

Musical dramaturgy in *Jeux d'eau* by Maurice Ravel

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Abstract: *Before being staged, any interpreting act (be it instrumental or vocal) needs to go through a careful analysis that should take into account the structure of the work performed, but also the style of the composer and the age to which it belongs. In this paper I aim to sketch a possible structural analysis of the work *Jeux d'eau* by Maurice Ravel while also presenting its musical dramaturgy. Referring to the same work, this study also puts forth a partial analysis of the elements that make up Ravel's musical language, proposing some tentative pieces of advice relative to the interpretation of this piano miniature.*

Key-words: *Ravel, Jeux d'eau, musical dramaturgy, musical language, interpretation*

1. Introduction

The idea of deciphering the innovative musical dramaturgy of the work suggestively titled *Jeux d'eau* (*Play of water* in translation) by *Maurice Ravel* came to my mind several years ago, while I was writing my honours thesis. The experience I have subsequently acquired in the areas of interpretation and research made me return to this work, which proved to be a true trail blazer, not only in the pianistic setting of the time when it was composed but also in the field of instrumental architectural constructions.

Deciphering Ravel's compositional methods and techniques, establishing their interconnections as well as studying the developmental principles used within this masterpiece belonging to the *modal-impressionist* style are absolutely essential goals in order to acquire a better understanding of Ravel's style in general, and of the contents and message of this work in particular.

2. Structural analysis and musical dramaturgy in *Jeux d'eau* by Maurice Ravel

Composed in 1901 and devoted to Ravel's master *Gabriel Fauré*, *Jeux d'eau* was first presented to the audience in the Pleyel hall a year later, in the interpretation of the pianist *Ricardo Viñes* (but it had previously been played at the *Les Apaches*

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Society, of which the composer himself was a member). Ravel's admiration for Liszt's piano works is clearly reflected in this piece, as the composer intended this miniature as a replica to *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* composed by Liszt in 1870. However, through his pioneering, varied, innovative and nuanced piano writing, Ravel paints here new representations of playing water forms, all of them concentrated in the quote from *Henri de Régnier* reproduced in the sheet: *Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille – The God of the river laughs while the water tickles him.*

Although, at first sight, the progression of the piece might suggest a certain overlap with the structure of the sonata (due mainly to the presence of the two basic motives on which the architecture of the work is built), *Jeux d'eau* follows rather a form made up by the combination of “juxtaposition and variation procedures” (Laura Vasiliu). And even if we cannot divide the piece into the three major segments of the sonata form (*Exposition, Development, Recapitulation*), the work's dramaturgy is still built following an *accumulation area* (m. 1-37), a *culmination area* (m. 38-50) and a *regression area* (m. 51-85, which will lead to a final culmination – m. 72). The scheme below may be seen as representing a possible progression of musical ideas, leaving room for other alternative analyses of the work's musical structure (Tables 1a, 1b and 1c). Periods are noted with **A** (capital letters, bold), phrases with *a* (small letters, italics), motives with α (Greek letters – alpha, beta, gamma, delta, in bold).

Periods	A (18 m)						B (19 m)					
Phrases	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i> ₁	<i>a</i> ₂	<i>a</i> _{v1}	<i>a</i> _i	<i>tran- sition</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i> ₁	<i>interior develop- ment</i>	<i>b</i> ₂	<i>b</i> ₃	<i>transition</i>
Motives	α figure motive	α _{v1}	α _{v2}	α	α _i		β motive phrase	β		β _{v1}	β _{v2}	
Measures	1-2	3 - 4	5 - 6	7 - 8	9 - 14	15-18	19-20	21 - 23	24-28	29 - 30	31 - 33	34-37
accumulation area												

Table 1a. *Technical-structural analysis of the work Jeux d'eau*

Periods	C (13 m)				B' (11 m)		
Phrases	<i>c</i>	<i>c</i> ₁	<i>c</i> ₂	<i>c</i> ₃	<i>b</i> ₄	<i>b</i> ₅	<i>b</i> ₆
Motives	γ figure motive δ binary motive	γ _{v1}	γ _{v2}	γ _{v3}	β _{v3}	β _{v4}	β _{v5}
Measures	38-40	41-42	43-44	45-50	51-55	56-59	60-61
culmination area				regression area			

Table 1b. *Technical-structural analysis of the work Jeux d'eau*

Periods	A' (11 m)		B'' (13 m)				
Phrases	a_{v2}	a_{1v}	b_{2v}	b_{3v}	b_{v1}	b_{1v}	b_{v2}
Motives	α	α_{v1}	β_{v6}	β_{v7}	β	β	
Measures	62-63	64-72	73-74	75-76	77-78	79-81	82-85
regression area							

Table 1c. Technical-structural analysis of the work *Jeux d'eau*

The piece's opening part takes us into a calm, delicate mood (*Très doux* and *pp*) which suggests the gentle movement of water, a mood only rarely disturbed by harmonic instability. Right from the start we are presented with the rich harmonies built on major seventh chords that will dominate the entire work (in this case, *E* major - the tonic and *A* major - the subdominant, both with major sevenths). The first *motive-figure* of the piece is built on these chords – motive α (m. 1 – Figure 1).

The image shows the first measure of the piano introduction in Maurice Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. The music is in 6/8 time and the key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The right hand (RH) plays a melodic line with a slur over measures 1-5, marked 'Très doux (♩ = 144) α'. The left hand (LH) plays a harmonic accompaniment with chords marked with asterisks (*). The tempo is marked 'pp' (pianissimo).

Fig. 1. Maurice Ravel - *Jeux d'eau*, m. 1

This “first subunit of the temporal structure” (SEE Valentin Timaru) will serve as a basis in the construction of the following phrases which will take the shape of continuous variations of the initial idea (this is true for each of the motives mentioned in the tables, therefore also for β , γ and δ). Besides bringing diversity into the musical discourse, these variations also help highlight instrumental virtuosity.

The phrases (which, in general, have the same length – 2 measures) succeed one after another building sound images that flow cursorily, rendering a particularly fluent musical structure. In measure 9a, motive α is inverted and the left hand accompaniment brings along a chain of fourths and fifths, and all this builds a first culmination in the high-pitched register (*ff*, m. 14) and a *transit aria* (m. 15-18) which will prepare with a rapid *diminuendo* the beginning of the second period – **B** (m. 19).

Motive β is the most treated subdivision of the work, as it serves as a basis in the construction of three periods intercalated with the other sections (we could even say that, in the work's composition, it behaves like a chorus – Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Maurice Ravel - *Jeux d'eau*, m. 19

The motive's sound structure is a well defined and easily recognizable *tetrachord* whose melodic progression is made up of the notes $C\#$, $D\#$, $F\#$ and $G\#$. The left hand should therefore be highlighted, as it is the bearer of this motive, while the right has now an accompanying role through successive series of seconds that oscillate within an octave. Very important in the interpretation of this passage is rendering the right hand accompaniment as lightly, fluently and easily as possible, since it is not absolute rhythmic equality that is of utmost importance here but rather the sound effect that should be created, the same being just as true in the case of phrases b_{v1} , b_{lv} or b_{v2} . In order to fulfil this desideratum one needs to study and practice various rhythmic or *staccato* formulas.

The following phrases will stem from the same motive-phrase β , rendering it in its entirety, taking over only some intervals or rhythmic formulas (it emerges in thirds and fourths in b_2), continually transforming it.

In my opinion, the fragment built starting from measure 38 (*le chant un peu en dehors* - the higher melodic line will have to be highlighted) is a separate section - C - as it brings two new superposed motives: γ - a figure motive and δ - a binary motive (Figure 3).

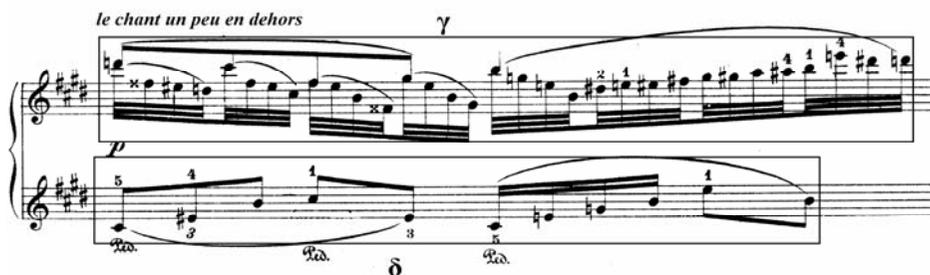


Fig. 3. Maurice Ravel - *Jeux d'eau*, m. 38

This new period, which also represents the *culmination area* in the work's dramaturgy, is a stage built from continuous sequences that reach the acute and superacute register. The piece's climax comes after these modulating stages in measure 48 (in *fff*), on a trill of chords played with both hands, followed by a *glissando* over the entire keyboard that fades on the piano's lowest note – A natural. On a rapid *decrescendo* spanning over only three measures, the pianist will have to prepare section **B'** using the attack of both his or her fingers and especially the pedal by pressing it briefly and repeatedly, thus preparing in a dynamic manner the nuance *p* and the *1er Mouvement*.

Having already stepped into the *regression area* of the work's musical dramaturgy we will witness, in what follows, a reconfiguration of motive β through three modulating sequences that progressively come one after the other following an ascending trajectory (phrases b_4 , b_5 and b_6), creating the impression of waves that come and go relentlessly.

Motive α also re-emerges in measure 62 (**A'**), but this time it has a different harmonic cloth, as the initial tonalities are now supplemented with a $G\#$ in the bass that has the value of a half and a very important harmonic role (it is the 3rd step in *E* major and the 7th in *A* major). The writing itself is also different, the rhythmic values are reduced as to suggest a continuous flux and reflux of the waters, everything leading to a new climax (m. 72). This will be preceded and anticipated by a spectacular, flowing mini-cadenza, in septolets that start in the superacute register and progressively descend to the lower one in *ppp* from which the climax bursts out in a passage performed *très rapide* on superposed harmonies – $F\#$ major with *A* minor and then *C* major. The superimposition of the two harmonies - $F\#$ major and *C* major – was even named the “*Jeux d'eau* chord”.

The last presentations of motive β (last period - **B'**) end and calm the mood, bringing along the slowest tempo in the work (*Un peu plus lent qu'au début; Lent, très expressif*). The sounds fade like little water drops in a passage of the right hand that plays, with very soft touches, the notes in the *A* major 6th arpeggio, trying to highlight the melodic line of the left hand (*un peu marqué*) through a nevertheless simple, natural, equal execution. Everything fades out almost imperceptibly - *pp* - on the leading tone of *E* major ($D\#$ for the right hand) and the composer is careful to mention the precious indication *sans ralentir* (no *rallentando*).

3. Style, language and interpretive perspectives in the work *Jeux d'eau*

In the case of any work, in order to sketch some potential interpretive viewpoints one needs good information about the *style* of the artistic movement to which that particular author belongs (or that he or she created), as well as about the features of the creator's language itself. In our case, we may undoubtedly talk of a *Ravelian style*, which is both extremely complex and rather constant, stemming from

Impressionism but endowed with *Baroque*, *Neo-classical*, *folk music* (Basque-Spanish) and even *jazz* nuances. Moreover, his remarkable piano and conducting skills inevitably influenced his compositional writing. The features of Ravel's hand (not as ample as Rachmaninov's, for instance) made his writing more accessible, but nevertheless complex and far from easy.

In what follows, we will therefore analyse, in part, some of the elements in Ravel's musical language that directly apply to the piece *Jeux d'eau*.

In general, Ravelian *melodics* is built on brief and concise themes that are reiterated through repeated sequences. In the case at hand, all the motives span over the length of a single measure, α , γ and δ being arpeggiated figurations (γ also has some chromatic insertion) and β a tetrachord. In most cases, phrases span over the length of two measures. Generally, the leading melody is intoned by the upper voice and in many cases it is given to the left hand but intercalated with the accompaniment (by crossing the hands, the left transforms into the upper leading voice – see b_2 and b_3). There are also cases – particularly in the last phrases - in which the melodic line goes below the accompanying register (see b_{1v}), overlaps with it (see b_{v1} and b_{v2}), or passes to the middle voice (see again b_{1v}). Accompaniment is usually supported by arpeggiated chords, but various chains of fourths and fifths are also present. At the same time, Ravelian melody is discrete, singable, and natural and holds the most important role among all the elements of his musical language (a point in common with Rachmaninov's view).

From the way in which the melodic trajectories are combined (and we may observe this just by having a quick glance at the sheet), we may conclude that Ravel's *harmony* is developed in close relationship with melodic lines. Even if it frequently encompasses modal structures, the latter does not move far away from tonality. It is innovating and characterized by great plasticity and expressiveness. An important role in highlighting the harmonies – as well as the melodic lines – is played by the pedal. In fact, the construction of the score's dramaturgy is largely dependent on the utilisation of the pedal, which should be used in such a way as to render as authentically as possible the combinations of colours and lights. In order to achieve this desideratum, various devices are used: half and quarter pedals, long pedal (*ped. jusqu'à la fin*), vibrating pedal that retains the basses while high notes are purged, released. Also, the use of the soft pedal is absolutely necessary whenever there is an indication in this respect. We have already talked about the *Jeux d'eau* chord.

Although, as mentioned before, the work is built based on the variation principle, the changes are not excessive at the level of *rhythm*, which is often subjected to sequencing that reveals, in general, the same chosen pattern for that phrase, aiming to render the constant flowing of water. From time to time, the intercalation of a 1/4, 2/4 or 3/4 time gives a certain rhythmic instability whenever necessary, but the balance is immediately re-established and the rhythm is flowing. Ravel deliberately increases this fluency by the lack of dotted formulas, whose presence would muddy the waters.

The indications relative to *dynamics* and *agogics*, particularly important in the work's dramaturgy, should be followed to the letter in order to reproduce the effects meant by the composer, which are built gradually and diversely (*Très doux, rapide, le chant un peu en dehors, cédez légèrement*, etc.). As far as agogics is concerned, one should also take into account the fact that Ravel preferred a simple, natural interpretation with no *rubato*, so that the pianist should comply with the indications carefully specified in the sheet. As a general rule, establishing the various aspects that the tempo (as well as the dynamics) should take on can only be carried out after a thorough analysis of the sheet, all the more so as, in our case, Ravelian writing may provide precious indications. For instance, a slowing down of the tempo may result from the passages with augmented values (or, conversely, diminished values for an acceleration), so that a supplemental slowing down/acceleration from the interpreter's part may not be necessary. At the same time, one should take into account the fact that any *accelerando* or *rallentando* should be lead exactly up to the next tempo in order not to create a rupture between the fragments.

As to the sound effects that may be rendered in this miniature, we may say that Ravel managed to generate very diverse and innovating *timbral* combinations for the piano, which make the overall music pictorial and original. We hear sonorities that, besides the musical vibrations of the water (calm or troubled), recall to one's mind the timbres of the harp, the cello or even the timpani. The interpretation should also take into account the sonorities and the mechanics of the various piano brands (but also the hall in which the piece is played), as they might be a source of more or less great difficulties in the rendering of the work's enchanting, refined mood. In this respect, it should also be mentioned that Ravel preferred Erard pianos.

Taking into account that the composer imposed himself some rules in the construction of *forms*, jettisoning absolute freedom in the making of his sound structures, we can say that in the case of *Jeux d'eau* primacy was given to the musical dramaturgy suggested very plastically right from the title. Even if many of the researchers who approached this work consider that it has the form of a sonata, I personally proposed a different reasoning (explained above), as it is difficult to identify here all the specific features of a sonata.

At the end of this section I would like to emphasize a very important aspect, namely that the interpretation of Ravel's music should not have a romantic quality, since the entire mood is made up of effects, in this case water drops and sprays, waves, everything played with a flexible *poignet*. There is no need for an excessive approach, the musical text should not be played in a very articulated manner, but at the same time interpretation should not be dull, imprecise or diffuse. Therefore, this work needs a balance between technique and piano interpretation.

4. Conclusions

In the history of music there was a time when the compositional styles of Ravel and Debussy were frequently thought to be similar. Moreover, it has been said that *Jeux d'eau* was inspired by Liszt's piece. Inevitably, any creator has his or her sources of inspiration, but it is clear that this work is an original musical picture full of dazzling brilliance owing to its cascading arpeggios. Thus, Ravel brings an important contribution to pianistic literature, as this is also the composer's first notable work.

Although it is more objective and does not take us into that intimacy specific to Debussy, opting for the more Lisztian line of valuing all the harmonic, dynamic, timbral, technical, etc. possibilities of the instrument, through his (relatively few) piano works Ravel manages to increase the instrument's sound potential. At the same time, I would like to specify that the pieces of advice given here are just guidelines and each performer has the right, as well as the obligation, to create his or her own interpretive version.

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