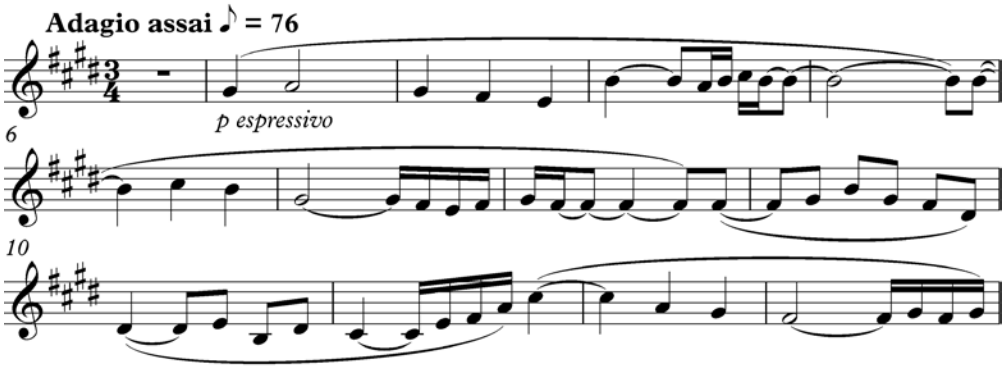


Fig. 1. *Bars 1-13, the beginning of the melody*

At first glance, an equally simple musical expression is created for the left hand, whose discourse is also composed in 3/4.

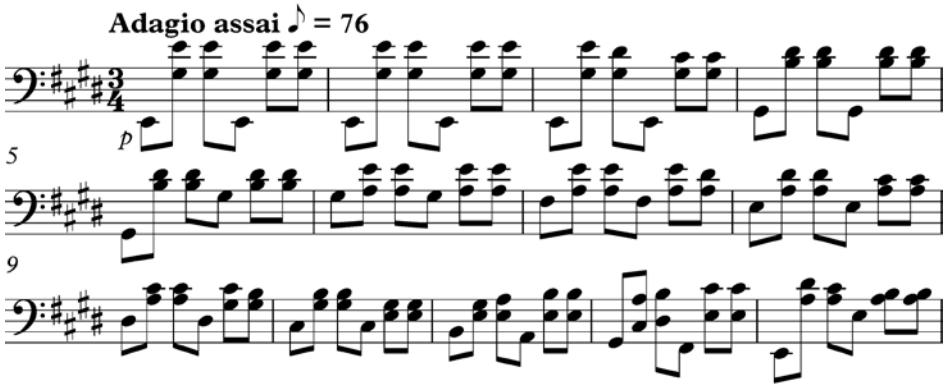


Fig. 2. *Bars 1-13, the layered contour of the accompaniment*

Considered separately (which is not actually affordable to the listener, not accessible in his/her reality), the two musical discourses transmit very similar aesthetic messages, characterized by calm, serenity, peace of mind.

However, the combination of the two spheres transforms things and somewhat modifies the perception; the whole transmits a message which is slightly different from the elements that form it. What precisely determines a state of mind that engenders insecurity, sadness and a sense of lack of fulfilment? It is quite as discernible as... invisible ink, however I find it clear and well-defined. It is all about the left hand on the piano, where Ravel grouped quavers by twos. The composer's manner of combining values and sounds which make up the initial motif, first repeatedly and then in a sequenced manner, would necessarily result in a contour written in 6/8.

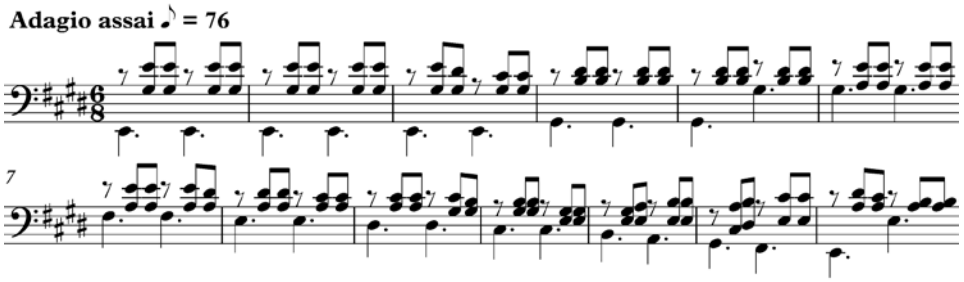


Fig. 3. *Bars 1-13, the contour noted in 6/8 and layered in terms of registers*

Well, the reader may say, what could this hypothetical manner of grouping the quavers mean? The problem lies in the different ethos of the rhythms, as everything the piano plays in Part II of the concert lies under the sign of

polyrhythm. Moreover, the existence of polymetrics becomes evident, even if it is not recorded as such.

Just because the composer could not (or perhaps would not) write the two staves for the piano in different metric systems (as Bartók did), he very clearly indicated the chronometre ♏= 76, along with the recommendation for the tempo. Beside speed, the quaver is here the pulsating unit!

I will try to explain this statement by first referring to a few notions of musical theory. It is a well-known fact that musical metre operates with the categories of measure and time, while rhythm is identified depending on the accents and (rhythmic) formulas. It is also known that the measure is denoted by a fraction, where the numerator indicates the number of the beats (1,2,3, etc.) and the denominator indicates the value of each beat (♏, ❑, ♒ etc.). In theory, these are basic elements in terms of metre notation. However, in practice, as far as both the instrumental soloist and the conductor are concerned, it is the notion of pulsation that becomes relevant. Specifically, it cannot be written, it goes beyond the ordinary, monotonous and objectives limits of the metre, and moves towards the vivid and hence slightly fluctuating subjectivity of the interpretation. Paradoxically perhaps, I venture to say that the pulsation is related directly neither with the tempo (the speed) of the music, nor with its character (parlando-rubato or giusto). The pulsation varies from one interpreter to the next and is different even when, in different situations or moments, the same musician performs the same piece. It is an integral part of that performer's or ensemble's personality and can be directly associated to the pulse of their heart, from a somatic and psychological point of view.

Let us now return to Ravel's scores and the problem of polymetric, of which I said above that it exists without being revealed in notation. In the second part of the concert, the composer (deliberately or just instinctively, it is difficult to tell which) uses the unusual device which can be compared with a situation very graphically described by Godfried T. Toussaint[3] in his book *The geometry of musical rhythm. What makes a "good" rhythm good?*[4] While he was not a musician, the Canadian scientist was particularly concerned about the expansion of geometry to other areas, especially by combining the theory of "pattern recognition" with the theory of "similarity in music" and he made quite an interesting statement. He says: "have you ever had the experience of peering at two distinct objects from a single observation point, and at first reach the conclusion that they are identical, only to discover later, after getting more information, that the objects in question are

[3] Canadian scientist (b. 1944), considered the father of computational geometry in Canada. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godfried_Toussaint

[4] Godfried T. Toussaint, *The geometry of musical rhythm. What makes a "good" rhythm good?*, CRC Press, Taylor&Francis Group, Boca Raton, FL, 2013.

actually very different? The example in Figure 4 (to be described below, author's note) briefly illustrates this issue. The object on the left is a cube and the one in the centre is a cylinder. They are located at opposite ends. Viewed from above, the objects look very different. However, from a front view, both look like the square on the right."[5]

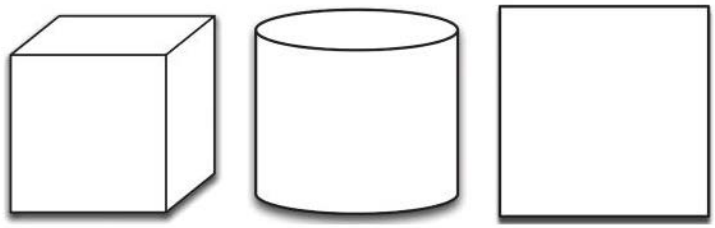


Fig. 4. *The way Toussaint looks at geometrical objects*

In the chapter entitled *"Musical objects and machines"* from *The Cambridge companion to Ravel*[6], researcher Deborah Mawer says: "An important part of Ravel's compositional aesthetic is bound up with objectification, crystallization and detachment, ideas that connect with Symbolist notions of imagery, Cubist notions of spatial and temporal planes and, beyond World War I, with the basic tenets of neoclassicism."[7]

This quote is not the only proof that Ravel was concerned about the possible translations of his music towards the visual and was especially mindful of this aspect. In the first few dozen bars of the second part of Concert in G major for piano and orchestra, the novel process under discussion here could be labelled "apparent metric unity". It must be admitted that the resemblance with Toussaint's geometric theory, presented above, is striking. Viewed from this perspective, of the different forms the same piece of music can take depending on the grouping of the values and its visual connotations, Ravel's piano score is only apparently unified in terms of metre.

[5] Op. cit., p. 151.
[6] See Deborah Mawer, editor, *The Cambridge companion to Ravel*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
[7] Op. cit., p. 63.

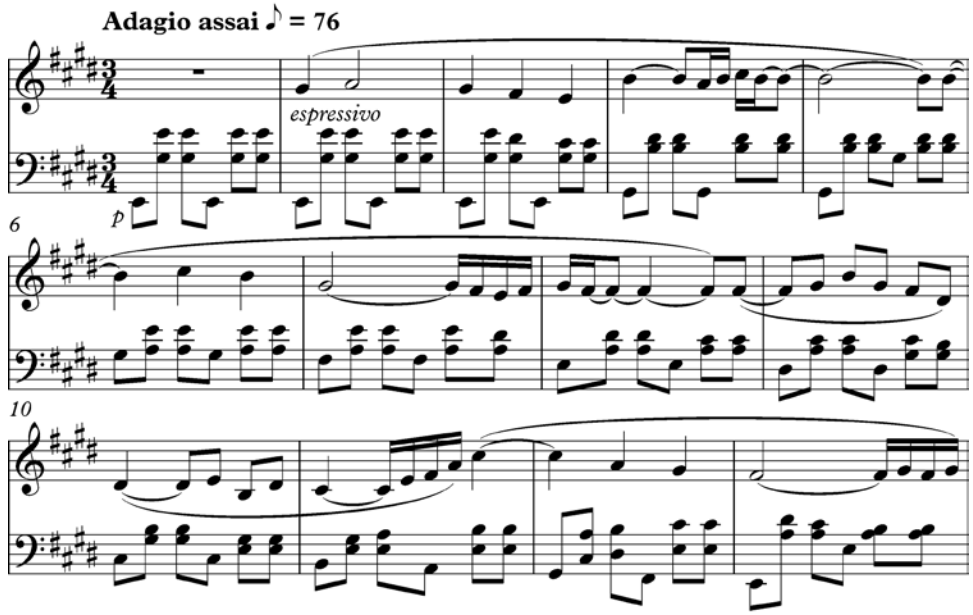


Fig 5. *Bars 1-13, Ravel's precise notation*

The 3/4 measure and the binary grouping in the left hand represent the "apparent metric unity". By contrast, the difference, i.e. the polymetric, can be seen only through the pianist's interpretation. If he/she thinks in terms of the metric unity, he/she accurately complies with the graphic aspect of the left hand and faithfully, even obediently, renders the calm, the tranquillity and peace of mind conveyed by the right hand. It is the equivalent of a front view of the geometrical objects. However, if the soloist senses the subtlety of the composition, or rather of the composer's metric and rhythmic design, he/she will intentionally highlight the ternary grouping of the quavers, presented under Example no. 2. Although both 3/4 and 6/8 are ternary, this very paradoxical metric dualism will make a difference in terms of rhythm of the musical planes reflected in the right and the left hand. That is exactly the effect of the top view of the geometrical objects. Ravel seems to treat the two contours as separate instruments, and this constitutes the very argument in favour of a pianistic realization (of a top view) that separates them.

Words can be inadequate and make a dry technical explanation, but the effect of this music on the listener can be bewildering. What is actually happening? The state of contemplation created by the melody in the right hand (the front view) is overshadowed by a kind of instability in the left hand, derived from the delicate change of the accents on the quavers (the view from above). We must admit that the difference between:

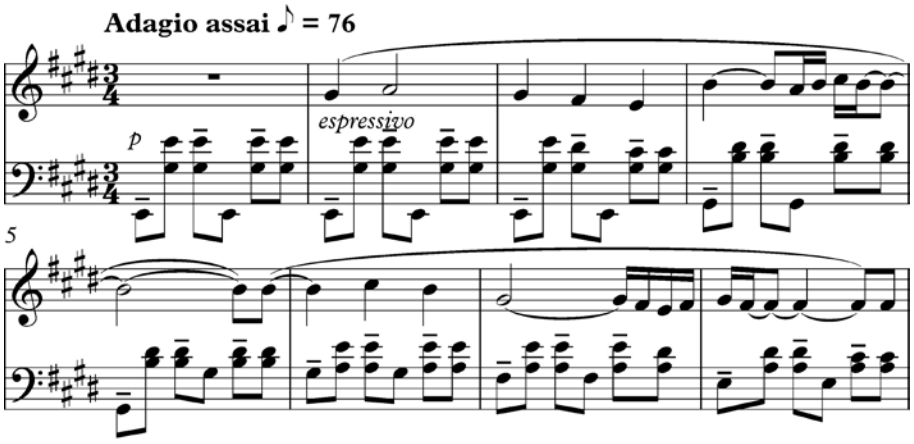


Fig. 6. *Bars 1-8, with emphasis on the metric accents in 3/4*

and

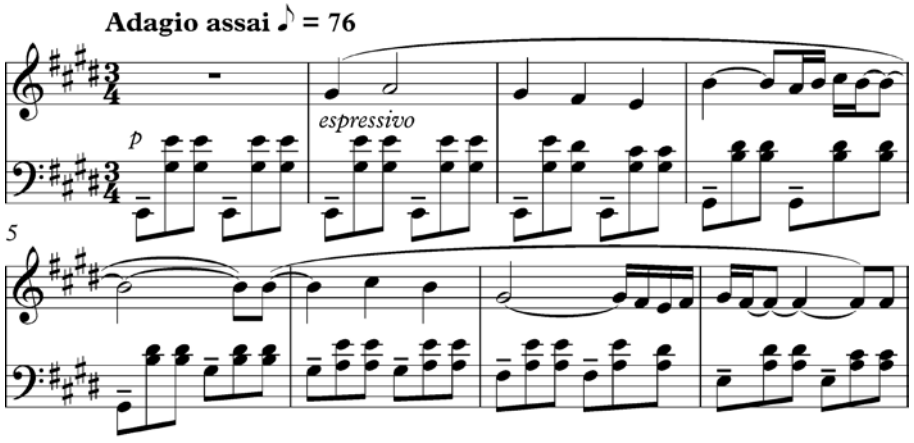


Fig. 7. *Bars 1-8, with emphasis on the metric accents in 6/4*

is quite significant[8].

Moreover, for a better understanding of the issue under discussion, the reader is invited to notice how the polymetric could be signalled, which would make the front and top views match, as if they were examined under a microscope.

[8] I added the indication for tenuto just to highlight the putative accented sounds.

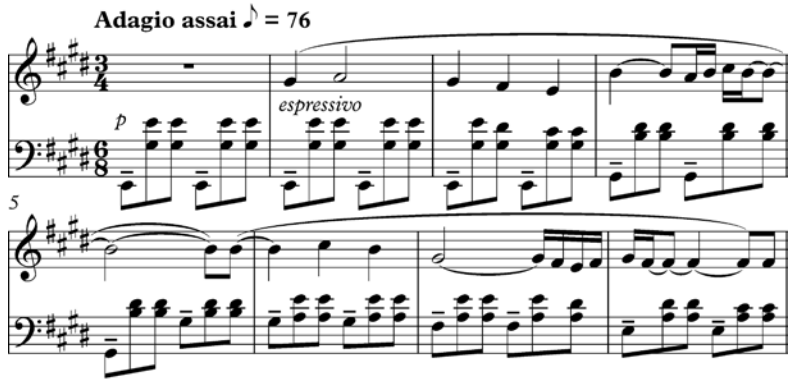


Fig. 8. *Bars 1-8, with the notation of the polymetric*

Obviously, no pianist in the world will play any of these accents because the elements of metric must serve an interpretive design, so he/she must unconditionally submit to it. I would say that the metre will be sublimated by the ideal interpreter, will make him/her slide delicately towards the elevated aesthetic spheres of prototypically French good taste.

Let us now return to the composer, and notice that his concern for rhythm and metre is permanent and dates back to his earliest creations. A first clarifying example can be extracted from his piece for piano "Minuet Antique", composed in 1895, when Ravel was only 20 years old. In the example below the reader can first notice the polyrhythm, apparent between the acute layers of the right hand (hereinafter referred to as layer 1) and the layer of the left hand (layer 2) with chords. We can also see that the middle layer, resulting from the string of quavers repeated on the sound C^2 somewhat surprisingly groups all the 12 values, which sets it apart from the other two and gives it a neutral aesthetic expression.

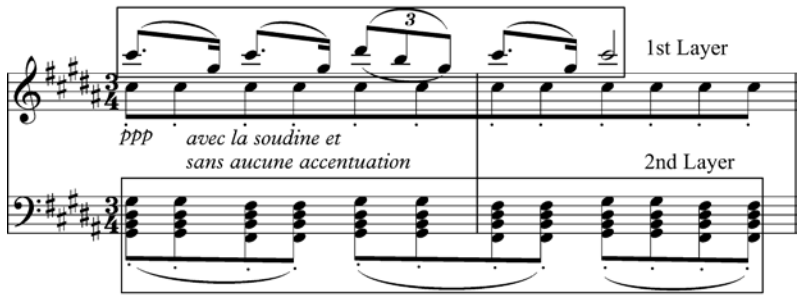


Fig. 9. *Ravel, "Menuet antique", bars 56-57, the polyriythmic layers*

One can also note the concurrent existence of a hidden polymetric, that could be identified only if one adds a metric specification at the beginning of each stave.

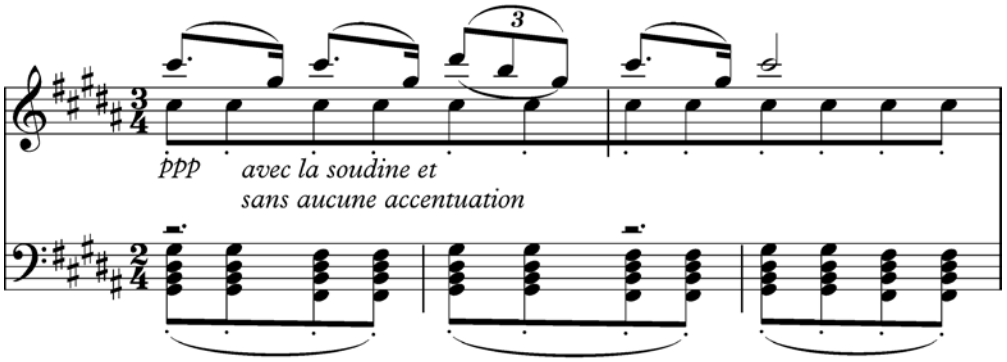


Fig. 10. *Ravel, "Menuet antique", bars 56-57, possible polymetric*

On closer inspection, the signs of his compositional ideas based on colours and layers can be already seen; this compositional design is probably the reason that prompted Ravel to orchestrate the piece in 1929 - the year in which he started to compose the Concert in G. Could the way in which he designed the rhythm and metre of the two works be a mere coincidence?...

It seems that Ravel long polished the melody that initiates the second part of Concert in G major. According to Michael Russ, the author of the study "*Ravel and the orchestra*" included in the 2000 edition of *The Cambridge companion to Ravel*[9], the composer himself is believed to have said: "That flowing phrase! How I worked over it bar by bar! It nearly killed me!"[10] Ravel also confesses that" melody that recalls Mozart, the Mozart of the Clarinet Quintet...the most beautiful piece he wrote."[11]

However, the cited source makes no reference to the rhythmic and metric aspects of the introductory fragment for the piano solo, or to the bars up to the end of the middle part, where the soloist instrument is accompanied by the orchestra. I am convinced that when he says he polished the melody, Ravel did not think only of the melodic aspect of the musical discourse, but he had it in mind the rhythmic aspect as well. Moreover, I am inclined to think that the labour on the rhythmic aspect was much more demanding.

[9] See Deborah Mawer, editor, op. cit.
[10] Op. cit., p. 152
[11] place. cit.

Moving beyond the soloistic section, we find that the emergence of the orchestra, of the flute specifically, which is the first instrument that is heard, we are proposed a rhythmic expression organized in 3/4; however, it can also have the metric aspect of 6/8, which can induce a change of the ethos. In terms of form, this is already an **A**.

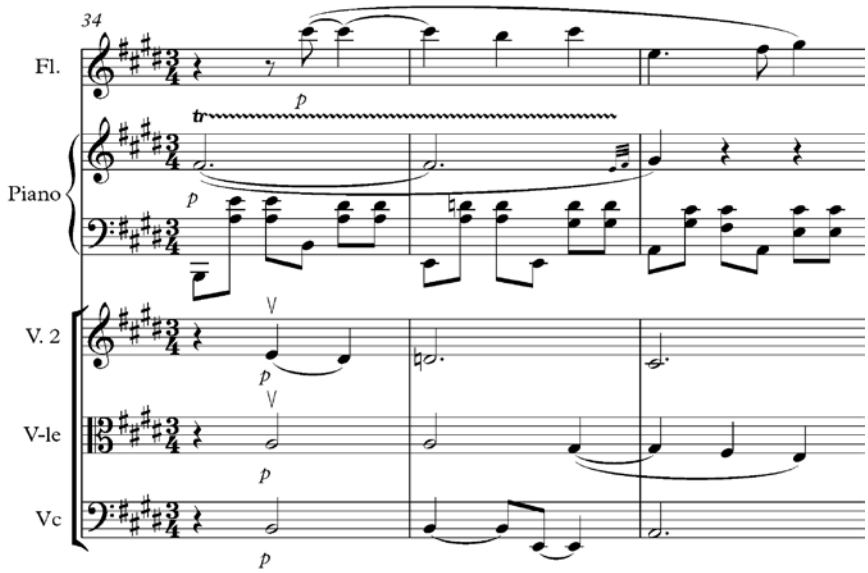


Fig. 11. *Bars 34-36, the beginning of section **A**, the notation in the score in 3/4*

Compared to the original, which was presented in the previous example, the same values which are assigned a measure of 6/8 take a slightly different aspect, which may lead to a slight change of accents, i.e. of the sounds highlighted by the performer. On a close investigation of the two examples, trying to hear them, but especially trying to perceive their semantic differences, the reader begins to realise how subtle the French composer's musical thinking really is.

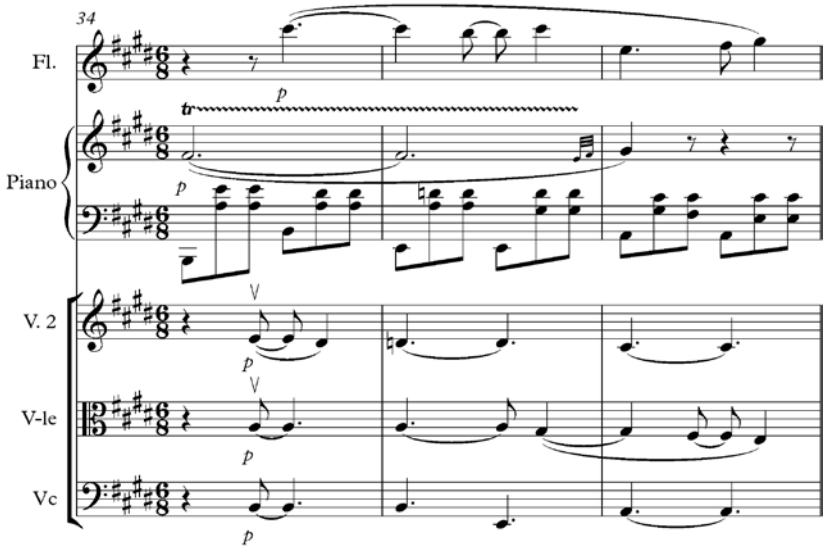


Fig. 12. *Bars 34-36, the beginning of section **A**, notation in 6/8*

This invisible metric duality, which nevertheless gives the pianist the opportunity to juggle with the subtle rhythmic accents, extends up to bar 57, the rehearsal mark 4 in the score. It is the point at which a new architectural section starts, namely **B**, which provides a few rhythmic clarifications. Thus, the right hand of the piano performs passages with small and very small values, which are played simultaneously with a quaver in the left hand. This is the main clue pointing at the fact that the rhythm is ternary, assimilated to a measure of 3/4. Another indication of the new sections is the passages of gradual quavers, first performed by the woodwinds, then by the string instruments. These passages start from very soft sounds, reaching a cumulated intensity, which is ephemeral in its manifestation of only two beats; the passages disappear, as the music returns to the atmosphere in the beginning of Part II. At rehearsal mark 6, the composer brings back the melody from the first section. Nothing can be clearer than this return, which, in terms of form, is the 3rd segment of the formula **ABA'**. Obviously, **A'** is not a copy of **A**, but here Ravel confirms the idea that simplicity is the most effective form of ingenuity. The following 17 bars are a magic moment, one of the most beautiful solos ever written for the English horn! The very first half of the melody, presented in the beginning as being discreet, soft, and undulating, is entrusted now to this instrument. When performed by it, the feelings Ravel intended to convey get denser, richer and melancholic at the same time, slightly elegiac in tone, a beauty close to perfection!

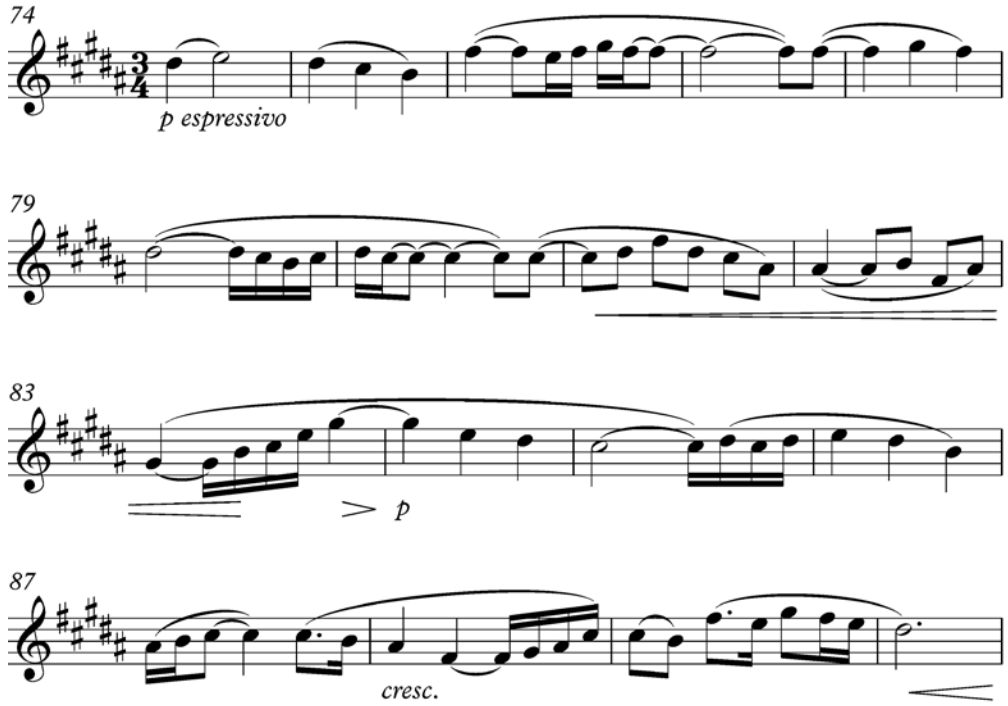
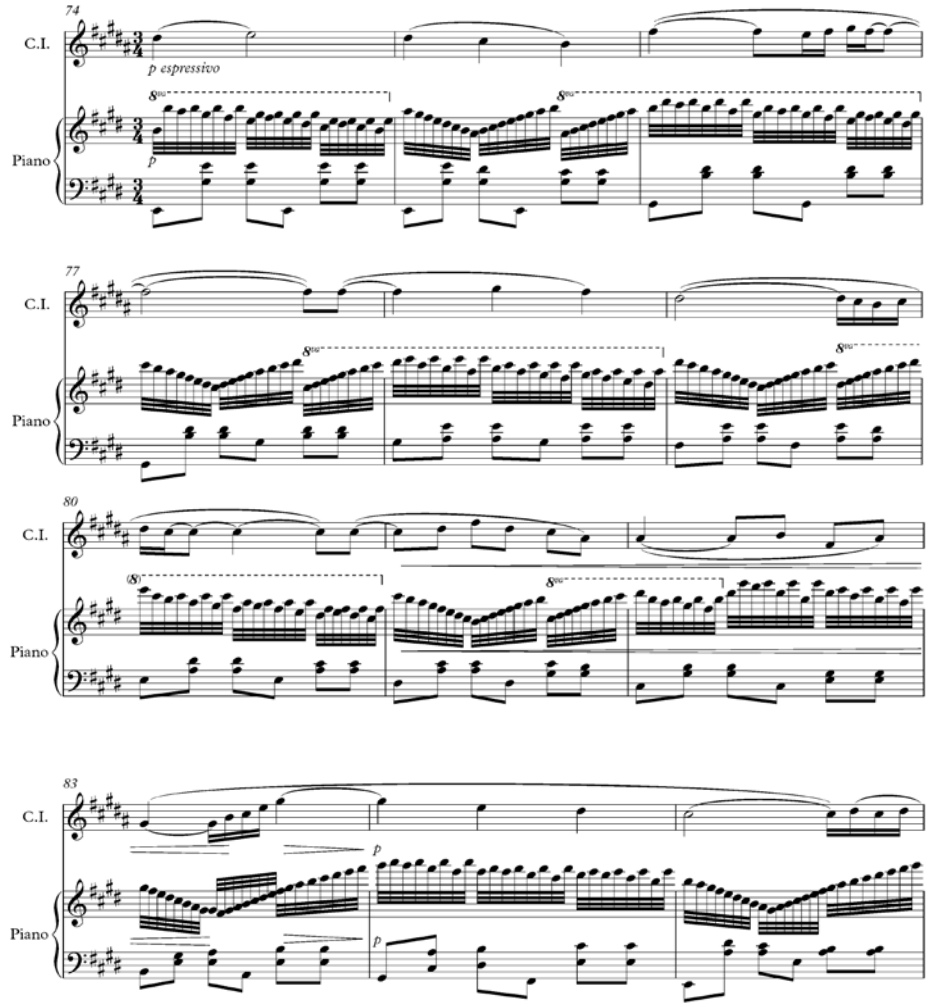


Fig. 13. *Bars 74-90, solo for the English horn, fragment*

On listening to this wonderful music that words fail to describe, does anyone realize that Ravel goes so far as to simply resume the left hand contour of the piano, as it appears at the beginning of this part? It is hard to believe... Actually, bars 74-90 contain exactly the same notes as do bars 2 to 18, more precisely the left hand retains its profile and the English horn takes over the melody of the right hand. In addition, in **A'** the second violins, violas and cellos are introduced, as well as a contour of the scales in demi-semi-quavers in the right hand of the piano. Again, the strings bring that undertone of metric duality they present when they are first introduced at bar 34. It is the role of the conductor to require that certain sounds should be emphasised, for the very reason of bringing out this unobtrusive rhythmical layer, as possibly suggested by the score.

The repetition of a musical motif is not new and can also be found in the works of the other great representative of the impressionist trend in music, composer Claude Debussy. In 1893, the latter writes the String Quartet, later recognized as a masterpiece of the genre; in its 2nd part he displays amazing ingenuity.

The musical construction of this part relies on repetition, one of the simplest (some would say the most trivial) compositional processes. However, the manner in which the composer arrays the motif is simply brilliant: he presents it identically 28 times and in a slightly modified form 15 other times.



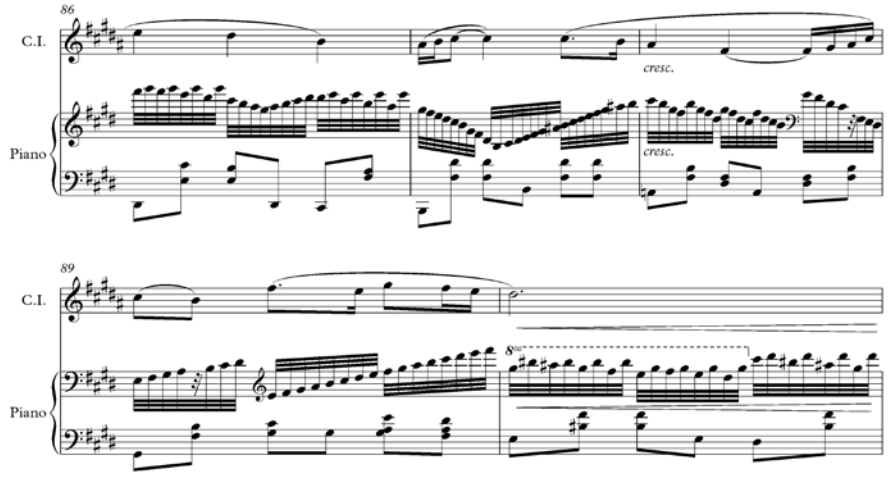


Fig. 14. *Bars 74-90, English horn and piano, no strings*

Consequently, the listener is hard put to test to identify it on listening to this music during a performance.

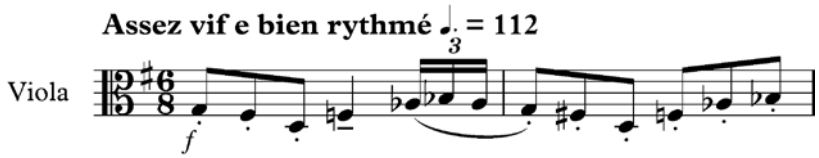


Fig. 15. *Debussy, Quartet, part II, bars 3-4, viola*

Returning to the work under discussion, it becomes apparent that after the 17 bars reproduced almost identically as in the first segment of the musical discourse that the 2nd part began with, Ravel feels the need to bring out the acute register of the English horn. This is why he makes it perform sounds of the highest range, but also of the highest intensity, which is the climax of the second part, after the *tutti* mentioned previously. There are 6 bars that complete section **A'** and move it close to perfection, one could say, but also lead it to the Coda in the second part. It occurs on rehearsal mark 9 in the score, along with the specific harmonic sounds of the harp, combined with the softness of the flute, bassoons and horns. The piano further delicately performs scales in demi-semi-quavers in the right hand, while the left hand continues the *ostinato* that it played in the beginning, which is dual in terms of both rhythm and metre. Thus, the slow part of the concert ends as delicately as it began. It moves the listeners' and the performers' soul deeply, creating an effect comparable to the warmth of an excellent French perfume.

3. Conclusions

The reader of these lines may be tempted to regard most of the previous claims - not only those about rhythm and metre - as no more than simple speculations, possible platitudes. To avoid such observations, I conclude by saying that I have tried to demonstrate the existence of three characteristics. The first is Ravel's ingenuity in creating melodies in direct relation with his inspiration. The second is the masterful combination of note values and accents, which create the rhythm, and the idea of placing them in various metric patterns, which is a matter of elevated musical thinking, of high craftsmanship. The sophisticated manner in which the composer leaves the orientation to one direction or the other at the discretion of the interpreters, the constant balance between the two metric concepts, sometimes combined with the perfect marriage between the two, are extraordinary. Those who want to interpret this music are thus empowered; they are entrusted with the task of reflecting the aesthetic messages encoded in the score, more so than in the case of other works.

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