

A NEW ANALYTICAL APPROACH TO THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF RAVEL

Anca PREDA-ULIŢĂ¹

Abstract: *The help offered by Schenker's analysis into performing, as the musician affirmed, is recognized in performer's world, considering that his approach situated the analysis into performing. Even if Schenker has not taken into account in his analysis the French music, a wide range of Ravel's music characteristics demonstrate that it can be analysed using the theoretical model of the Austrian theorist. The prolongation's principles can be extended in order to adapt them to the post-romantic music using new criteria applied to the foreground through the complexity of musical language and without modifying the paradigm of the background mostly aligned to the Ursatz mode.*

Key words: *Ravel, Schenker, prolongation, structure, Ursatz.*

1. Introduction

The 20th century is widely known as a period of innovation, of exploring the diversity of styles and approaches of piano music and also for the predisposition of interaction between arts, which have not yet been completely revealed. In this context, Ravel could be considered an artist whose musical knowledge was inspired by composers he studied and admired. Although his unique contribution regarding the pianistic technique, orchestral tone or concord are undeniable, his innovation is, most certainly inspired by the traditional musical practices. Apart from style and musical tradition with French specific, Ravel tried to obtain a better insight of music from various parts of the world. The innovative aspects of Ravel's music reflect a complex musical identity, as multicultural assets can be found in most of his creations.

2. Stylistic influences

Ravel has an independent personality resulting from his great passion towards a variety of styles, from French baroque to Spanish popular music and American jazz and blues. A composer with a remarkable culture, a true connoisseur of literature and of contemporary visual arts as well as a passionate of dancing, Ravel approached composing in a complex interdisciplinary and multicultural manner, being preoccupied by synaesthesia and the effects music could have on senses.

2.1. Cultural influences

The gamut and the sonorities specific to the Orient combine with the one specific for the American jazz, blues and ragtime. Also, the influences of the Russian school on Ravel's style, especially regarding orchestration, are noticed even by

¹ Faculty of Music, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

contemporary music critics. Ravel took contact with Russian music even from his youth, and his interest was stimulated at the Conservatoire in Paris. Moreover, among his childhood memories, there are also Spanish traditional songs sung by his mother, in consequence, Ravel was fond of the Spain, the Spanish people and traditions, as well as Spanish music in general. As far as the Austrian school, Ravel had the same esthetical orientations specifics to Mozart, Schubert or Mendelssohn, also appreciating Strauss, Mahler and Schoenberg.

2.2. Visual arts

The Parisian impressionists and symbolists – artists, musicians and writers – were representing Ravel's entourage and also were the source of his innovative ideas. Moreover, being part of the group of avant-gardist intellectuals who shared his taste in art – Les Apaches- always kept him informed regarding the tendencies in the domain of music, visual arts and literature.

In this way, the composing style of Ravel is reflected within the alignment with the techniques defining the contemporary movement of the visual arts, especially by using the „trompe l'oeil” technique – characterized by the illusion of tridimensionality. By determining an analogous process of hearing disorientation, Ravel distracts the hearer from structural events, anticipated by the introduction of ornaments within the surface structural level, and by consequent the abrupt import of rhythmical configurations within the passes between the formal structures invokes fluid textual limits, creating the „trompe l'oreille” effect.

2.3. Literature – an inspiration for Ravel

Literature, namely the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire, had a

meaningful role in the formation of Ravel's concepts, as he considered the first one as a third professor, along with Fauré and Gédalge. Poe's attention for logical and calculated planning of the creation process fascinated Ravel- whose approach of measured and manufactured composition was in concordance with the American poet's style. Furthermore, when he was a student, Ravel often read Mallarmé's poems whose literary creations represented a crossroad in the French literature and he kept a constant admiration for the work of this poet all his life,

2.4. Dance

Ballet has a particular meaning in Ravel's creations, as it offered him the opportunity to stimulate his imagination through a pluridimensional projection of dancing. The connexion between music and choreography: movement, phrasing, structure, visual spectacle, elegance, as well as the fact that the two arts have in common the capacity to animate space and time, determined him to combine the two arts in order to create new and surprising effects, through a stylised and innovative approach.

3. Ravel's musical language

Even though Ravel's music has tonal characteristics, for the times he lived in, it was considered to be innovative and, maintaining the French school style, his melodies are almost exclusively modals. Ravel's compositions did not depend on using modes, he used extended harmonies and complicated modulations placed outside traditional practices. Ravel was fond of the 9th and 11th chords, and the abruptness of his concords is mainly due to unresolved appoggiaturas.

Ravel's esthetical pianistic is the result of a lifestyle involving the intense study of

other composers, from which she took what attracted him the most: certain qualities and stylistic element remaining in the same unique time of music history. His preferences moulded expressivity and the context influenced his musical language.

From an orchestral point of view, Ravel exposes images in an ingenious manner through the sound of instruments and original effects, through colourful tonalities implemented in a variety of sounds and instruments. His structures are well defined, having a classical sense of proportion and conventional formal models creating the control of innovative ideas.

Ravel analysed some of his piano compositions showing the fact he was taking into consideration prolongations and large structures as well as musical layers. At the same time, he explained that some elements of his sequence melodic lines function as an unsolved appoggiatura offering also implied solutions that because of the bass, those elements show a classical rendition evidencing the primary and the passing tones of the voice leading. Ravel also exposed the analytical phases of rendition in a similar manner as Schenker did, showing that a passage can be rendered to a single chord.

It seems that in the harmonic structures of his compositions, the unsolved appoggiatura have had an important role because those one replaced the implied notes Schenker spoke about. Therefore, the characteristics of the Ravelian style can be discovered through an analytical approach based on the theories enunciated by the Austrian theorist.

The pedal-points dominate the harmonic progressions developed on a large scale, so the analysis through prolongations is useful to discover contrapuntal structures and harmonic and melodic language full of assonant loudness based on superimposed thirds and unresolved neighbour notes, but also it is useful to discover the complex

structural hierarchy. The climaxes are prepared with ascending linear progression while the crossover between sections is based on descendant progression; sometimes simultaneous prolongations of inconsistent harmony are created.

4. Schenkerian analysis to Ravel's music

We can observe that the fundamental ideas of Schenker's theory are found in Ravel's works. The preservation of ideas and fundamental rules maintains the invariable component of Schenker's motto (always the same) where the extensions demonstrate the theoretical necessity of diversity (not always in the same manner). Ravel's tonal language is presented as a version of the tonal language from Classicism and Romanticism; hence the Schenker's approach on the Ravel's music is possible.

4.1. General observations

Even if Schenker concentrated his analysis on the German repertoire, a certain number of theorists and musicians tried to apply them beyond this musical spectrum. Their aim was to find a way through which Schenker's theories can offer another point of view to Ravel's music, based on prolongation and musical layers. The start is represented by Schenker's ideas about analysis, ideas that can be successfully applied to Ravel's music.

Schenker's theoretical studies helped to transform the musical theory. The legal writings about interpretation are based on his experience as a musician and as a teacher and propose an intelligent re-evaluation of the manner in which the lines-up are played through interpretation. Schenker's thoughtfulness has been influenced by the second half of the XIX century but it was adjusted by his students

and successors based also on the academicians' values from post-war period in United States of America. Because of them, Schenker became a theorist known today in music. The modern analysis, adjusted later, have an amazing influence for performer's analytical approach.

4.2. Adaptations to Ravel's musical language

First of all, the steps that would have to be completed during the matching of the post-romantic music analysis based on Schenker's theory have to cover the characteristics of the basic ideas belonging to his writings, the identification of the analytical problems that may occur as well as prolongation problems - this being the first aspect that allows us to touch the post-romantic repertoire through musical layering but also the use of *Ursatz* in a flexible manner of particular tonal background. After that, the consideration of the publications and of the particular articles offering an overview of Schenker's analysis to the modern music is necessary, eventually, limits can be imposed depending on the different background that can show up.

As Schenker observes, the musical layers are governed by different constraints of voices conduct rules, the background having the severest rules. In this way, the prolongation's principles can be extended in order to adapt them to the post-romantic music using new criteria applied to the foreground through the complexity of musical language and without modifying the paradigm of the background mostly aligned to the *Ursatz* mode. The *assonant* prolongations exist only in foreground and middleground, being reduced in background. Also, the non-diatonic structures are subordinated to the diatonic ones.

For Schenker, the representation of a

composition as a sequence of a basic structural idea that can be expressed in terms of notation was an inspiration and only the brilliant composers had the ability to decompose the musical text because most of them were not aware of the methods through which they were able to arrive to the final form of a composition.

Knowing the ideology and the circumstances in which mental content was settled out by the well-known classic composers starting with their social life to their spiritual and political life that beset them; Schenker issued a hypothesis saying that behind those structures built with mathematical accuracy there is semantics. So in order to find a methodology offering a semantic function for the classical and romantic compositions (extended to the modern ones), interesting statements like "The main line is genius' fortune" may occur.

For Ravel's music that needs a certain degree of flexibility in order to identify and connect the structural points, those aspects are very important. Because of the fact that many ways of performing may occur, we can speak about how a work is related to *Ursatz* rather than considering *Ursatz*'s determination a goal. Hence, when we analyse Ravel's music from a schenkerian point of view, we are looking for tonal aspects without considering necessary the identification of basic classical structures- traditional *Ursatz*.

Considering Schenker's goal about the analysis as long as his examples and prolongation problems, it would be necessary to determine the advantages but also the limits imposed by the implementation to Ravel's music. Therefore, if the *Ursatz*'s problem is reconsidered as a tonal indicator, it must be taken into account the adjustment to a contrapuntal structure matched to the tonal background. The adjustment to this kind of structure that represents the essential part

of a work is useful was an issue debated by the theorists who treated the problem of schenkerian analysis extension. Some think the analyst would have to have a view of the musical work as a whole and to focus on the manner in which the schenkerian analysis can be useful for its understanding, concluding that those can be helpful even for pieces from post-romantic period despite tonal ambiguity and the fact that it cannot be reduced to a traditional *Ursatz*.

Considering that Schenker's theories can be applied only to the tonal music, here appears the idea of affiliation to the extended method applied to the post-tonal music. From my point of view, this problem is one of semantics, the idea of adjustment to the background of a musical language mainly tonal being evident but very complex because Ravel used the contrapuntal and harmonic classical techniques and a large number of foreground layers while the middleground layers and the unusual ones are being created by the extended use of passing tones or tones that replace them. So the tonal language from Ravel's works occurs like a tonal language extension from classical and romantic period. The main goal of the analysis is the manner in which the tonality is used to relate to the schenkerian theories.

For post-romantic music, a general scheme regarded through the rendition of secondary elements can show the tonal content of the analysed piece without attempting an abstract background. Practically this rendition compared to an *Ursatz* specific to pieces belonging to tonal music would evidence major differences that demonstrate the absence of tonality, but what I will try to do is an approach that won't treat Ravel's musical language being extremely complicated neither as a truncation of classical style nor as a main version of the future. But, we cannot

neglect the tonal moves that exist, even the tonal hint or the fact that Ravel uses untraditional sonorities into a tonal syntax.

4.3. Implications for the performers

Concerning Ravel's music, the creativity assigned to the performer has fine connotations and it is based on details that arise from score but also from knowledge of the style, personality and influences contributing to the musical results. The significance and the sound effects are already exposed in the score so the performer has to replay what he marked down. His approach on the performer may seem to depersonalize, to restrict, but the ability to recreate, to replay imply not only creativity but also intelligence and complex musical intuition. As Schenker observes, the scores represent the effects desired by the performer and not the manner in which these effects must be created, offering the performer the chance to find ways to create them. Therefore, the performer's role is to complete what the composer has created.

In order to apply the schenkerian analysis, the performer has to conceptualize the role of the analysis into performing- the ideal of applied analysis. All those discoveries occurring because of the analysis are distinguished in performance, because a performer who understands and hears the relationship of the fundamental musical piles attached by prolongations will perform differently, much more naturally than those who are based on instinct. The aspects connected to the musical structure are relevant and defining in performing problems as the articulation, dynamic, phrasing and many others.

The relationship between structure and performance is not so close to restrict performers. They will not have to limit to the idea that a composition has a structure

but they must consider it like something offering the possibility to invent. Once the structure has been established, the biggest challenge for the performers is to transmit the tension created by surface details, by handling the dynamic, the tempo, the touché, therefore to create tension with the musical discourse. The performers can create meaning through structural possibilities of the composition, meaning that cannot be issued only by a simple structural description.

5. Conclusions

The approach of schenkerian method of analysis by contemporary musicians may find a much more clear direction than that of pure music theory. Analysis reveals componistic purposes, musical and extra-musical associations, this being the only method for the awareness of music. Through analysis, it can be discovered the coherence of a whole composition, the analytic brightness of a composition depending on hearing and understanding of composition. The development of a personal strategy helping performers to get through this entire way, improving the required competence is extremely important. The analysis represents a crucial part of an work during the identification and conceptualization process of structure and tension dissipation, it represents a part of bits control, a part of apogee around which are built discovering phrases of correct performance componistic effect. The performer must have the ability to approach each part of a work with

accuracy because any omission can ruin the entire structure.

References

1. Baker, J.: *Voice Leading in Post-Tonal Music: Suggestions for Extending Schenker's Theory*. In: *Music Analysis* 9/2, 1990, 177–200.
2. Chong, E. K. M.: *Extending Schenker's 'Neue musikalische Theorien und Phantasien': Towards a Schenkerian Model for the Analysis of Ravel's Music*. Doctoral Thesis, Eastman School of Music, Rochester, NY, 2002.
3. Cook, N.: *A Guide to Musical Analysis*. New York. Oxford University Press, 1994.
4. Cook, N.: *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. New York. Oxford University Press, 2013.
5. Kaminsky, P.: *Ravel's Late Music and the Problem of Polytonality*. In: *Music Theory Spectrum*, Oxford, 2004, 26/ 2.
6. Larson, S.: *The Problem of Prolongation in Tonal Music: Terminology, Perception, and Expressive Meaning*. In: *Journal of Music Theory* 41/1, Durham, NC, 1997, 107.
7. Pearsall, E. R.: *Harmonic Progressions and Prolongation in Post-Tonal Music*. In: *Music Analysis* 10/ 3 (1991): 345–55.
8. Puri, M. J.: *Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire*. New York. Oxford University Press, 2012.