

The Prolongation in the Music of Ravel

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Abstract: *The principles of prolongation and linear progression give us a comprehension of music from a broader perspective, of general architecture, as an organic scheme of the whole. Such an understanding of music helps us to avoid, in interpretation, considering each note as having the same degree of importance in a musical phrase. Also, a proper division of the musical works into fragments according to prolongations and harmonic progressions is a genuine help in the process of obtaining fluency and correct phrasing. The analysis is necessary because only in this way can the musical ideas be understood and performed.*

Key-words: *prolongation, harmony, contrapuntal chords, structural chords, structure*

1. The concept of prolongation

Hierarchical harmonic structures can be found in most of Ravel's music, even when the harmonic vocabulary does not seem to have concrete functions. Some of the principles governing the perception of prolongation in functional harmony can be applied to Ravel's music.

In short, the prolongation of the chord is its expansion through one or more chords. The division of chords in two categories: *harmonic* – that fulfil a structural function and *contrapuntal* – function of prolongation is not limitative. Tonal coherence has always been intensified throughout musical history, because of the tendency to expand our horizon and the architectonic possibilities of music. Thus, there are chords and progressions of chords of whose meaning demonstrates that harmony and counterpoint can combine their functions of structure and prolongation. Hence, harmonic chords can't only have structural status, but also of prolongation (*harmonic prolongations*), as well as cases of contrapuntal chords having structural meaning.

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The Ravelian harmonic language is loaded with complex, dissonant sounds and chord structures based on unresolved appoggiaturas and non-diatonic elements (Cassela 1926, 125-126). Prolongation in the sense of "decomposing" a note, an interval or a chord by means of ornaments and elaborations, or by less important additions within the structure, occurs within the median and surface levels and allows the identification of structural points. (Larson 1997, 107) Sometimes the overlaps and interactions of different linear elements create simultaneous prolongations of seemingly incompatible harmonies. Also, certain harmonic structures may be difficult to identify due to the subordination of certain elements to others, so it is necessary to set structural priorities according to context.

2. Melodic-contrapuntal prolongations

In any musical work, the analysis should reveal the compositional purposes and the musical and extra musical associations, this being the only method of awareness of music. Through it, one can discover the organic coherence of a composition taken as a whole, the analytical perception of a composition depending on the hearing and deep understanding of the work. Thus, the Schenkerian point of view of approaching a work in the form of hierarchical levels takes into account the fact that the surface ones appear in a metaphorical connection with the abstract levels of analysis. The surface of music must be seen as a complex prolongation of simple musical ideas.

3. Harmonic prolongations

The first three measures of the second movement of the *Sonatina* represent a prolongation of the tonic chord, all other chords having no structural role. The first change in the harmonic structure appears in the fourth measure, for the first time, where the third stage chord intervenes.

Mouv^t de Menuet

I P I₇ I₆₄ I₇ P I₇ P P

Fig. 1. M. Ravel – *Sonatine*, 2nd mvt, mm. 1 – 4

Regarding the prolongation of dominant chord, Salzer refers to *Jeux d'eau*, and recalls “one of the revolutionary achievements of contemporary music: the counterpoint prolongation of dissonant chords, especially mixed chords. The entire opening section of the *Jeux d'eau* is typical for the Impressionist French style to such an extent that the triad as an architectural factor of structure and prolongation is replaced by a seventh chord and other altered chords.” (Salzer 1962, 163-4)

Piano

*pp dolcissimo
una corda*

I₇

Fig. 2. M. Ravel – “*Jeux d'eau*”, mm. 1-4

4. Contrapuntal chords

The separation and connection of the harmonic chords, is expressed in terms of flow of the music through counterpoint and contrapuntal progressions. Counterpoint in itself represents motion, while harmony, through harmonic chords, has the role of setting structural points that give purpose to the contrapuntal progressions inside these points. The chords that have voice leading functions but don't have passing character are frequently found in musical literature. The neighbor note chord represents the most important contrapuntal factor. The neighbor note can be an ornament both for the fundamental of a chord or for its third or fifth.

The musical score shows four measures of music. The right hand (treble clef) and left hand (bass clef) are both in 3/4 time. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The piano part is marked *pp léger*. The right hand plays a sequence of chords: a triad (F#, A, C), a dyad (F#, A), a triad (F#, A, C), and a dyad (F#, A). The left hand plays a sequence of chords: a dyad (F#, A), a triad (F#, A, C), a dyad (F#, A), and a triad (F#, A, C). The chords are labeled 'Appogg.' and 'I' below the staff.

Fig. 3. M. Ravel – “Valse nobles et sentimentales, no. III”, mm. 1 – 4

There are cases where one (or two) of the outer voices of a chord have an adjacent note and the others are followed by passing tones. In such cases, an adjacent passing chord results, which does not have, exclusively, the characteristics of a passing chord or of a side note, but combines them. That is why it can only be classified as a combination of the two.

1^{er} PIANO
(Solo)

Adagio assai. ♩ = 76

p *espressivo*

I I⁶₅

N P N

Fig. 4. M. Ravel – “Piano Concerto in G”, 2nd mvt., mm. 1 – 8

In general, in Ravel's music there are dissonant chords prolonged by the ornamentation of melodic notes and harmonies within the surface level. Thus, linear progressions and pedal points must be taken into account in determining harmonic functions. The dissonant chords in Ravel's creation may be based on third-party overlaps (seventh or ninth, in the direct or reversed state), may contain unresolved backing, or may be the result of a combination of the bass and an independent harmonic structure.

4.1. Harmonic prolongation of contrapuntal chords

A very complex case of a larger difficulty is represented by the harmonic prolongation of a contrapuntal chord. Similar to the previous situations, a chord with contrapuntal role can be prolonged. Also, ornamental neighbour chords could be prolonged through harmonic progressions (complete or incomplete).

The structural function of a chord can be prolonged through others, so that it rules a contrapuntal progression consisting of several chords subordinated to it.

The image shows a musical score for M. Ravel's "Valse nobles et sentimentales, VII", measures 19-23. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features a piano (pp) dynamic. The upper staff (treble clef) contains chords and melodic fragments, with 'N' markings above several chords. The lower staff (bass clef) contains a bass line with 'N' markings below it. A large bracket underlines the entire passage, with a Roman numeral 'I' centered below it.

Fig. 5. M. Ravel – “Valse nobles et sentimentales, VII”, mm. 19 – 23

4.2. Contrapuntal Chords with Structural Significance

Harmonic chords and prolongations may comprise structural functions and also serve the purposes of prolongation. Nevertheless, contrapuntal chords may assume a structural significance when it supports a structural tone in the melodic line. While most of the chords have either harmonic-structural or contrapuntal-prolonging functions, there are many instances of harmonic chords that serve the purposes of prolongation or contrapuntal chords that may assume structural significance.

5. Analysis and performance

Following a request by René Lenormand for the book *Étude sur l'harmonie moderne*, in which he presents the practices of harmony specifically French, Ravel sent him some analyses of his own works. One of the analyses of the 7th waltz of the *Valse nobles et sentimentales* suite, also had an explanatory note on the unresolved appoggiaturas, which demonstrates that Ravel considered large prolongations and structures, as well as musical layers (Orenstein 2003, 23). He explained that certain elements of the melodic lines act as unresolved appoggiaturas, offering the implied solutions in parentheses, which, in the context of the bass, show a classical reduction from which emerge the main and passing tones in the voice. Ravel also presented the analytical stages of reduction in a manner similar to that of Schenker, so that a passage of 13 measures can be reduced to a single tonic chord, with added sixth. He also sent analyses to passages

from *Oiseaux tristes* and *Alborada del gracioso* from *Miroirs* suite and from *Les Grands Vents venus d'outremer*.

Through analysis, the performer discovers the fundamental structure of music that reduces an entire phrase, period, or even composition to a few important structural events. The basic structure offers a very clear meaning to the motion of the music, from the beginning to the end, although it is not a tangible musical event. It must be discovered through analysis, its effects on music being perceptible only in the context of a phrase or a shorter fragment. The secondary parameters (prolongations) are much clearer, they enrich and improve the structure.

The performer must conceptualize the role of analysis in interpretation - the ideal of applied analysis. All these discoveries that take place through analysis are later noted in interpretation, because a performer who understands and hears the relationships between the fundamental musical pillars connected to each other by prolongations will play differently, more naturally than those based solely on intuition (Cook 1987, 2). Aspects related to musical structure are relevant and decisive in performing issues such as articulation, tones, dynamics, phrasing and others.

6. Conclusions

Through an analytical approach starting from the theories formulated by the Austrian theorist, one can discover characteristics of Ravel's compositional style. The pedal points dominate the harmonic progressions that take place on a large scale, therefore the analysis in terms of prolongations proves to be helpful in discovering contrapuntal and harmonic structures, loaded with dissonant tones based on overlapping thirds and unresolved side notes, as well as complex structural hierarchies. Highlights are prepared by ascending linear progressions, while transitions between sections are based on downward progressions, sometimes creating simultaneous prolongations of incompatible harmonies. However, the dissonant nature of Ravel's music stems from the fact that the unresolved appoggiaturas are superimposed over consonant harmonic constructions, so that the reduction according to the principle of musical layers is necessary to determine the contextual structural priority (Strauss 1987, 2). The structure is most clearly perceived when it is presented by performers within the possibilities of composition.

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