

Soloist aspects of the Snare Drum in *Bolero* by Maurice Ravel

Răzvan BULARCA¹

Abstract: *The article entitled “Soloist Aspects of the Snare Drum in Bolero by Maurice Ravel” is divided into three chapters. The first chapter describes Ravel as a composer and fundamental exponent of French music; maybe one of his most popular work is Bolero, a wonderfully clear example of the way a symphonic orchestra can be used. The second chapter focuses on composition patterns regarding rhythm, melody and harmony. The first rhythmic pattern is the one opening the work, assigned to the snare drum and is obsessively repeated all along the musical act. The last chapter focuses on the organization form of the musical material and the way the work evolves based on well-defined cyclic structures. Conclusions of this article underline the technical and interpretative difficulties of Ravel’s Bolero.*

Key-words: *rhythm, pattern, cyclic structures*

1. Preamble

In time, music has enciphered in sound the limitless complexity of the human being, where the invisible changes of human feelings sublimed. Rhythm has always been an element that influenced the human mind; human heart tends to tune with the music rhythm we listen to, being able to influence the state of mind.

The complexity and variety of ideas, forms and languages meeting together, overlapping or intertwining in the science, philosophical science and art plans between centuries 19th and 20th envision creativity as a promethean size of the human being. In these three plans, music was the expression of the worlds, both seen or unseen, because music has the privilege of grasping the live purity of forms better than any other art. This way, music reaches a less accessible size for the human being, the spirit. The features of the music phenomenon in this era have developed simultaneously and complementarily. The artist, a creator and a performer of an era characterized by an eccentric and excessive intellectualism, participates and transposes into the dynamics of continuously changing forms, changing within such process.

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, razvan_bularca@yahoo.com

2. Bolero - an exercise for the orchestra and a masterpiece; main features of the work

Maurice Ravel's creation, despite the foresights of his contemporaries - Poulenc, Honegger, Milhaud who thought of it as obsolete, protruded and stood still in history, shining distinctly up to present times. Ravel is represented by the detailed concern for fixing pointedly highlighted images, in order to draw the exact line of the form and of the harmonic balance that he controls from the impressionist aesthetics position. After Debussy died in 1918, Ravel was thought of as a composer and fundamental exponent of French music. The success of his music outside the borders confirmed his name and, during the four months tour in the United States of America and Canada he conducted, held recitals and concerts as a soloist and gave interviews that were collected in the work *Contemporary Music*. One of the most appreciated compositions in the U.S.A. was *Sonata for violin and piano* with the slow move called *Blues*, inspired by jazz and blues rhythms.

As a conductor and next to Marguerite Long, Ravel promoted in Europe the *Concerto in G Major for piano and orchestra*, and between 1929-30 he composed the *Concerto for the left hand*, dedicated to Paul Wittgenstein. Other projects of the composer include the assignment for the Russian dancer Ida Rubinstein, *Bolero*, a piece of work he would himself describe as „a masterpiece...with no music”².

Regarding the orchestration, Ravel saw it as a separate subject from the composition, involving different technical abilities. Roland-Manuel observes in his writing that Ravel's students never saw him while conceiving a piece of work, but there were many opportunities to see him orchestrating. Every time, he used to be careful with what he was assigning to a family of instruments so that they could also serve separately, not only together. Although he was not approving to work over his own creations after he had finished them, the orchestration provided Ravel the opportunity to look at certain creations in a new light and a different context: *Ma mere l'oye* or *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. Most of other composers' works Ravel orchestrated used to be assignments from Djaghilev or Koussevitzky and he still used to look at such assignments as a tribute. Although he did not wish to change the essence of some creations, Ravel left his mark regarding orchestration, impressing for instance another cadent vitality to Debussy's *Dance*. Moreover, the composer made arrangements for piano four hands – Debussy's *Nocturnes* and *Prelude to the afternoon of a faun*.

If we were to summarize in just a few words the period in which the above-mentioned works were created, we can say that the first decades of the 20th century are under the sign of a new wave of inspiration and musical experiment: specifically expressionist dissonance, disjoint pieces, non-existence of a tonal centre etc. A few representative works of this period emphasize the heyday of later romanticism at the same time with the birth of modernism:

² Honegger, A. *Incantation aux fossiles*, Editions d'Ouchy, Laussane, 1948, pp 91-2

Richard Strauss: *Don Quixote* (1898), *Salome* (1905), *Elektra* (1909)
Jean Sibelius: *Finlandia* (1899), *Symphonies* no. 1-3 (1899, 1902, 1905)
Arnold Schoenberg: *Pelleas und Melisande* (1903), *Chamber Symphony* (1906)
Giacomo Puccini: *Tosca* (1900), *Madame Butterfly* (1904)
Gustav Mahler: *Symphony no.3* (1902), *Kindertotenlieder* (1905)
Alexandr Scriabin: *The Poem of Ecstasy* (1908)

The originality of Ravel's style may be defined by one of the main features of his creation and that is the Spanish accent appearing in a large number of his works. This accent is given by intonations, colours and yet undiscovered tone colour combinations, but especially by the exact, feverish rhythms, even violent sometimes, in a mixture of Oriental nostalgic dream and experience. Rhythm plays a crucial role in these works and many times the melodic and harmonic evolution come out against the background of some well-defined repetitive ragged patterns³.

Maybe one of the most popular creations of Maurice Ravel is *Bolero*, written in 1928; this is a unique and famous orchestration exercise because, as Leonard Bernstein used to say, *Bolero* is a „wonderfully clear example of the way in which a big symphonic orchestra may be used“⁴. The work was written at the demand of dancer Ida Rubinstein, being „a dance in a very moderate and constantly equal movement both by the melody and harmony and by rhythm, the last being interruptedly marked by the cylindrical drum. The only diversity element here is brought by the orchestral crescendo“⁵. Based on tone colours, the work exposes the melody nine times with no rhythmical-melodic and tonal variation till the end when the modulation in E major appears, to return to the basic key. *Bolero* secret consists in the build-up in turn of the symphonic orchestra instruments in an enormous orchestral crescendo. Gathering instruments by adding new ones in various tone colour combinations makes the orchestration change for every rehearsal, to become richer and stronger each time until „it ends in the most profound roaring one has ever heard“⁶. Leonard Bernstein used to say about this ingenious theme with tone colour variations that it is the most fascinating orchestral variation in this music history.

3. Composition patterns in terms of rhythm, melody and harmony

In this work, Ravel's orchestra is made up of: wooden wind instruments (2 flutes, 1 piccolo flute, 2 oboes, an English horn, an E-flat clarinet, 2 B-flat clarinets, a bass

³ In: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 3rd Edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1927

⁴ Bernstein, Leonard. *How To Understand Music*, Musical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1982

⁵ Ravel, Maurice. *Esquisse biografique*; J-P Gisserot, Paris 1998

⁶ Leonard Bernstein, *How To Understand Music*, Musical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1982

clarinet, 2 bassoons, 1 contrabassoon), brass (4-F French horns, a D-trumpet, 3 D-trumpets, 3 trombones, a tuba, 3 saxophones- soprano, alto and tenor), percussion instruments (3kettle drums, 2 snare drums, cymbals, tom-tom and celesta), harp and chords. In the following lines I will analyse the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic patterns this work is based on and the manner in which they are arranged, thus moving to a structural and abstract level of musical representation.

Ravel's *Bolero* is built on well-defined patterns, appearing and disappearing during the musical display, following very exact rules; musical patterns play different roles and may be classified in 4 categories: rhythmic patterns, melodic patterns, harmonic patterns and solving patterns. Some rhythmical, melodic and harmonic patterns play a specific role regarding the tone colour display, and the development of the harmonic patterns results into an accompaniment.

3.1. Rhythmic patterns

The first rhythmic pattern is the one opening the work, assigned to the snare drum and it is obsessively repeated all along the musical act; this two measures pattern is really the engine of the entire work and appears in the following versions in the score:

A: the pattern is assigned to a percussion instrument

A1: the pattern is assigned to a tunable instrument

A2, A3: the pattern is assigned to a tunable instrument and includes an arpeggio

Res arpeggio

The image shows five staves of musical notation, each representing a different version of a rhythmic pattern. The first staff (A) is a snare drum pattern in 3/4 time, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes and quarter notes. The second staff (A1) is a melodic pattern in 3/4 time, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes and quarter notes. The third staff (A2) is a melodic pattern in 3/4 time, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes and quarter notes, with an arpeggio indicated by a bracket and the number 8. The fourth staff (A3) is a melodic pattern in 3/4 time, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes and quarter notes, with an arpeggio indicated by a bracket and the number 8. The fifth staff (Ar) is a snare drum pattern in 3/4 time, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes and quarter notes, with an arpeggio indicated by a bracket and the number 7. Each staff has a label on the right side: A, A1, A2, A3, and Ar.

The other rhythmic patterns are:

C: 2 measures pattern acting as a contra-pedal structure

E: 2 measures pattern with a balancing effect and it is assigned when opening the cello part, and then the kettle drums'



3.2. Melodic patterns

Bolero's melodic line is based on two themes- a major one (B1) and a minor one (B2), each with 18 measures and being presented alternatively all along the piece of work.

The image shows six staves of musical notation in 3/4 time, labeled 'B1'. The notation is complex, featuring various rhythmic values and melodic lines across the staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The notation includes eighth notes, quarter notes, and rests, with some notes beamed together. The pattern is presented across six staves, showing a continuous melodic line.

3.3. Harmonic patterns

This patterns I shall note with D1, D2 (a version of D1) and G are one-measure structures with either a harmonic or a pedal role; patterns D1 and D2 are built up based on weak measures, and pattern G on the accentuated time of measure 3/4.

3.4. Solving patters

Bolero's final section is characterized by new patterns:

B3: is a modulating version of B2 pattern- minor theme

B4: is a new theme after B3 and leading to a solution exposed by trumpets

Res arpeggio: final pattern

A3: is a version of pattern A1 and has a tremolo function because of second and third intervals

Res arpeggio: derives from the initial rhythmic pattern

D2: the pattern replacing D1 in the end; its structure plays an important role in the final section evolution

Musical score for B3, consisting of eight staves of music in 3/4 time. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are several triplet markings (indicated by the number 3) and a star symbol (*) above a note in the sixth staff. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a final note.

Musical score for B4 and B rez, consisting of three staves of music in 3/4 time. The notation features complex rhythmic patterns with multiple triplet markings (indicated by the number 3) and a sextuplet marking (indicated by the number 6). The piece concludes with a double bar line and a final note.

4. Meta-structure of the work

Like most composers, Ravel has in mind an organization form of the musical material, a general structure that is not represented by the usual musical symbols. Maybe *Bolero* is one of the most self-evident examples in this sense because the work evolves based on well-defined cyclic structures. The musical rules of evolution refer to the rhythmic, dynamic, melodic, harmonic and tone colour combinations aspect. At the most abstract level we can speak of the cyclic structure repeating four times based on the two themes –major and minor; this structure has the form B1B1B2B2 and after its exposure in four lines, Ravel comes with solving by patterns B3, B4 and Res arpeggio.

The global structure of the score may be represented as follows:

Intro + 4x (B1B1B2B2) +B1+B3+Res arpeggio

Intro (B1B1B2B2) (B1B1B2B2) (B1B1B2B2) (B1B1B2B2) B1 B3 Res arpeggio

Each structure B1B1B2B2 lies along 72 measures and builds up in the rhythmic, harmonic, tone colour and dynamic plan, while the melodic plan is static till the final section. The listener's perception when hearing the *Bolero* is the one of a colossal crescendo till the end, and this feeling is especially due to the overlap of the structures described in the previous pages. Ravel aims at aesthetic and musical purposes and overlaps these structures in order to create dynamic, harmonic and tone colour effects.

While the evolution of the dynamic plan is somehow obvious, the evolution of the tone colour plan is revolutionary for the period when the piece of work was composed (1928): Ravel brings together novel tone colours by the linear combination of traditional instruments; the harmonic evolution remains close to the classical composition technique.

5. Conclusions. Technical and interpretative difficulties.

As you can notice while taking a short look at the general score of *Bolero*, the snare drum is the instrument that is present from the first to the last measure of the work. It is the instrument Ravel builds on a two-measure pattern and which shall be taken over in turn by all the other instruments of the symphonic orchestra. The snare drum, by the rhythmic formula repeated obsessively 169 times, backs up the entire evolution of the work.

The part starts in a low piano key with the solo of the snare drum; this beginning represents a challenge for any percussionist because one needs a perfect technique combined with rhythmic precision and subtlety at the same time. The rhythmic formula itself is not difficult, but repeating it so many times challenges the human condition itself because the beat will never be exact enough. The rhythmic constancy is thus one of the most difficult missions for the instrumental performer.

Another technical difficulty regards the equality of the rhythmic formula, implicitly of each separate beat; this implies being aware of each beat, in a calculated progressive crescendo, till the end of the work. Repeating uninterruptedly a formula 169 times means the instrumental performer may represent mentally the construction of the work before anything else in order to create an adequate dosage.

Starting with section 16 in the general score, Ravel also introduces the second snare drum to support intensity by a continuous *crescendo*. The difficult part consists in the perfect synchronization of the two percussionists till the end. As a percussionist, I consider that this „orchestra exercise” of Ravel is a test and few are those who can take it to an end.

The style and interpretation analysis of this masterpiece opened new horizons for me as a percussionist within the symphonic orchestra, making me pay closer attention to details, but also to the entire picture. The study of the scores raised technical, coordination and expressivity problems; the assumption of the accompanist or soloist role within the symphonic orchestra may only be done by having a detailed stylistic experience.

6. References

- Bernstein, Leonard. 1982. *How to Understand Music*. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. 1989. *Nineteenth-Century Music*, Tr. J. Bradford Robinson. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Faure, H. 1978. *Mon maitre Maurice Ravel*. Paris : Les Editions A.T.P.
- Fevrier, J. 1939. “Les exinges de Ravel”. *Revue internationale de musique*, nr. 5-6, p. 892.
- Honegger, A. 1948. *Incantation aux fossiles*. Laussane: Editions d’Ouchy.
- Howat, Roy. 1977. “Debussy, Ravel and Bartok: Towards Some New Concepts of Form.” *Music and Letters* 58, Oxford Journals.
- McCrelles, Patrick. 1996. “An Evolutionary Perspective on Nineteenth-Century Semitonal Relations”. In *The Second Practice of Nineteenth-Century Tonality*, ed. by William Kinderman and Harold Krebs. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Meyers, R.H. 1960. *Ravel: Life and Work*. London: G. Duckworth Edition.

Ravel, Maurice. 1998. *Esquisse biografique*. Paris: J.-P. Gisserot.

*** *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 1927, 3rd Edition. Oxford University Press; New York.

*** *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*. 2003. Harvard University Press.