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### Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Ravel the Existentialist?

A supporting document submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts  
in Keyboard

by

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January 2018

The supporting document of Leslie Cain is approved.

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January 2018

Ravel the Existentialist?

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by

Leslie Cain

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Esther Hirschkowitz.

Thanks especially to my parents Jeff and Judy, my brother Josh, my aunt Jane and uncle John, and my grandfather Mo for their lifelong support and guidance. I would also like to thank my committee: Paul Berkowitz, Derek Katz, and Robert Koenig, and the rest of the UCSB Music Department faculty and staff who helped shepherd me through the doctoral process.

To Larissa Fedoryka: I have no doubt that I would not have finished this degree without you by my side as a friend and roommate. Thanks also to all my colleagues (really, comrades) in the DMA program, especially Mark Gutierrez, Petra Peršolja, and Jordan Warmath. To Julie Weiner: thank you for your words of encouragement, and for the soothing presence of your cats on my lap as I studied. As both Ravel and Sartre knew, it really helps the work along to have cats in the house. To Eleni Goodman and Michael Meza: thank you for your friendship and for your sympathetic ears when things got tough. Finally, to Ben Moulton: thank you for making me laugh every single day I have known you. Just like having cats around, it really helps.

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## ABSTRACT

Ravel the Existentialist?

by

Leslie Cain

Both during his lifetime, and throughout the years since, audiences of Maurice Ravel's music have reported several uncanny sensations that scholars have found difficult to explain using traditional modes of musical analysis. Listeners tend to experience a sense of detachment or distance permeating Ravel's works, as if the composer is intentionally setting up an emotional barrier between himself, the performer, and the audience. Scholars agree that these qualities mirror the composer's personality and lifestyle, drawing comparison between such traits as his emotionally guarded social comportment and his dandyist sense of style, and the particular sounds and textures of his compositions. However, scholars differ in their presumptions about what underlying principles govern these "Ravel phenomena," offering up a variety of psychological, aesthetic, and literary contexts as possible ways of seeing "behind the veil" of Ravel's characteristic artifice. In Chapter One, I examine two of the most recent major books about Ravel, Stephen Zank's *Irony and Sound* and Michael J. Puri's *Ravel the Decadent*, exploring how each writer's core theory illuminates the connection between Ravel as he composed and Ravel as he lived. In Chapter Two, using the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* as a case study, I observe how these theories are expressed in an actual piano composition, both alongside and independently of more traditional music

theory. Chapter Three presents my own proposed conceptual context for surveying Ravel, in which I argue that many Ravel phenomena exhibit and anticipate the existentialist principles that would be outlined by Jean-Paul Sartre only several years after the composer's death. By comparing Sartre's seminal texts of existentialism (*Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*) with Ravel's own comments on his process of composition, his attitude in social interactions, and his manner of dress and home décor, I demonstrate that Ravel possessed proto-existentialist senses of artistic process, of the nature of the self, and of the fraught relationship between the interior self and the gaze of the Other. Lastly, I conclude in Chapter Four with a discussion for performers, especially concerning the performance of Ravel's piano music. Here I draw on the work of Carolyn Abbate, whose exploration of "musical automatons" as an influence on Ravel provides further connection to Sartre, who identifies performative, mechanistic behaviors as an inherent part of human existence.



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## Introduction

Appropriately for a composer of such polite comportment, Ravel scholarship is not one of the great musicological brawls of our time. There is no bitter debate between competing theorists as to the correct chordal analysis of *Bolero*'s 277<sup>th</sup> measure. No one argues that great chunks of his oeuvre were actually written by some imposter long forgotten to history. His catalogue of works numbers into the dozens, not the hundreds or thousands; even if some forgotten Ravel manuscript were to be found, it would not be a tremendous undertaking to renumber the list—and performers and scholars rarely make reference to his catalog numbers, anyway.

It used to strike me as odd that such a frequently-programmed and well-regarded composer never became a darling of the musicological field. My perspective, of course, is that of a performer, and one who harbors great personal affinity for Ravel. Though a handful of writers have articulated a natural progression in the flow of music history from the late German Romantics to the *fin de siècle* French composers, the latter tend to be cordoned off in our narrative of how one musical era yielded to the next. In my undergraduate music history sequence, Debussy and Ravel were quarantined to the “niche” topic of Impressionism, covered in one week’s worth of music history lectures out of four semesters (your undergraduate mileage may have varied). This was not for lack of appreciation of the quality of their work—indeed the opposite. Our professor posited that this music is so uniquely enchanting, so inscrutably beautiful, that common academic inquiry would sully the rapturous experience of its sound. Virtually every notable Ravel scholar has said something to this effect in an abstract or book introduction, all but apologizing for their desires to scrutinize and analyze and debate. Ravel himself resisted all attempts by contemporaries to

penetrate his armor of impeccable dress and demeanor, delighting in his reputation as an enigma even amongst close friends. Perhaps the very pedestal upon which we fans place the composer explains the paucity of scholarly writing about him—to explain away the enigma would extinguish the beloved, mysterious essence of Ravel.

Tantalizing mysteries notwithstanding, the study of Ravel benefits from a few everyday advantages. Unlike the great number of composers that we argue about as much as we play, we can pretty comfortably take for granted the “facts of the matter” when it comes to Ravel’s biography. His situation in music history has reduced the need for extensive musicological archaeology: Ravel lived relatively recently and was quite successful in his time. He had no difficulty in getting his music published, his premieres received ample media coverage, and those who interacted with the composer socially and professionally tended to make note of it in their records. He was born late enough to have had access to decent recording technology, and was an accomplished writer. Among the personal artifacts of craft he left behind are recordings of his own performances of piano works, numerous reviews of concerts he attended, and many cultural commentaries on such topics as popular music, politics and literature. His friends tended to be both very affectionate and very well-written, and many took care to write down in detail their memories of the composer, in addition to posthumously preserving his home almost exactly as he lived in it. Thus, Ravel scholars enjoy a wealth of information sourced directly from the composer and his contemporaries, leaving little need to speculate as to biographical details.

Furthermore, Ravel’s body of work is paltry compared to the average titan of the classical canon—at least in terms of sheer quantity. Beethoven in his 56 years composed upwards of 700 works, Mozart wrote over 600 in 35 years, and that champion of

productivity, Schubert, penned at least 1000 in his short 31 years. Ravel, by contrast, wrote only 85 known compositions in his 62 years, including lost works, fragments and unpublished pieces. It is not necessary to place Ravel's life and music in a framework of early-middle-late periods, nor to keep track of a constantly-changing palette of compositional techniques. Perhaps because of his notorious perfectionism, audiences and scholars are not privy to the fruits of any dramatic experimental phases—even when writing pastiche, Ravel always sounds like Ravel! His catalogue is further distinguished not merely by its unique style, but by its consistent standard of polish. Certain Ravel works might be notable for the frequency of their performance, for being a certain pianist's or conductor's favorite, or by making appearances in a smattering of Hollywood films, but virtually all Ravel works are master works.

Even when attempting more subjective analyses of Ravel's work, historical and modern scholars have not found themselves much at odds. Surveying Ravel scholarship reveals a curious consistency in the way that Ravel's music has been experienced by listeners, allowing us to treat certain subjective qualities as quasi-facts about Ravel's music. Much of the experiential phenomena addressed by modern scholars are first described in the earliest posthumous accounts of Ravel's life and work, beginning with the sweetly personal biography written by friend Alexis Roland-Manuel only ten years after the composer's death. Since then, interested parties have more or less agreed on a basic set of "Ravellian" traits, though they may supply different theories about the psychological and historical origins of these phenomena. For one, many perceive that Ravel's music is imbued with a pervasive sensation of distance and detachment, as if Ravel had purposefully established some barrier between himself, the performer, and the audience. Similarly, Ravel's music exhibits a lack of

distinctly *emotional* content as compared to much of the classical canon. The quintessential sound of Ravel's music—that lush planed harmony, those shimmering orchestral timbres, those enchanted and delicate melodies—substitutes high aestheticism and technique for feelings as the material of its expression. This sensation also arrives as a sense of coldness, even a slight inhumanity—perhaps because the music is patently cerebral in its construction, but also as a function of its pristine, impossible beauty.

The question that remains, as always, is “why?” Why did this particular music, that has instilled the same peculiar sensations in listeners for 80 years, emerge from this particular (and peculiar!) figure? Why do we experience these arrays of notes, these non-representative and often non-programmatic compositions, as so saturated with content beyond their sheer aural material? In some cases it is easy to identify the through-line between biographical facts, musical events and the reactions in listeners that they commonly prompt. For example, a reasonably uncontroversial analysis would be to connect the *Toccata*'s intricacy of technical construction to Ravel's fascination with mechanical engineering, and this in turn to the usual impression in the audience of extreme textural complexity and tightly-wound virtuosity. In some cases, however, musical elements prompt more abstract feelings, and it is here that the most academically fruitful questions about Ravel emerge.

What follows is in part a retrospective look at how previous scholars have contended with the abstruse “why” of Ravel, and in part a proposal of a new perspective, using French existentialist philosophy to establish an expanded theoretical context for considering Ravel's life and work. Chapter One examines two of the most recent major works of Ravel scholarship: *Irony and Sound: The Music of Maurice Ravel* by Stephen Zank (2009), and *Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire* by Michael Puri (2011). Chapter Two

uses the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* as a case study for the application of Zank's and Puri's respective theories, showing how each writer applies his conceptual mode of analysis to the "nuts and bolts" of an actual musical work. In Chapter Three, I present my own theory, dividing the affinities I identify between Ravel and Sartre into two main categories: how existentialism is expressed in Ravel's process of composition and the music itself, and how it is expressed in his general lifestyle and personality. I conclude in Chapter Four with a brief discussion of the relationship between theory and practice in performing Ravel's piano music, defending an "existential" approach to performance as equally humanistic to emotion-driven performance practices. Alongside Zank, Puri, and Sartre, I here draw heavily on the work of Carolyn Abbate, whose paper, "Outside Ravel's Tomb" analyzes performance in the context of the "musical automatons" of Ravel's era.

# Chapter One

## Predecessors in Conceptualizing Ravel

### Notes on the Texts

A first criterion for my selection of the texts discussed in this chapter was simple convenience: these are the two most recent major books written about Ravel, and I will thus trust them to be founded on the most up-to-date historical knowledge about the composer's life. For purposes of this paper, questions of each scholar's accuracy in sourcing and describing biographical minutiae, as well as the validity of their music-theory analyses of repertoire examples, will be set aside; this is neither my area of expertise nor my particular interest. Rather, I will take up as my target their *conceptual* interpretation of these phenomena.

More importantly, these texts were chosen because their authors seem to share a certain belief about the place of their respective books in the historical arc of Ravel scholarship. To better articulate this observation, I will borrow a terrifically useful term from the world of physics: the so-called "Theory of Everything." The ever-elusive "ToE" is the hypothesized theoretical framework that underlies the structure of the entire physical universe. The true ToE must therefore be singular, comprehensive and all-encompassing: all natural phenomena, observed and as-yet-unknown, would be completely validated and explained by it. In the same manner, every seemingly disparate object and force and quirk of the universe would equally be an expression of the ToE at work—just another instance of the same holistically understood apparatus. Appending to the notion of the ToE is a palpable allure of revolution and relief: once discovered, humanity's understanding of the universe

would be forever settled, and imagine the renown for whomever is first to crack that final code!

Of course, thinkers in virtually every discipline know that the bigger the scope of inquiry, and the greater the variety of phenomena that a single theory attempts to reconcile, the more difficult it is to find that holy grail. Physicists are beholden to an especially vast scope of inquiry, and their best attempts at the ToE have yielded general relativity and quantum mechanics. Big new ideas about Ravel are of comparatively miniscule significance in a cold, indifferent universe. But within the lovely little microcosm of Ravel scholarship, what I will call the “ToE approach” has taken hold in recent years. Though Zank and Puri pursue quite different conclusions, the broad goals of their respective analyses are quite similar, aspiring to fulfill the following criteria I posit as necessary for a potential Theory of Everything. First, both contend that a singular concept underlies the entire gamut of Ravel phenomena (biographical details, what we know of his psychology, how his music sounds, etc.). This principle must be extramusical: a verbal, descriptive entity, not a traditional music-theory methodology that analyzes just “the ink on the page.” Further, the concept must be universally applicable: any Ravel phenomenon could be understood through the context that the concept provides. Thus, the concept can reveal connections between phenomena of different types—for example, Ravel’s manner of dress and the pianistic textures of his music—demonstrating their relation as varied expressions of the same underlying concept. Put simply, the concept should offer a bridge between what we know about Ravel’s life and what we perceive in his music. Finally, the concept must be novel, even if synthesized from existing analyses. It must offer a new, compelling context for considering Ravel that has not previously been codified as a predominant theory in existing scholarship.



## Part One: Stephen Zank's *Irony and Sound*

For Stephen Zank, the missing piece of the Ravel puzzle is irony. Within the first few pages of *Irony and Sound*, Zank's Theory of Everything attitude is evident: in claiming that the composer "cultivated irony and its effects often enough to make scholarly neglect a dilemma,"<sup>1</sup> Zank not only asserts irony as the crucial lens through which all Ravel phenomena can and should be considered, but also indicts previous accounts for their inattention to a constitutive aspect of his work.

The natural point of departure is to establish a working definition of irony, one that Zank will be able to convincingly append to the full gamut of Ravel phenomena. He notes that "few large-scale studies" exist on the matter, and "none pertain significantly (if at all) to music."<sup>2</sup> He makes frequent reference to the opinions of prominent thinkers (from Socrates, to Kierkegaard's "stunning thesis" on irony, to more contemporary academic work)<sup>3</sup>, but without commentary on whether he considers these takes to be equally valid. This is a smart move: in the absence of some age-old and agreed-upon standard of what is or is not irony, Zank need not attempt a major redefining or problematizing of the concept, even as he unprecedentedly applies it to music. Instead, he initially adopts a simple definition of irony, centered upon the core act of "saying one thing while meaning another," or alternatively, "saying something without really saying it."<sup>4</sup> This definition primarily addresses speech and behavior, but as Zank notes, so-called "situational" irony has historically been acknowledged as its counterpart. Situational irony refers to occurrences, rather than statements, that thwart

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Stephen Zank, *Irony and Sound: The Music of Maurice Ravel* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

expectations. Note that though situational irony does not necessarily carry a verbal component, it still requires some element of active human thought, namely an expectation for how events will or should unfold that is then contradicted by what actually happens.

Zank cautions against using irony as an umbrella term, that would encompass a smattering of rhetorical strategies often confused with irony itself. These expressive devices are dismissed as party-trick imitations of true irony, diluted versions of what Ravel could masterfully deploy: “Ravel’s musical irony [possesses] a meticulously designed unexpectedness distinguishing it from ‘mere’ paradox, humor, satire (or parody), mockery, or sarcasm.”<sup>5</sup> The definition of irony thus (ironically?) appears simultaneously narrow and broad: a specific enough technique that only certain experts (i.e. Ravel) have actually wielded it, but one vaguely-defined enough that Zank is not left with too few examples of “true” irony at work.

Zank elects to side-step the major ontological question of how exactly a concept traditionally understood as it relates to words and events can be translated to the non-representational form of music: “The present inquiry...does not attempt to define, sort, or ‘scale’ past and present efforts in using words to write about music, writing about music that incorporates words, trying to write about words as music or—however intriguing—variations thereof.”<sup>6</sup> His first alternative strategy is to simply compare irony as it appears in representational forms versus non-representational music:

...for a good two millennia irony has been conveyed chiefly by sound, by the sound of words spoken, whether written down or not. But it has been conveyed, too, by

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1.

other means such as gesture or visual representation, and one may therefore observe, too—with little glee, given the complications—that irony and a variety of perceptual modalities including sound, and musical sound, are promisingly conjoined.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Zank aims only to call attention to moments of *resemblance* between literary and musical irony. Insofar as musical gestures mimic gestures in representational forms, they could be deemed ironic. If this were the extent of Zank’s ambition, he would not need to successfully defend the conflation of literary and musical irony on a conceptual level.

However, borne out by his ensuing chapters is the suspicion that Zank really does desire a proper amalgamation of these “dual ironies,” and thus sets himself a much bigger challenge. Ultimately, Zank tasks himself with providing a convincing account of what irony *sounds like*, to a more meaningful extent than comparing, say, a clarinet’s whine to some nasal speech inflection in a sarcastic comment. Complications, indeed!

Zank’s plan of attack in identifying ironic Ravel phenomena approaches the inquiry from two sides:

The ‘what’ of Ravel’s irony will be of two-fold interest...the first being, in essence, ‘notational’ (whether or not words, as they sometimes do, intrude or inform), since notes and their manipulation obviously underpin the ‘what’ Ravel wished for us to grasp, and correspond roughly to the larger historical category of ‘verbal’ irony.

And further:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2. An interesting comparison could be made here to programmatic music with explicitly ironic themes, such as Sergei Prokofiev’s *Sarcasms*.

Secondly, conceptually, that is, it will be important to note, reinterpret, or newly propose ironies falling in to the larger category of the irony of ‘things,’ of the world, or of ‘fate’—ironies attached *to* Ravel or his music and life, from contemporaries...from those who followed, and from those who choose, in further retrospect, to consider such ‘situational’ ironies as tools of constructive review.<sup>8</sup>

As Zank sees it, the dual components of his original definition of irony overlay neatly onto the two varieties of Ravel phenomena as described in this paper’s introduction. In the first point, he correlates collections of notes with collections of words, claiming that “verbal” irony can be found explicitly in the sonic and notational material that Ravel composed. The second point is broader, positing the presence of “situational” irony in multiple cases. Certain events of Ravel’s life can easily be called ironic—an amusing example is how, after repeatedly and soundly being rejected by the competition judges of the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel was invited back after graduating, as a now-famous composer, to serve on the same jury.<sup>9</sup> Zank’s reference to Ravel’s contemporaries also suggests that a productive source of the second type of irony could be instances of reception: to Ravel’s music, to him as a friend, and so on. Recalling that situational irony arises from a contrast between what is expected and what occurs, any instance in which Ravel disrupted prevailing beliefs about his character or his musical style (or, as Zank often notes, ideas about musical style in general) are potentially situational irony.

Zank makes additional reference to one of Ravel’s first biographers and an avid analyst of the composer’s stylistic quirks, Vladimir Jankélévitch, who identifies in Ravel’s

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9.

music the “*aesthétique de la gageure*,”<sup>10</sup> literally an aesthetic of wagering or betting. Rather than an earnest, heartfelt gesture, Jankélévitch sees Ravel’s music as a sort of game, in which the composer challenges himself to reconcile disparate, even chaotic elements within formal musical structures. In turn, Ravel’s audiences are challenged to come along for the ride: like the thrill of watching a horror movie with the knowledge that its monsters cannot really harm us, we accept the occasional jarring dissonance or precipitous, spiraling-out texture with the knowledge that Ravel will eventually deliver us safely to the double bar.

## Part Two: Michael J. Puri’s *Ravel the Decadent*

As we have by now come to expect from Ravel treatises, *Ravel the Decadent* is unabashed in its claims of scholarly upheaval. Within the first paragraph, Puri makes a grand pronouncement of the insufficiency of previous analyses: “serious attempts to get to the heart of this music—how it works and what it means—have appeared all too seldom.”<sup>11</sup> Within the first page, he calls for a reconsideration of the primary descriptors used to characterize Ravel, targeting Zank’s specific term of choice alongside those favored by Roland-Manuel and other contemporaries: “In the case of Ravel, familiar and enduring terms include *imposture*, *artifice*, and *irony*, among others. In this book I propose my own set, which features the four mentioned in the title and subtitle: *decadence*, *memory*, *sublimation*, and *desire*.”<sup>12</sup> Puri judiciously goes on to say that he does not wish to do away with the former group altogether; indeed, they are “quite compatible since imposture, artifice, and irony were all marked as

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Puri, *Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation and Desire* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

typically ‘decadent’ behaviors”<sup>13</sup> during the *fin de siècle*. However, given the vehemence of his introduction and the vigor with which he argues for his own set, it is clear that Puri does not consider them anywhere close to approaching ToE status. Instead, Puri sees Ravel as belonging wholly to the Decadence, an artistic movement widely explored as it relates to literature, poetry, painting and other genres, but virtually untapped as frame of reference for understanding music. Puri’s proposed set of terms does not result only from those prominent individual quirks of Ravel that have, in the past, precluded him from being considered part of “artistic movements.” Rather, Puri argues, they are functions of a *collective* trend, in light of which the gamut of Ravel phenomena can and should be newly reexamined.

Establishing a working definition of Decadence proves less problematic for Puri than pinning down irony is for Zank. Most importantly, a much greater scholarly precedent exists for Decadence as a descriptor of the age. As mentioned previously, Decadence is a widely-discussed topic in other disciplines, particularly the histories of literature and painting. Though virtually any attempt to name an artistic movement cannot help but spark fervent debate about the validity of one “ism” or another, the term is at least in widespread use. Several of Ravel’s literary idols have been taken up elsewhere as standard-bearers for Decadence, granting Puri the easy assertion that Ravel was directly influenced by Decadent thought. Scholars have also examined Decadence in relation to a host of sociological topics that pertain to Ravel, such as the Decadent dandy’s role in expanding the expression of sexual identity. Lastly, Decadence is usually posited as a nationalistic movement, expressed primarily in French art and secondarily in English art. Decadence at first glance seems quite straightforwardly applicable to Ravel, that quintessentially French composer.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Puri also enjoys a much less restrictive foundational principle than Zank, whose cautious expansion of irony to encompass both “verbal” and “situational” forms hardly afforded him any analytical breathing room. Puri’s definition of Decadence is inclusive rather than exclusive, collecting so many possible characteristics that it is almost more intelligible as a “feel” than a description of discrete qualities. Indeed, in his “thematic catalog” of Decadent preoccupations, he draws little distinction between qualitative components of works, the mood or outlook of their creators, and the social import of their reception:

What, if anything, gave the Decadence coherence as an artistic movement? First and foremost, it is a set of topics and stances, including antirealism, antinaturalism, antimoralism, anti-progressivism, *épater le bourgeoisie*, *fumisme*, individualism, aestheticism, refinement, dandyism, *fête galante*, perfectionism, machines, automata, *femme fatale*, *ange-femme*, esotericism, pessimism, alienation, isolation, escapism, ennui, spleen, *tristesse*, melancholy, unconscious, introspection, retrospection, futurism, exoticism, fantasy, dreams, medievalism, mysticism, idealism, metamorphosis, ornament, sensuality, music, synesthesia, hyperesthesia, androgyny, sexuality and sexual deviance, neurosis, morbidity, sadomasochism, and Satanism.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, Puri not only *associates* the Decadence with any figures who experiment in these realms, but presents an “artistic roster” as its own *definition* of the term: “The Decadence is also a motley group of artists whose work draws heavily on the preceding themes.”<sup>15</sup> Mentioned here are several of Ravel’s favorites, including Mallarmé, Poe, and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Proust, as well as the usual slate of Symbolist poets (Verlaine, Baudelaire, and others) that flavored the literary zeitgeist of Ravel's time.

Taken together, these modes of definition impart a “you know it when you see it” vibe to Puri's definition of Decadence. By embracing such an assortment of leitmotifs as Decadent, he certainly stacks the deck in his favor to find some such element in every Ravel phenomenon—thus fulfilling the universal applicability required to proclaim a new Theory of Everything. Of course, he also runs the risk of diluting Decadence as a meaningful term: without some shared thread running through these themes and figures, the designation of Ravel as Decadent is perfectly convincing, but of lessened significance. Certainly, it is difficult to find “coherence” in a list of forty-eight different themes.

Even if Puri's list of Decadent themes is taken at face value, to proceed with a musical analysis compels him to address the same ontological problem as Zank. We can simply substitute “Decadence” for “irony” in formulating the question: “what does Decadence *sound like*?” Decadence in music is far murkier territory than Decadence in the representational arts, with only two, only very recently published books devoted to this correlation.<sup>16</sup> Unlike with irony, Puri cannot start with simple analogues between sounds of music and sounds of irony-inflected speech. And here too, as with Zank, showing mere resemblances between musical elements and representational expressions of the Decadent themes would not make for a compelling thesis. Much of Puri's musical analysis hinges on

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Downes' *Music and Decadence in European Modernism: The Case of Central and Eastern Europe*, was published just a year prior to *Ravel the Decadent*, in 2010. Interestingly, Downes identifies Wagner and Strauss as the exemplars of Decadent composition as opposed to Ravel, contending that their postlapsarian, pessimistic attitudes are more representative of Decadence than the optimistic, consoling beauty pursued by French composers.



the expression of the paramount Decadent themes of memory and recollection—especially, as we shall soon see, in his examination of the *Valses nobles*. It is a clever approach. Music, no matter its narrative or representational content, unfolds through time, and our common understanding of musical form derives from memories: of recurring themes, of the harmonic buildups that carry us to present resolutions, and so on. Here Puri sets himself another challenge shared with Zank, namely of proving how Ravel’s strategies differ from those of other composers: if all music depends on memory, what makes Ravel’s memories specifically Decadent?

When it comes to historical context, Puri has a distinct advantage over Zank: the influence of contemporary writing on Ravel’s programmatic and narrative music is obvious. It is uncontroversial to say that when Ravel sets the music of poets already deemed by literary scholars to be “Decadent,” Ravel himself expresses Decadence. However, much of Puri’s attention is addressed toward instrumental music, and these inquiries are more intriguing for the greater challenge they pose. Some of Puri’s argument rests on the intentions of the composer, and given his extensive list of Decadent themes, he has no trouble matching his chosen keywords to quotes from the composer. Given that “Decadence,” while a commonly used word amongst contemporaries, was not codified as an artistic movement until modern scholars decided to append the designation, Puri does not claim that Ravel would have considered himself a Decadent. Rather, the intent presumed here is Ravel’s desire to emulate the stylings and adopt the preoccupations of his literary idols, consequently expressing their Decadence in his own work and comportment. It certainly seems feasible that Ravel would have happily accepted the mantle of Decadence as

a welcome alternative to Impressionism, and would have felt much more proud to be counted among the other artists therein.

This observation points to one of the more fascinating components of Puri's ToE: inherent in the idea of Decadence is the notion that appearance, and reception by others of that appearance, is a constitutive element of substance—especially in the case of those serving as artistic figureheads in society. What others *perceive* you to be is a true assessment (if not the only truth) of who you *are*. Thus, an external pronouncement (“You’re a Decadent!”) must be assimilated by its target into his sense of self, whether he agrees (“I suppose I am a Decadent, or at least seem enough like one that Monsieur Puri would think that about me.”) This reality (which, as we shall examine soon, is one of the primary realizations underlying existential dread) pertains in particular to the Decadent figure of the dandy, whose obsession with fashion and style emerges not from sheer superficiality, but from a profound awareness of the substantive power of outward appearances. Indeed, the re-conception of appearances from pure decorations to major sources of meaning recurs throughout literature of the time. Puri notes the example of Jean des Esseintes, the subject of Joris-Karl Huysmans’ 1884 novel *À rebours* (“Against Nature”), now considered the quintessential Decadent story. Esseintes, weary of the dictates of bourgeois society, seeks comfort by means of absolute aestheticization:

Disgusted by his dissolute life in Paris, he flees the city for an eremitic existence in the countryside, where, in out-right defiance of nature and reality, he attempts a total sublimation of self and environment, surrounding himself with decadent artifacts...by

restricting himself to a carefully designed universe of art, books, food, lighting, smells, and décor, he gains absolute control over his mind and senses...<sup>17</sup>

To dreamy aesthetes enamored of Esseintes' rebellion, the conclusion of *À rebours* is an unmitigated tragedy: plagued by poor health, Esseintes must return to Paris, electing to sacrifice the integrity of his aesthetic life in order to sustain his physical being. If Huysmans intended his novel as a cautionary tale, it failed in this regard: though Esseintes had to accept that man cannot live on aesthetics alone, he was soon taken up as a hero in artistic circles. Not only was Ravel a major admirer of *À rebours*, Puri notes the obvious comparisons to the composer's chosen lifestyle in Montfort L'Amaury: a country dwelling, removed but not inaccessible from the city, carefully decorated with an emphasis on tastefulness rather than ostentation.<sup>18</sup> As shall be discussed in Chapter III, this aesthetic retreat reveals not merely Ravel's personal taste, but evidences Ravel's anticipation of the prescribed existentialist response to worldly troubles: to exert ever-growing control over the minutiae of one's everyday life.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 11.

## Chapter Two

### A Case Study on the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*

#### Introduction

I shall now examine how Zank and Puri, through their respective conceptual lenses, analyze selections from the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. The waltzes were published first as a piano suite in 1911, and were orchestrated by Ravel shortly thereafter to accompany the ballet *Adélaïde, ou le langage des fleurs*. The suite's title is borrowed from two collections of waltzes by Franz Schubert, although these waltzes bear little musical resemblance to Schubert's. Comprised of eight movements, the suite concludes with an *Épilogue* that intersperses its own motivic passages with transfigured, ghostly echoes of the previous seven waltzes.

#### Part One: Zank's Displaced Irony

Zank spends comparatively less time than Puri on the example of the *Valses*, in part because he limits his attention to theoretical details rather than the overall mood of the piece. Whereas Puri's discussion of memory in the *Épilogue* posits the movement's transporting, ethereal timbre as a substrate for the emergence of specific remembrances, Zank keeps his feet on the ground, so to speak, by focusing on the more bombastic movements of the set. Yet, like Puri, Zank believes the *Valses* to be generally governed by a single compositional theme: not memory, but retransition, "a perceptible preparation for the return of primary or important materials."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Zank, *Irony and Sound*, 51.

Retransition appears to perform a function similar to the “priming” of the mind necessary for Proustian involuntary memory to well up, as Puri describes in his discussion of the *Épilogue*. Here, the listener’s underlying state of mind is an awareness of recognizable, recurring moments rather than Puri’s dreamy liminal torpor. If this seems like a minimal distinction, it is: in both cases, past motives are held somewhere in memory, ready to be pulled up to consciousness by the repetition of musical elements. However, Zank considers the primary catalyst of these remembrances to be the musical material that directly precedes them, rather than the atmosphere of the total work. Retransitions alert the mind to specific and immediately-oncoming memories, while Puri’s primings create a more all-purpose headspace that is receptive to whatever memories might wander through.

Zank’s first example is the attention-grabbing and delightfully impudent Waltz I, whose massive dissonant chords belie an elegantly classical structure. The structure of the movement is a miniature sonata form, played out in barely 75 seconds. Instead of a traditional dominant preparation—the harmony is way too chaotic for a standard V chord!—mm. 53-60 propel us towards the recapitulation by means of a terraced crescendo and the insistent rhythmic motive of the waltz’s opening theme (Fig. 1). As cacophonous as is the effect, Zank observes that the harmony proceeds in a standard circle of fifths, as the bass line passes through a whole tone scale until arriving back to its initial point of departure in m. 61. As we know, Zank has set himself the challenge of tying such phenomena back to irony. Here, the attendant irony is that the “nondirectional essence” of the symmetrical whole-tone scale is transformed into a vehicle of extreme velocity, in order to serve the “more distilled, architecturally directed purposes of Retransition.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 53.

**Fig. 1:** *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Waltz I, mm. 51-60



*Figures 1-4 are reproduced from the original Durand edition, Paris, 1911.*

Another movement presents itself as a tiny almost-sonata, the jazzy Waltz VI. Here again, Zank claims that irony is to be found in the B section’s transition back to the reprise of the opening. The “leaping” figure, which in the A section cheerfully proceeds through a series of regular three-measure phrases, is refashioned in the B section as the movement’s mood briefly darkens. In mm. 37-44, “Ravel collapses suddenly the registration of his writing—hands previously bounding about the keyboard are now suddenly, literally, on top of one another in *claveciniste* fashion” (Fig. 2).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

**Fig. 2:** *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Waltz VI, mm. 37-45



The steady motivic ascent in the right hand—notably, again passing through a whole-tone scale before being compressed into chromaticism—is marked with a curious dynamic hairpin. This adds an additional layer of irony, as the driving force back towards the A section is contradicted by a fade in volume: a simultaneous ascent and tumble. Ravel’s controlled-chaos deployment of these ironic gestures within perfectly neat, classical structures, even as these traditional elements are disguised by the “tricks” that catch our attention, is a fulfillment of the *gageure* conception of irony—a wager, perhaps, that we won’t notice the sleight-of-hand at work.

In a later chapter, Zank turns his attention to registration, specifically Ravel’s habit of “displacing” musical elements throughout the geography of the keyboard or orchestra. Like the tripartite layers Puri describes in the *Épilogue*, the first Waltz opens with a strong delineation of low, middle and high regions, then plays with alternating reinforcement and blurring of these boundaries (Fig. 3). The opening “smash” of Waltz I is quickly interrupted by a higher “smash,” adding registration as a thematic element alongside the motifs of

dissonant harmony and percussive waltz rhythm. Moreover, the contrast between the registral expectation established by the first chord and the immediate departure from the piano's center of gravity is the true motif here—not just registration, but the displacement of objects within it. Later in the movement, the direction of displacement changes from upwards to downwards (mm. 21-22), then to inwards (mm. 45-46), and finally, at the arrival of the recapitulation, displacement evolves (devolves?) into quick reversing leaps that teeter on the edge of calamity (mm. 61-62).

**Fig. 3:** *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Waltz I, excerpts

The figure displays four musical excerpts from Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Waltz I. The first excerpt (mm. 1-2) is marked 'Modéré - très franc' with a tempo of 176 and a dynamic of *f*. The second excerpt (mm. 21-22) is marked *ff*. The third excerpt (mm. 45-46) is split into treble and bass staves. The fourth excerpt (mm. 61-62) is marked *ff*. All excerpts show complex harmonic structures and rhythmic patterns characteristic of Ravel's style.

As a performer of the work, Zank's analysis of displacement aligns nicely with an image that came to mind when learning this movement: myself, the pianist, as the captain of a very tiny boat, trying to avoid capsizing as the waves of leaps throw me about. It is in those first measures of the recapitulation that it feels especially distressing that the piano bench is not equipped with a keel. Again, Zank asserts that irony is to be found in the expert reconciliation of elements: Ravel's juggling of chaos and order, displaced smashes and



lyrical sweeps between layers, near-shipwrecks and calm seas. Indeed, the onslaught of displacements ironically serves to lessen their bite, an observation made by Tristan Klingsor, a friend of Ravel's and an early audience to the suite: "The first measures of the *Valses* chafed at first. But then, as if it were only rational, the ear quickly found pleasure in those 'pseudo-false' notes."<sup>22</sup> The *Valses* thus further exemplify the *gageure* aesthetic, a risk undertaken not just by the composer in writing such a piece, but by the pianist, who must wholeheartedly commit to crashing down upon notes that inevitably will sound wrong, at least to the uninitiated.

## Part Two: Puri's Proustian Memories

For Puri, the *Valses* are the ultimate example of the ultimate Decadent theme, that of memory and recollection. Though plenty of other works exhibit a repeated vanishing and resurrection of musical motives (notably *La valse* and the *Rapsodie espagnole*), this technique is here set apart, claiming ownership of an entire movement of the set: the *Épilogue*. Rather than as a simple summation to neatly round off the total suite, Puri sees Movement VIII as a dramatic conceptual statement worthy of its own "ism," devoting Chapter 5 of *Ravel the Decadent* to exploring "epilogism."

Puri's analysis of memory in the *Épilogue* examines three intertwining frames of reference. First is the general mood of the piece, the atmosphere created by the timbre and tempo of the movement, which is evident even if detailed aspects of the movement's music theory are disregarded. Discussed next is the attendant physicality of the movement, both on the part of the performer and perhaps, as Puri speculates, on the part of the composer. Lastly,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 155.

a structural untangling of the movement reveals expressions of memory in the small details of the movement's construction; it is this latter component of the chapter that most closely resembles traditional musical analysis.

The mood of the *Épilogue* is treated as the *mise-en-scène*, setting an appropriate stage for memory and recollection to occur. Puri posits the *Épilogue* as “night music,” noting that much of the libretto for *Adelaide* takes place after dark:

The slow tempo...its soft dynamics and muting (indicated by the frequent indication of ‘sourdine’ in the piano score), extended pedal points, registral breadth, transparency of texture, and alternation between expected motivic repetition and new material are all generic and recognizable traits of ‘night music,’ a characteristic that typically goes unremarked in appraisals of the piece.<sup>23</sup>

This “night-ness” evokes themes both Decadent and psychoanalytic: concealment under cover of night, liminal space, dream states, a realm accessible only to the subconscious, perhaps? Puri also observes a pervasive sense of melancholy in the movement, interestingly attributed to its structure as well as its mood: “From a melancholic point of view, the fragmentation, distortion, and disordering of the waltzes when they reappear in the *Épilogue* are traces of memory’s failure to preserve the past intact.”<sup>24</sup> Thus a particular *feeling* is ascribed to these musical elements, derived from the qualitative experience of what it is like to remember. Memory can inspire melancholy, which in turn can serve as the psychological atmosphere that allows memory to well up. Like the recurrence of a motive, memory and mood affect each other in cyclical fashion.

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<sup>23</sup> Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 141.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 165

This nocturnal backdrop primes the subject for a particular type of memory, namely “involuntary” memory. Puri credits this distinction of types primarily to Proust, having discussed the difference between involuntary and voluntary memory as outlined in *Remembrances of Things Past* at length in the introduction to *Ravel the Decadent*. Unlike memories that are actively sought out by the pondering subject, perhaps of some data point or another, involuntary memory is “unbidden by the conscious will and conjured up by sensation rather than the intellect.”<sup>25</sup> Key to involuntary memory is that it is prompted by some external stimulus: in Proust, the brief taste of a madeleine cookie dipped in tea launches not only seven volumes of a novel, but in turn an entire new nomenclature for this category of thought. For Puri, it is the *Épilogue*’s recurring glimpses of waltzes past that provoke involuntary memory, here as a conclusive act rather than as Proust’s provocative madeleine: “Situating at the end of a narrative, involuntary memory in Ravel’s *Épilogue*...serves an opposite rhetorical purpose by drawing the work to a quiet close rather than beginning it with a bang.”<sup>26</sup>

Proust is not the only author to which Puri appeals in describing involuntary memory. Philosopher Henri Bergson’s influential book, *Matter and Memory*, provides a second source of historical grounding for the *Épilogue*’s particular flavor of memory. In his text, Bergson contrasts “habitual memory,” which is rote, procedural, and unconscious, with “pure memory,” the recollection of experiences and feelings that carry with them an inherent and overwhelming sensation of pastness: an awareness of the chasm between the present and what has already passed, a distance traversable only through memory itself. Puri points out

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 145

an explicit connection between the works of Bergson and Ravel, by way of Henri de Régnier. Ravel's chosen epigraph for the initial Durand publication of the *Valses*, quoted from the poet, is "...*le plaisir délicieux et toujours nouveau d'une occupation inutile* (the delightful and ever-new pleasure of a useless activity)." Compare this to Bergson's account of the necessary state of mind to access "pure" memory: "we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream."<sup>27</sup> The dreamy, near-static flow of the *Épilogue* through time encourages such a setting aside of goal-oriented activity, providing the substrate out of which pure memories blossom.

Owing to his experience as both a performer and an analyst of the *Valses*, Puri has a good vantage point for considering how the physicality of playing the *Épilogue* might relate to its structural and conceptual content. It is a welcome addition to the chapter—music students have long lamented the disconnect between the experience of doing music theory homework and the experience of playing music. Puri's acknowledgment of the role that the real-world movements of the pianist's hands might play in analyzing the piece is rare and noteworthy. Indeed, the relationship between the physical body and mental phenomena was a major preoccupation of the Decadent's timeframe, which saw the emergence of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Recalling Proust's account of involuntary memory as arising from physical sensations (the taste of the madeleine), it is a simple logical step to expand the *Valses*' supposed stimuli of involuntary memory to include physical motions on the part of the player alongside the actual sounds of the music.

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<sup>27</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York City: Zone, 1988), 82.

Puri describes a hypothetical scene of Ravel composing the movement, “prompted by the flowing textures of the music itself: the image of Ravel freely improvising at the keyboard and occasionally being surprised by the turns that the music has happened to take under his fingers.”<sup>28</sup> Of course, as Puri admits, this may not have been the actual process by which Ravel composed the *Épilogue*; in reality, it runs quite contrary to Ravel’s own claims about his writing methods. But it is certainly an intriguing idea that the trajectory of the hand toward the particular registers and shapes of each preceding waltz could have propelled Ravel toward one quotation or another in the *Épilogue*, contributing to the overall architecture of the movement. Puri’s scene also calls attention to the necessary play between different types of memory as conceived by Bergson. The hands of the pianist must rely to some extent on physical habit, even when improvising; technique at one time learned consciously becomes automatic, and is a prerequisite for composing or playing the textures of the *Épilogue*. Thus the execution of the *Valses*—and indeed, of any piece—is an example of habit memory at work, even as the sounds emanating from the piano inspire or embody pure memory.

By now, one may have observed that Puri has, as yet, sidestepped the question of who exactly are the remembering subjects at hand. Memories only exist insofar as they are remembered by individual consciousnesses; thus, works that are somehow “imbued” with memory can only be so in virtue of their ability to provoke specific memories or, as certainly seems the case for Puri as he listens to Ravel, provoke a general feeling of memory-ness in their audience. Supposing the latter, it might suffice to say that Puri is identifying a *theme* of memory in the *Épilogue*, and that any possible remembering subject is equally relevant.

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<sup>28</sup> Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 145.

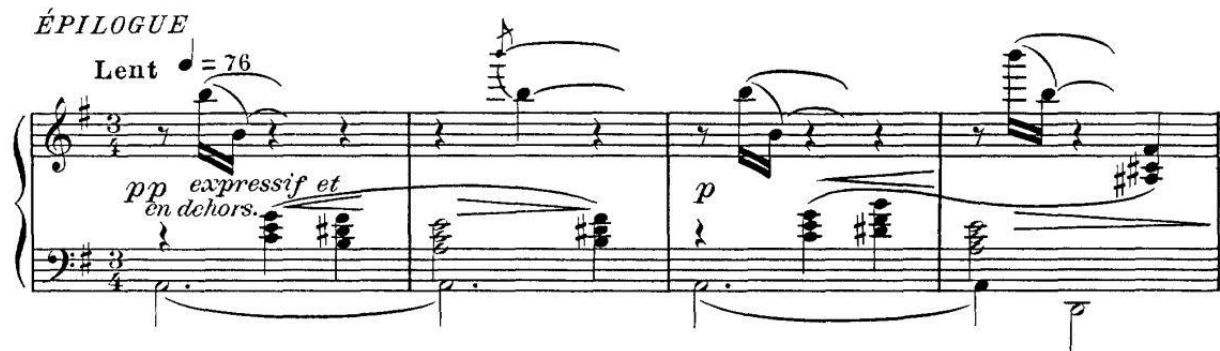
However, I cannot help but crave a more solid answer, in order to better determine how Puri's analysis might help a listener, performer, or theorist to understand the piece. In his appeals to Proust's involuntary memory and Bergson's pure memory, Puri avoids any explicit contention of how, and for whom, these phenomena operate. Presumably, the subjects here are any performers or listeners, with the *Épilogue* serving both as the atmospheric background that primes the mind for recollection and as the specific stimulus that seizes this opportunity to push forth memories. Or, as suggested by the commentary on the Durand epigraph, and by Puri's rhapsodic scenario of Ravel's improvisation at the keyboard, the composer himself is a strong candidate as a remembering subject. In this case, remembered content would include past musical material (motives and harmonies), first recalled and then inserted anew into the concluding movement.

Puri's structural analysis of the *Épilogue* divides the movement into six phrases, each comprised of a four-bar "presentation" of the movement's own unique theme and a "continuation" of variable length that contains thematic material from other movements.<sup>29</sup> The *Épilogue* theme encompasses three motives, each with their own register: a single bass line, a melodic line expressed in planed triads, and the distinctive, interrupting broken octaves of the upper right hand (Fig. 4). Among the continuations, material from Waltz IV recurs most often, perhaps for narrative reasons. In the libretto, Ravel referred to this movement as a romantic *pas de deux* for Adélaïde and Lorédan, and the *Épilogue*'s refashioning of this theme into an eerie refrain could be a melancholic commentary on the irretrievability of past pleasures.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 144.

**Fig. 4:** *Valses nobles et sentimentales, Épilogue*, mm. 1-4



Puri pays closest attention to the first phrase, mm. 1-4, which establishes the movement's three-layered texture in an immediate split-personality gesture—while the most traditionally melodic element is discernible in the middle layer, attention cannot rest too long in any particular register. In this introduction, Puri observes two foundational aspects of the movement's framework: “a quasi-acoustic principle that places fundamentals below and upper partials above, and a related rhythmic principle that increases activity as the register ascends.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, each register of the keyboard derives its character not only from the relative height of its pitch, but from the actual content of the music Ravel chooses to place in one region or another. In turn, Puri considers this continuous play between registral layers to be a musical simulacrum of the mind's different domains: “the stratified texture separates the mind into different registers of thought and emotion, while the dynamic properties of expansion, contraction, migration and transformation, which govern these musical registers, figure the mixture and continual modulation of that thought and emotion.”<sup>31</sup> Thoughts and

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 154

musical elements, here, appear in Puri's esteem to be cut from the same cloth! A natural comparison here is to Freudian psychoanalysis, certainly a popular topic among the intelligentsia of Ravel's time. The division of the mind into operating consciousness, the subconscious, and so on inevitably carried with it a set of rather prescriptive notions about where different thoughts "reside" in the mind: profound self-truths in the "deep" subconscious (akin to those acoustic fundamentals) and less consequential day-to-day thoughts in the "shallower" operating consciousness (akin to those acoustic partials and non-melodic octaves).

Of course, the boundaries between these striations are not wholly rigid, but permeable. Puri terms the *Épilogue* a "dialectics of memory,"<sup>32</sup> speaking to the conversational and inextricable nature of the contributions each layer makes to the overall structure of the movement. For example, the middle layer of triads serves as a mediator between the outer two, helping carry the listener's ear to these extremes rather than only interjecting with its own cry for attention. As seen in mm. 1-4, the planed chords frequently arrive on either an A-minor or B-Major triad, alternating tonal "allegiance" with the bass layer's A-pedal and the upper layer's B-octave. Within the nocturnal stillness of the opening mood, there emerges the slightest hint of direction and interaction: the theme "vacillates in the first half of Phrase One between the melancholic brooding of the bass and the sanguine scintillation of the treble."<sup>33</sup>

Further blurring of boundaries occurs as Ravel weaves the motivic material of past waltzes into the "continuation" portion of each phrase. In mm. 4-8, the melodic aspect of the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 148

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 154.



middle layer (the line formed by the top note of each chord) predicts the oncoming quotation of Waltz IV. This bridge between presentation and continuation invokes the “priming the mind” necessary for the activation of a Proustian involuntary memory. The first statement, capping off the *Épilogue* theme, is “a premonition of memory’s visit,” while its repetition, beginning the quotation of Waltz IV, is “the visit itself.”<sup>34</sup> For Puri, the moment is an especially impressive example of Ravel’s skill at deploying musical memory, rendering the *Épilogue* exceptional among the “usual suspects” of thematic recollections—say, hearing the exact same material in a recapitulation, altered only by key. The dialectic between memories is also inherently a dialectic between past and present, emphasized by Ravel’s treatment of the Waltz IV material:

“[The theme] is not transposed directly and mechanically into the *Épilogue*. Rather, it has been transformed to accommodate an ongoing Phrase One, just and Phrase One has been shaped to accommodate it – so seamlessly, in fact, that we may not even recognize it as a memory until it has nearly passed us by.<sup>35</sup> Every instance of remembering, though it recollects a vanished past, occurs in the present. Ravel’s inclusion of the Waltz IV material in both the presentation and continuation embodies this more conceptually meaty consideration of memory, beyond sheer repetition.

Puri then expands the scope of his analysis to the total organization of the movement. The brief reprise of mm. 1-4 beginning in m. 62, now indicated to be played *un peu plus las* (a little slower, wearily), now evidences the movement’s cyclical form. Within this movement of memories, the reprise is the last complete recollection before the movement

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

fades, the interrupting octaves now sounding as if at a distance, until all that remains are the sonic specters held by the sustain pedal. Puri here again makes reference to physicality, noting that the recursive framework “remembers the waltz by musically simulating its dance pattern...similar to a waltzing couple as they whirl around the circumference of a ballroom, thereby transferring choreography from the dancer’s legs and feet to the pianist’s arms and hands.”<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, the *Épilogue* could be conceived of as a farewell not just to the suite that it closes, but to the waltz form in general. The first seven movements pretend at a triumphant revival, but by the end we are left with mere apparitions of the dance—a microcosmic analogue to the decay of 19<sup>th</sup> Century forms and ideals. However, Puri closes the chapter with a comforting reminder that the dialectical nature of memory carries its own revitalizing power. The past has departed but is not fully inaccessible in the mind; it remains in “active, ongoing negotiation”<sup>37</sup> with the present.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 167.

## Chapter Three

### Ravel the Existentialist?

#### Introduction

Having explored the conceptual contexts proposed by Zank and Puri, I will now articulate my own possible Theory of Everything, positing that the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre provides a provocative new way to consider the Ravel phenomena that are primary points of interest in current scholarship. In keeping with the non-combative spirit of Ravel musicology, as described in the introduction to this paper, I intend the following material to be additive to, rather than argumentative with, my predecessors in doing this sort of analysis. The existentialist view, while it provides a previously-unidentified interdisciplinary connection to the philosophy of Ravel's era, is certainly compatible with existing ideas of irony, Decadence, and the like. What follows is intended simply as an expansion, as a potential new tint to our existing outlook on Ravel, rather than as a full-blown revolution.

#### Notes on the Texts

The 800-odd pages of Jean-Paul Sartre's seminal book, *Being and Nothingness*, cover a broad spectrum of philosophical topics—some inherited from the alliterative “founding fathers” of Continental philosophy (Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger), and some entirely novel and notably French rather than Germanic in flavor. While René Descartes, a Frenchman, is credited with the first comprehensive summation of the ontological question of being, it was the aforementioned trio of German philosophers that provoked an absolute obsession with this inquiry among European thinkers. Eventually, the topical preoccupations and methods of

argument employed by these philosophers so diverged from traditional modes that a new movement coalesced: the Continental school. The opposing camp, the Analytic school, tended toward more scientific, less humanistic language, always requiring the strictures of formal logic to govern pronouncements about what we know and how we know it.

Continental philosophy, in large part because of its concern with the subjective nature of human existence, embraced a more artistic, less procedural approach to philosophy. Sartre explored the literary possibilities of philosophy (and the philosophical possibilities of literature) some years before the publication of *Being and Nothingness*, weaving existentialist principles into fictional works like *Nausea* (1938).

*Being and Nothingness*, while certainly no less intimidating than any other 800-page book subtitled, “A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology,” is peppered with narrative illustrations of the concepts presented therein. Like much of the action of *Nausea*, these vignettes are often set in cafés or otherwise out-and-about in the city, and Sartre’s tone frequently borders on the colloquial. Nonetheless, despite this generous incorporation of familiar scenarios amidst the heavyweight content of *Being and Nothingness*, the work was vastly misunderstood upon its publication. Within two years of the birth of existentialism, Sartre found himself dismayed by a host of misconceptions about his work held by critics and sympathizers alike, spurred by what he considered an irresponsible bandying about of the term “existentialism” by the press. So, in 1945, Sartre gave a now-legendary lecture at Paris’ Club Maintenant to clarify the meaning and implications of his new philosophy. The lecture was a strategic move on two fronts: Sartre desired to reclaim his work as a serious text of professional philosophy, but also, perhaps reluctantly, acknowledge and manage its new popularity as an object of public fixation. Here, in a half-compassionate and half-defensive

gesture, Sartre yields completely to the accessible language of the book's narrative vignettes, and focuses his discussion on the chapters pertaining to human subjectivity: not just how to define "being" in a philosophical sense, but how to describe what it is *like* to be. Later published as *Existentialism is a Humanism*, the lecture reiterates the foundational principles of existentialism as they pertain to the individual, to the relation between her and society, and to the general human condition. Thanks to its concision and its more manageable language, *Existentialism is a Humanism* serves as a convenient point of entry to Sartre's philosophy, and it is from this work that I draw the forthcoming description of core existentialism. Later, I will bring *Being and Nothingness* back into play, so as to identify even more detailed affinities between Sartre's work and the life and music of Ravel.

## Part One: Ravel as He Composed

At its core, existentialism is a description of the fundamental reality of being human, taking up each individual subjectivity—each person who exists and subjectively experiences the world—as a prototype of humankind's general condition. Sartre immediately and proudly posits existentialism as a contradiction to prevailing religious thought, acknowledging that his atheism has contributed to the public perception of his philosophy as cold and pessimistic: "according to...a Catholic critic, we have forgotten the innocence of a child's smile."<sup>38</sup> Sartre insists that his philosophy allows room for plenty of humanistic optimism, as shall be addressed when I compare Sartre's optimism to that of the Decadent dandies. As yet, however, and on a foundational level, existentialism must soundly reject the traditional story

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<sup>38</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 17.

of God's role in the creation of man. Sartre analogizes godly creation with the manufacture of a purposeful object, like a paper knife:

We note that this object was produced by a craftsman who drew his inspiration from a concept: he referred both to the concept of what a paper knife is, and to a known production technique that is part of that concept and is, by and large, a formula...we cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper knife without knowing what purpose it would serve.<sup>39</sup>

The craftsman is guided in his process by a conscious through-connection between the intended use of the tool, its physical qualities needed to suit this purpose, and the steps he must take to produce an object of such form. This awareness in the craftsman, this host of concepts that must be present in his mind in order to produce the paper knife, amount to the tool's "essence" in Sartre's terminology. And, crucially, this essence necessarily occupies the mind of the craftsman *before* the actual production of the paper knife: essence precedes existence.

So goes the old story in the case of humankind, Sartre observes: "When we think of God the Creator, we usually conceive of him as a superlative artisan...when God creates he knows exactly what he is creating. Thus the concept of man, in the mind of God, is comparable to the concept of the paper knife in the mind of the manufacturer."<sup>40</sup> Religious accounts that accord with this idea of God the Creator would consequently assert that man's essence precedes his existence—a notion that appears even in various atheistic philosophies that presuppose a general inborn "human nature" or instinctive moral code. Sartre, however,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 21.

contends the opposite: "...man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself...to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself."<sup>41</sup> Man's existence precedes his essence, and further, it is up to no one but the individual himself to conceive of, and act towards, the particular sort of person he would like to become. As with the paper knife, man may first hold in his mind some conception of his desired form, before deciding which behaviors are appropriate to pursue it. But here, both the conceiving and the behaving are actions derived from his choice. No external being provides the conception ready-made, and no one else can do the work for him of embodying that image.

Reiterating the primacy of subjectivity in his philosophy, Sartre reminds us that man must *consciously* plot the trajectory of his developing essence, unlike "a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower."<sup>42</sup> The realization of this first existentialist principle, Sartre acknowledges, should prompt a tremendous sense of dread. When faced with the inescapable responsibility of crafting your own essence, day after day, it might seem wholly preferable to be a mere patch of moss in a quiet forest (anything but working on your dissertation, right?). Sartre hopes that, upon further contemplation, individuals might embrace the truths of existentialism with a fair bit of enthusiasm, buoyed by the freedom and possibility contained within all that responsibility. Indeed, he claims "no doctrine is more optimistic, since it declares that man's destiny lies within himself."<sup>43</sup>

Sartre cautions that existentialism is not simply a new flavor of moral relativism, in which cultural or even personal moralities are legitimated simply by the fact that people

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 40.

choose to adopt them. Nor is Sartre's recognition of man's ultimate freedom a global endorsement of any and all actions, admirable and deplorable alike. He has much to say about the implications of existentialism on ethics, politics, and other topics of concern to collective society, which are beyond the scope of this paper to examine. For purposes of finding affinities with Ravel, I shall only address in particular the conditions that Sartre places on the *process* of choosing one's actions, setting aside for now the question of existentialism's worth as a system of moral value.

Above all, Sartre disapproves of the privileging of instinctive or emotional impulse over conscious contemplation: "Existentialists do not believe in the power of passion. They will never regard a great passion as a devastating torrent that inevitably compels man to commit certain acts and which, therefore, is an excuse."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Sartre believes emotive feelings to be among the resultant consequences of choices, rather than their primary motivations: since "feelings are developed through the actions we take...I shouldn't seek within myself some authentic state that will compel me to act."<sup>45</sup> Feelings that one suspects or claims to hold are only validated through actions that evidence them: "I may say that I love a friend well enough to sacrifice a certain sum of money for his sake, but I can claim that only if I have done so."<sup>46</sup>

Here again is cause for anguish! Sartre admonishes our inclination to comfort ourselves by overemphasizing those factors of our being that are beyond our control. Attributing actions to upheavals of passion is a means of denying existential responsibility, an attempt to fashion oneself as a passive bystander in what is actually the ongoing, active

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 32.



process of self-becoming. Likewise, Sartre rejects the idea of individual dispositions, inasmuch as they are used to explain away unrespectable actions. For example, "...there is no such thing as a cowardly temperament...a temperament is not an action; a coward is defined by the action he has taken." Sartre here again expects resistance and denial, knowing that with each paragraph he offers humanity an ever-larger pill to swallow: "What people are obscurely feeling, and what horrifies them, is that the coward...is guilty of his cowardice. People would prefer to be born a coward or be born a hero."<sup>47</sup>

With these existential ideas in mind, let us consider what we know of Ravel's compositional process. At its core, Ravel conceived of composing as an act of craftsmanship, not unbridled creativity. In "Memories of a Lazy Child," an article penned by the composer in 1931, Ravel cites a surprising figure as his model: "As for technique, my teacher was certainly Edgar Allen Poe. The finest treatise on composition, in my opinion, and the one which in any case had the greatest influence upon me was his 'Philosophy of Composition.' No matter how much Mallarmé claimed it was nothing but a hoax, I am convinced that Poe indeed wrote his poem 'The Raven' in the way that he indicated."<sup>48</sup> In this treatise, Poe expresses his distrust of the "fine frenzy" and "ecstatic intuition" claimed by Romantic poets to overtake them as they wrote. In reality, Poe admits, they "would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes,"<sup>49</sup> revealing the arduous and rather tactical

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Ravel, "Memories of a Lazy Child," in *A Ravel Reader*, ed. Arbie Orenstein (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1990), 394. Earlier in the article, Ravel describes his view of various artistic genres as virtually the same entity, differing only in the mode of their expression: "For me, there are not several arts, but only one" (pg. 294). Thus a poet is a quite suitable model for a composer.

<sup>49</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature and Art*, April 1846, 163.

process of writing a poem. Poe reflects on his composition of “The Raven” as a deliberate engineering of literary elements, purposed toward invoking a particular effect on the reader that was decided upon before writing a single word. The construction of this poem, of which Ravel was so enamored, is described by Poe in decidedly unromantic terms: “no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition...the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.”<sup>50</sup> Instead of a feverish burst of otherworldly inspiration, the eerie magic of “The Raven” began with the simple decision of how many lines would comprise the poem, according to Poe’s finely-tuned theory of how many lines a poet is allowed before he wanders off into monotony. From there, Poe finessed downward from large structures to small—stanzas to lines to words—considering at each level the mereological relations between each detail and the totality of the work.

Plenty of comments made by Ravel regarding his own process indicate that, sure enough, he kept Poe’s principles in mind throughout his career. In conversation with music critic Robert de Fragny, Ravel remarked that “we’ve gone past the days when the composer was thought of as being struck by inspiration, feverishly scribbling down his thoughts on a piece of paper,” pronouncing further that composing is above all an “intellectual activity.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, he once insisted upon a sort of anti-inspiration: “I don’t have ideas...nothing forces

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Maurice Ravel as recalled by Robert de Fragny, quoted in Roger Nichols, *Ravel Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1987), 61. Interesting here is that Ravel expresses a sense of changing narrative: there was the way composers *used* to go about composing, or how they used to *conceive* of composing, but his generation holds a different view. Perhaps Ravel is revealing a difference he intuitively feels between himself and Romantic-era composers.

itself on me.”<sup>52</sup> Instead, he proceeded cautiously and methodically by comparing different combinations of selected notes and rhythms, “rang[ing] and order[ing] them like a mason building a wall.”<sup>53</sup> Ravel was also known to be secretive with his sketches, even setting rejected drafts aflame. Colette, the librettist of *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, recalled waiting five years to receive the finished score of the opera. Despite Ravel’s enthusiasm for the project and admiration for Colette’s work, he refused to provide so much as a fragment until the music was entirely complete.<sup>54</sup> In this stubbornness is evidenced a privileging of the cohesion and potency of the total work, suitable for distribution—even to close colleagues and friends—only in its polished final form.

Note how, in the views of Poe and Ravel, composing a work closely resembles Sartre’s account of the craftsman and the paper knife. The essence of the work is conceived prior to the actual act of its construction, and its formation results from a conscious series of choices rather than from the unexpected graciousness of some mysterious muse. The craftsman must have a robust sense of the form and purpose of the object *before* making it manifest in the world. Interestingly, Ravel describes his compositional outlook as a particularly French point of view, confessing that he possesses “the virtues and defects of French artists...we are always somewhat cerebral, but within these limits we very often reach perfection.” He continues, in an especially striking anticipation of Sartre: “I consider sincerity to be the greatest defect in art, because it excludes the possibility of choice.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ravel as recalled by Edmond Maurat, *Souvenirs musicaux et littéraires* (Saint-Etienne, 1977), 128, quoted in Roger Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 55.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, in a rare moment of public self-doubt, Ravel admitted to Colette that he was worried that he could have chosen a better onomatopoeia for the singing cats’ meows.

<sup>55</sup> Maurice Ravel, “Interview with *ABC de Madrid*,” in *A Ravel Reader*, ed. Arbie Orenstein (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1990), 434.

Relying on eruptions of feeling to inspire his music would not only have resulted in works of technical inferiority; it would, perhaps counter-intuitively, have limited the composer in his expressive choices. Sincerity, as it lays bare the composer's emotions and reflects the desire in itself to lay them bare, renders the composer a passive, whimsical figure, neither a master of his technique nor a master of his self. It is certainly no accident that, when artists speak of their metaphorical muses, they tend to characterize these beings as capricious, even cruel. Both Ravel and Sartre would likely grimace at such a subservient account of artistic productivity, in which the artist denies his own precious agency and offers it up instead to some mythical mistress. An alternative, pianistic analogy can be found here in the training of a student to play with rubato. A pianist who has never learned how to strictly follow the metronome will almost certainly fail to execute good rubato—she will know only how her body unthinkingly feels the rhythm, and be ill-equipped to make purposeful, tasteful adjustments to her tempo. Ravel expands on the subject of considered choice in “Memories of a Lazy Child,” asserting that “a *conscious* artist is always right. I say *conscious* and not *sincere*, because in the latter word there is something humiliating. An artist *cannot* be sincere...when one allows oneself spontaneity, one babbles and that's all.” He continues, sounding again quite like Sartre: “The truth is, one can never have enough control. Moreover, since we cannot express ourselves without exploiting and thus transforming our emotions, isn't it better to at least be fully aware and acknowledge that art is the supreme imposture? What is sometimes called my insensibility is simply a scruple not to write just anything.”<sup>56</sup> Ravel declares conscious choice to be the essential and liberating precondition of the exercise

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<sup>56</sup> Ravel, “Memories of a Lazy Child,” in *A Ravel Reader*, 395.

of his technique, presenting a proto-existentialist narrative of his compositional process a decade prior to the arrival of *Being and Nothingness* on the scene.

## Part Two: Ravel as He Lived

Ravel's dandyism has always been considered a vital window of insight into his inner life and accordingly, into his artistic process. Though Ravel did not assign the label of "dandy" to himself, the word comes up several times in the recollections of his friends: Roland-Manuel, for one, describes Ravel's interest in fashion as an extreme "absorption." Perhaps, Roland-Manuel wonders further, Ravel's careful manners and tidy dress were a means of making up for a slight social anxiety: "at a first meeting Ravel was courteous and reserved...it seemed as if he felt uncontrollably awkward and almost physically incapable of putting his emotions into words."<sup>57</sup> Like audiences upon hearing his music, even close friends felt a palpable, if gradually fading, emotional barrier between Ravel and themselves: "his best friends could not help feeling secretly disappointed by the feeling that they were not able to become more fully intimate with him...it took a long time to discover that Ravel was the surest, most faithful and most profoundly affectionate of friends."<sup>58</sup>

Here again, we can identify several existentialist themes suggested by Ravel's life, first by returning to Sartre's account of deliberate choice as constitutive of the self. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre contends that every choice, independently of its resulting consequences, is equally as expressive of the fundamental human condition of absolute freedom. Choice, simply by virtue of being made, reflects the value of choice itself;

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<sup>57</sup> Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dennis Dobson Limited, 1947), 127-36, quoted in Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 191.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

evaluation of its effects, whether it was made wisely, and so on, are of separate consideration. Sartre declines to provide a robust “ethics” of existentialism, in which he might prescribe particular beliefs or goals toward which he would prefer we act. Instead, his focus in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and *Being and Nothingness* remains fixed on the essential nature of choice, and the ideal process by which choices are made. Thus, the only inherent existentialist value is the freedom that underlies man’s project of self-determination: it “can have no other aim than itself.”<sup>59</sup> All other values are second-order, chosen and expressed through the actions we take: “Life itself is nothing until it is lived, it is we who give it meaning, and value is nothing more than the meaning we give it.”<sup>60</sup>

A Decadent dandy could thus take up Sartre’s philosophy as a defense, were he to be accused of lacking substance in his fixation on appearance. Existentialism encourages the setting-aside of grand notions of profundity versus superficiality, elevating even minute behaviors to a privileged position: expressions of ultimate human freedom, expressions of man’s self-determination and promotions of his individual values. Even the choice of the day’s silk tie—if made consciously, and if rightly understood to be part of the establishment of one’s self—is just as much an existential triumph as the choice to go to war. The dandy may even exercise more dimensions of his freedom than most, not devoting his attention only to decisions of great worry and consequence, but applying the full force of his reason to every detail of his worldly surroundings. Through sheer quantity of choices made, and by the

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<sup>59</sup> Sartre, “*Existentialism is a Humanism*”, 48.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

making-conscious of decisions that others make at random (reaching in to the drawer for any old tie!), dandies literally fashion themselves into existential exemplars.<sup>61</sup>

Further insight can be found in Sartre's discussion of what it is like for one subjectivity to come face-to-face with another, often characterized as the foreboding capital-O "Other" in the headier ontological chapters of *Being and Nothingness*. Ravel's (and the general dandy's) desire to exercise complete control over his appearance and comportment reveals a keen understanding of the distress that Sartre considers to be a necessary component of encountering the Other. In *Existentialism is Humanism*, Sartre goes so far as to declare that the Cartesian *cogito* ("I think, therefore I am"), once taken as the only truly infallible kernel of knowledge, is insufficient to describe the natural state of subjectivity. The self cannot be understood only by observing itself, but requires the external observation of others to help define it: "the man who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he does so as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything...unless others acknowledge him as such."<sup>62</sup> Since the self is manifested by action, and action exists out-and-about in the world rather than in the interior realm of the mind, the choices that define the self are available to be witnessed by others. *Et voilà!* Another opportunity for anguish! Those who took Sartre's first charge to heart, enthusiastically taking up the challenge of crafting their own selves and assigning their own values to life, might feel dismayed and cheated by this new caveat. In their obsession with "superficial" matters, Ravel and the Decadent dandies are again unwittingly entering

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<sup>61</sup> This is not to say that Sartre considers all decisions to be of equal *consequence*, nor that all choices are equally difficult to make. But, rendering choice a value unto itself at least commands that all choices be valued unto themselves.

<sup>62</sup> Sartre, "*Existentialism is a Humanism*", 41.

existentialist territory. At first, we might assume the dandy has simply overcome his existential dread of facing down other subjectivities: if he's afraid of being seen, why would he adopt the practices of the peacock, leaving the Other no choice but to notice his appearance? However, the showiness of his clothing belies an even more intense craving to control the manner in which he is perceived: it is an attempt to predetermine and manipulate the reactions of others, not to disregard them. Remember that dandies were not distinguished merely by the flamboyance of their dress, but with the degree to which they accorded with ever-changing fashions, adopting each other's tastes rather than staging their own individual fabric revolutions. And, of course, in their manners and speech dandies maintained an imperturbable coolness, in contrast to the outward-reaching colors of their clothes—others were invited to gape at the marvelous façades, but were denied any glimpse of the dandies' interior worlds.<sup>63</sup>

Aestheticization could also be seen as a means of coping with the impingement of the world on a dandy's individual freedom. Sartre used the term "facticity" to label the personal set of worldly circumstances in which each of us must operate. Though values are ours to determine, the caprices of nature, the machinations of history, and the structures of society all place their own limits on the possibilities available to us—even though they are, Sartre admonishes, never excuses to avoid choosing from among our options within these unavoidable contexts. Having served in World War I, Ravel was no stranger to the extremes of facticity. Yet he never lost his drive to beautify his surroundings, evidenced (seriously) by

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<sup>63</sup> Zank's irony could here be weaponized by the dandy – a devastating quip made in front of a group often has the aim not just to amuse the onlookers, but to assert one's superiority of wit and self-control compared to the other conversant. Satire and sarcasm are not just jokes; they are a move to keep other from feeling too at ease, and thus too intimate.



his continued compositional output and (amusingly) by his accessorizing of his military uniform with an enormous fur coat.

Consider also Le Belvédère, Ravel's home in the countryside town of Montfort L'Amaury. The estate is sunny, quiet, and calm, named for its far-reaching view of gentle, grassy hills. A continuous motif of black and white—sometimes in the wallpaper, sometimes in the tile—winds throughout rooms each saturated with a single color: rich purple here, bright yellow there. Art Nouveau whorls and Grecian figures, hand painted by the composer, adorn wall panels and wooden furniture. The library room is small, but stacked wall-to-wall with books of poetry and classic novels alongside Ravel's favorite musical scores. Among the displays of Ravellian artifacts preserved there today are two impeccably tailored waistcoats of fine brocade, highlighting just how slight was the composer's 5'3" frame. Recall Puri's speculation that des Esseintes, the Decadent hero of Huysmans' *A rebours*, would have made his artful retreat in a house just like this. Like Esseintes, who fled from the metropolitan exhaustion of Paris to inhabit instead a world of pure, carefully curated beauty, Ravel crafted his surroundings to be a haven, an antidote to all things distressing and distasteful. The effect of visiting Le Belvedere is one of immersion, as though the subtle splendor of this decor could replace in one's memory the ugliness of any other place. Here, aesthetic control adopts a soothing character, serving as a consolation to the troubling realities of facticity and embodying in a tangible sense the optimism of Sartrean freedom.

Sartre himself intuited a connection between his philosophy and one Decadent figure, in his discussion of the Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire's "consciousness which was watched and scrutinized and which knew it was being watched and scrutinized while it performed its normal functions, at once lost its naturalness...everything was faked

because everything was scrutinized.”<sup>64</sup> Intuiting what Sartre makes explicit, that summations by others are not just opinions *about* but facets *of* the self, Baudelaire and Ravel shared the impulse to shield themselves against the look of the Other by adopting high aestheticization as a way of life. Ravel’s designation of art as the “supreme imposture” need not be an admission that his work is devoid of meaning in the traditional emotive or narrative sense. Rather, the active choice of wearing the mask of artifice is itself a highly expressive act—not of feelings, but of a conceptual reckoning with this particular variety of existential anguish. Likewise, the distances Ravel maintains—between himself and his friends, between his music and the audience—are not devoid of intimacy, but their intimacy is of a different sort than we usually suppose. Ravel may not invite the warm emotional connection that pursues mutual feeling between the artist and his audience (as especially advocated, among others, by Leo Tolstoy), but his music and life invites us to consider the ever-presence of the Other, facing our own subjectivity, at times to our enjoyment and at times to our horror.

It must be noted that my identification of Ravellian detachment as an existentialist gesture is an alternative, and perhaps a challenge to, a prevailing theory in existing scholarship. Several writers have credited the aforementioned sense of distance between Ravel and his listeners to the composer’s active repression of his rumored homosexual orientation. Our knowledge of this facet of Ravel’s life is murky at best, forcing scholars who champion this theory to rely on often dubious evidence for Ravel’s sexual proclivities. Benjamin Ivry, the principal proponent of the repression theory, appeals to a handful of anecdotes of varying substantiation: some easily verified, like the composer’s close

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<sup>64</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, trans. Martin Turnell (New York City: New Directions Publishing, 1950), 23.

relationship with his mother; some almost surely exaggerated, like the scenario of Ravel suddenly fleeing a bookstore after accidentally brushing a fellow browser's hand, fearing it to be a flirtatious gesture that might accidentally "out" him.<sup>65</sup> Puri, though less confident in his estimation of Ravel's orientation, devotes a chapter of *Ravel the Decadent* to the theme of sublimated desire. In "Dandy, Interrupted," Puri suggests that the alternation of energy in *Daphnis et Chloe* between sober refinement and primitive agitation mirrors Ravel's ongoing quest to subdue his own visceral impulses.

While these psychoanalytic readings of Ravel's music can be interesting enough on a hypothetical level, I shall here follow the example of Ravel's friends and decline to offer my own, irrelevant opinion on the matter of his sexuality. Indeed, the acceptance of the erotic-repression narrative would not necessarily be in conflict with an existentialist reading of Ravel: the choice to repress could easily track with the more general existentialist charge toward self-determination, although Sartre might consider this a step too far towards reproachable self-*deception*. And certainly, much has been written about the role that the Decadence, dandyism, and other concurrent movements played in the historical evolution of queer identity, with plenty of substantiation. However, I posit that the existentialist reading has an advantage here, at least when it comes to Ravel: it hinges almost exclusively on Ravel's own pronouncements about his life and work, rather than circumstantial evidence. Crucial here is that, for this analysis, it is not necessary to pretend that Ravel somehow *intended* his music to be "existentialist" before Sartre codified and publicized his theory, or to argue that Ravel hoped that his music would somehow express such conceptual ideals.

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<sup>65</sup> Benjamin Ivry, *Maurice Ravel: A Life* (New York City: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2000), 124.

Rather, in virtue of who he was and how he wrote, Ravel appears to have stumbled into this “ism” unwittingly—a realization unavailable to him, but mine to contend in retrospect

Moreover, whereas the erotic-repression theory immediately severs conceptual ties between Ravel and any definitely-heterosexual contemporaries, the existentialist lens allows us to reinforce Ravel’s place as part of a larger narrative of 20<sup>th</sup> century French culture. Musicologically and music-theoretically speaking, Ravel is a bit of an oddball, and I do not consider it wholly unfair that he is often excluded from the usual laundry list of “compositional titans.” The aloof attitude of his music certainly contributes to our inclination to cordon him off, and it is unsurprising that this isolation extends to how he has usually been viewed as an artistic figure: so strange, so closed off, that we must describe him almost exclusively in terms of his uniqueness. However, taking a broader perspective, in which Ravel’s individual life and artistic process are tied to universal philosophical principles, reframes the composer as just another participant in France’s gradual shift toward a new sense of self. I posit that, had Ravel not possessed an existentialist outlook—his rules of process, his acute awareness of subjectivity, his sensitivity to the look of the Other—he could not have written music that sounds the way that it does. Ravel was not an artist at the mercy of his impulses, not an artist who craved a warm communion between himself and his audience, not an artist who agonized whether his music would be “meaningful” enough. Instead, the notes and rhythms of his music *sound like* an alternative set of principles put into practice. The sonic qualities that are so commonly recognized in Ravel’s music—detachment, mechanism, hyper-aestheticism—are a concrete, sonic embodiment of an emerging philosophy *that existed in the world as music before the philosophy had a name.*

Indeed, Sartre does not consider his philosophy to be his own invention, per se; it is the calling-out of realities that, he contends, have always governed human existence, whether we knew it or not. It is not difficult to imagine that Sartre, tuned-in as he was to the Parisian zeitgeist, may have been influenced in his perspective by the artistic tendencies of the *fin-de-siècle* creatives. As Sartre grew up in Paris, aesthetic seeds of existentialism were already taking root, planted not only by Ravel, but also by a host of quintessential French figures: by the Symbolist poets, who eschewed sentimentality and insisted upon the elevation of everyday objects to poetic icons, thereby declaring superficiality to be a substantive act; by avant-garde composers like Satie, who rejected the overwrought emotional impulsiveness of the Romantic era; even by the gradual replacement of lush, naturalistic Art Nouveau décor with the starker, more stylized, and perhaps more philosophical Art Deco. If existentialism has always been the undercurrent of the world, it took these artists to give it shape, to give it sound—then it took Sartre to give voice to the philosophy that was already at work.

## Chapter Four

### **The Ghost in the Machine: A Discussion for Performers**

*Practice without theory is a gamble; theory without practice is unfinished business.*

-Capt. Moses Hirschkowitz, US Maritime Service

In my years of studying piano, I admit that I have spent many hours sitting silently at the instrument, wishing that just *thinking* about abstract musical concepts for a while would prepare my repertoire as effectively as, well, actually working on my repertoire. In these moments, my mind has often wandered to the above words of my grandfather, a retired professor of engineering whose comprehension of the relationship between theory and practice literally propelled nuclear-powered ships across the sea. It is not hard to see the connection between the usual musical definition of “theory” (melody, harmony, rhythm and form) and the practice of performing. Knowing the intricacies of a piece’s construction cannot help but affect our choices in voicing, tempo, timbre, and all those other details that we manipulate through our physical engagement with the piano. But I have always craved to incorporate into my playing, in some mysterious way, the sorts of conceptual questions that I’ve set forth so far in this paper. I have suggested that Ravel’s music is inherently endowed with the ability to express philosophical matters, broadcasting existentialist declarations in the process of their creation, the sense of self possessed by their creator, and the essential barrier between subjectivities that is upheld in their attitude of detachment. But should this change the way that pianists practice and perform his music?

To an extent, interpretation is personal; to an extent, it should not be, at least according to classical ideas about the sovereignty of the composer. I will not suggest here that performers of Ravel should hurry to adopt some “existentialist approach to interpretation”—though I am sure that I will, upon any forthcoming presentations of this analysis, be immediately and justifiably asked to explain what that might look like. For now, I will simply offer up one more existentialist parallel, addressing performance in general as much as the performance of Ravel, to provide a final philosophical insight that might be of practical interest.

First, let us briefly return to Zank’s and Puri’s analyses of the *Valses*. Each theorist provides a faint suggestion as to how a performer might want to approach the work, though neither book offers up a full-fledged prescription for interpreting Ravel’s music in general. As with much of his defense of Ravellian irony, Zank relies on the opinions of Ravel’s contemporaries when addressing performance. Quoting a 1924 lecture given by pianist Louis Aguetant to students at the Lyon Conservatory, Zank unearths an explicit directive to perform the *Valses* with a healthy sense of irony: “Nothing is more French than this sensibility shrouded in irony,”<sup>66</sup> and thus “a musician has no need to experience the emotions he wishes to communicate. What counts is what he produces musically, a determined effect...”<sup>67</sup> Perhaps as a direct reflection of Ravel’s compositional process, technique is championed by Aguetant as a means of suppressing and superseding emotional impulse. Mastery of technique, presumably, would better enable the performer to embody the “sleight of hand” in Ravel’s ironic compositions, like a satirist whose quips are all the more biting for

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<sup>66</sup> Louis Aguetant, “Maurice Ravel,” in *La Musique de piano des origines à Ravel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1954), 427-42, quoted in Zank, *Irony and Sound*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

her erudite vocabulary. Indeed, the ability to give the impression of tremendous passion, while secretly maintaining a detached coolness while performing, would likely qualify as an example of Zank's simple definition of irony: saying (playing) one thing while meaning (feeling) another.

Puri is not quite as keen to let go of the performer's personal connection to the work, perhaps because he himself is a seasoned performer of the *Valses*. After all, his analysis of the *Épilogue* hinges on its welling-up of memories and their attendant emotional weight. However, Puri ultimately places technique at the top of a performer's priorities, so as to better invoke the mnemonic powers of the movement. Recalling his image of the composer's hands exploring the keyboard and alighting upon familiar chords and motives, Puri suggests that a convincing interpretation of the *Épilogue* would "maintain the illusion that the moment precipitating the Waltz III recollection is a musical-muscular event that happens involuntarily rather than pressing forward willfully into it as if the notated dynamic swell were urging them to identify with it and 'express' its impulse."<sup>68</sup>

Puri proceeds to make passing reference, as most contemporary scholars of Ravel do at some point, to Carolyn Abbate's delightfully macabre essay entitled "Outside Ravel's Tomb." Published in 1999, Abbate's paper takes up *Tombeau de Couperin* as the best example of Ravel's ability to resurrect long-forgotten forms and techniques, examining how this act of musical necromancy fits into a cultural context of new recording technology and automated music-making machines. One of Abbate's main conceits is that, owing to certain universal truths about performing, but especially brought to light by the mechanistic textures of Ravel, performers have much in common with "musical automatons" throughout the ages,

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<sup>68</sup> Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 146.



from 18<sup>th</sup> Century music boxes, to the less-than-convincing “singing automatons” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, to the player pianos and phonographs of Ravel’s time.

As Abbate sees it, “nowhere is our machinelike status more clear than in a musical performance in which someone plays someone else’s work.”<sup>69</sup> The pianist is given a set of symbols to realize through physical movements, and the sound of the music emanates from a—let’s face it—rather brutish and heavily-engineered structure of wood and iron. Despite the recognition of the audience member that she is watching a person, a creation of flesh and blood like herself, the experience of witnessing the performer’s technique at work can be unsettling. Abbate notes the comments of Romantic writer Jean Paul (not Sartre!), who rather insultingly sums up a piano-playing lady as “at best merely a successful copy of all the female machines who pound on the piano, and accompany the notes with a swaying clearly intended to betray passion.”<sup>70</sup> Clearly Jean Paul was unconvinced of any authentic feeling in this poor woman, although from a modern, feminist perspective, I doubt his ability to understand women on any level. Abbate sees a similar reception to child prodigies: “perhaps we are disturbed by the spectacle of adult thought perfectly reproduced by the small laborer, who, we assume, cannot experience the emotions he or she mimics.”<sup>71</sup> As delighted and impressed as we may be by the prodigy’s technical command, her ability to fool us into experiencing her performance as authentically emotive, despite her emotional immaturity, is faintly disturbing.

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<sup>69</sup> Carolyn Abbate, “Outside Ravel’s Tomb,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52 (1999): 477.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 477-8.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

Nonetheless, Abbate posits that designating performances as “automatic” is not necessarily pejorative. After all, by Ravel’s time, an absolute obsession with mechanical means of reproducing music, as well as other artistic forms, had thoroughly taken hold of artists and audiences alike. Ravel himself embraced new technologies, recording albums of his own performances despite a lack of confidence in his pianistic abilities, and even volunteering his services to the Welte Mignon company, whose player pianos claimed to exactly replicate the touch of the performer’s hands upon the recording keyboard.<sup>72</sup> Himself a lover of all things mechanical, Ravel came of age in the first era to disconnect the hearing of a musical work with the physical presence of the performer. Some cultural critics (most famously, Walter Benjamin) lamented the loss of some intangible magic that supposedly inhabited the original work, be it a painting or an act of performance. But Ravel did not seem to share such concerns; indeed, the especially spooky Welte Mignon piano was appreciated by composers for its superior sound quality over scratchy wax cylinder recordings.

Certainly, Ravel’s textures often compel the pianist to merely execute, rather than express. The perpetual-motion engines that drive works like the *Toccata* and the closing movement of the *Concerto in G Major* are amplified in their virtuosity by repeated notes and overlapping hands; any inclination of *rubato*, especially when tasked with captaining the orchestra in the *Concerto*, is quickly abandoned. Recalling Zank’s compositional “wagers,” Ravel seems at times to be actively trying to derail the pianist: tangling her hands up in layered textures, adding tricky repeating notes to keyboard-traversing arpeggios, stuffing chords with unexpected dissonances that contort and stretch the hand, and often appending this insanity with a polite reminder to maintain a supple, classically French delicacy of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 491-2.

tone.<sup>73</sup> Ravel happily admitted that technical difficulty was a priority when composing his piano music, not just to live up to the standards of Romantic virtuosity, but even to supersede the demands of Chopin, Schumann and Liszt. Thus the challenge falls not only to Ravel to pull off the harmonic and motivic risks of the music's construction, but to the pianist to safely shepherd us through to the last bar.

Abbate makes the fascinating observation that, in the midst of such titanic technical demands, the moments when performers appear most human are among the most distressing to the audience. She notes, "Our sense for performance is paradoxically most keen when something –a memory lapse, perhaps–goes awry...one might assume that the failure marks the performer's liberation from the instructions that control him, yet in practice it simply reinforces his mechanical status."<sup>74</sup> Pianists, in addition to the usual shades of performance anxiety, are acutely attuned to the unique dread of forgetting the music that we absolutely swear we knew from memory in the practice room. Until the moment when the pianist finally "locates some node in his unspooling movements where the mechanism can be reengaged,"<sup>75</sup> the audience must share in his discomfort, and perhaps even his shame.

A compelling parallel can be drawn between Abbate's commentary on automaton-performers and several of Sartre's accounts of what it is like to encounter the Other. Recall that "the Other" denotes any subjectivity other than oneself, including anonymous strangers as much as acquaintances and friends. In the first chapter of the third section of *Being and Nothingness*, entitled "The Existence of Others," Sartre describes his observation of a

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<sup>73</sup> Abbate, Zank, and Puri all make special mention of Ravel's use of *sans ralentir* ("without slowing"), which often seems in Ravel to be the musical equivalent of a schoolyard taunt: "bet you can't keep up!"

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

passerby in the park. As always, Sartre's individual subjectivity comprises his fundamental vantage point: "it appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole."<sup>76</sup> The man that makes his way into Sartre's field of awareness becomes just another point of orientation in Sartre's perception of the world, such that this other person, in all his complexity, is rendered as an object which is treading upon *that* grass so many meters from *that* bench. Key here is that Sartre's most *immediate* perception of the man is as an object, and it requires further (albeit near-instant) contemplation to acknowledge that the man is a "privileged" object, namely a man like Sartre himself.<sup>77</sup> From the stranger's perspective, of course, Sartre is the object, but Sartre has no access to the interior world that comprises the man's own subjectivity: "it escapes me. I cannot put myself at the center of it."<sup>78</sup>

Taking a moment to broaden the scope of our inquiry, it is important to recognize that Sartre is here making explicit a point of schism between previous Analytic philosophies and French Continental thought. Since the Cartesian *cogito* ("I think therefore I am"), philosophers of all allegiances have acknowledged subjectivity as the only truly infallible certainty. However, logicians and scientists were eager to set this pronouncement aside in favor of addressing practical, worldly matters. Through reproducible methods of empirical observation, the story went, different persons could achieve mutual understanding of particular bits of knowledge—in other words, separate subjectivities could arrive at matching mental contents. Sartre, however, continually insists that we recognize the elemental barrier

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<sup>76</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York City: Washington Square Press, 1956), 343.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

between one mind and another. We can approximate such communion through language, empathy, and the like, but this is not to be confused for actual permeation of the boundaries of our own perception.

Keeping this existential skepticism toward true mutual feeling in mind, we can examine another scenario in which Sartre encounters the Other. Here, in his chapter addressing “Bad Faith,” Sartre watches a waiter perform his duties in a café: “His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer.” Sartre emphasizes that the waiter’s movements seem overly deliberate, exaggerated, as if he is caricaturing the job as much as he is performing it. Sartre continues: “...he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray...All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms...”<sup>79</sup> As far as Sartre can tell, the waiter makes these uncanny movements not because he desires to existentially craft his essence as such; rather, “he is playing at *being* a waiter in a café.”<sup>80</sup> A discrepancy exists between the externally-visible affectations he adopts in the fulfillment of his duties, and the true constitutive reality of his being. Crucially, Sartre identifies an expectation on the part of the café’s patrons that compels the waiter toward this posturing. Since he is instrumental to their ordering and dining and paying, the patrons are unconcerned with the relationship between his movements and his essential being: just the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 102.

former are enough to get them their coffee. Like the man Sartre watches in the park, the most immediate impression taken of the waiter has little to do with the inner world of his own subjectivity, yet in this case, it is demanded that he fully occupy the role of his job.

Paradoxically, then, in the view of these Others (the patrons), the whole truth of his being becomes “waiter,” insofar as this is the only facet of the man with which they interact. Sartre remarks that “this obligation is not different from that which is imposed on all tradesmen. Their condition is wholly one of ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor.”<sup>81</sup>

How remarkable that Abbate’s description of the highly specialized task of performing a classical piano recital is so reminiscent of Sartre’s account of waiting tables! In the case of performers, of course, part of the “ceremony” that many audiences demand is, paradoxically, the pretense that the performance is not merely the execution of a task, not merely the fulfillment of an obligation. Many pedagogical and musicological traditions hold that it absolutely matters whether or not the performer fully embodies her performance: whether or not she *feels* any of the emotions that she depicts in her playing, whether she *feels* like the performance is somehow expressive of her being, whether we are witnessing an instance of her being her most authentic self, or just “going through the motions.”

When used to describe a musical performance, those descriptive words that are appended to Ravel’s music without controversy—distant, detached, mechanistic—immediately take on a pejorative connotation: imagine how distressing it would be to be complimented by an audience member saying, “You looked so mechanical up there!” Ravel’s music, however,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

invites the performer to reconsider the nature of authenticity, to embrace imposture and artifice not just as a historical fact of the music's composition, but as a means of producing effective renditions of these works. Arising from Ravel's intuitive yet acute understanding of the fundamental distance between separate subjectivities, his music encourages, even demands, that the performer set aside any aspirations of emotional communion. Instead, the pianist can hide her interior world behind the technical and aesthetic perfection of the notes themselves, just as Ravel did. The music thus offers protection from the gaze of those especially intimidating Others, the audience, insulating her from any errant conclusions about her essence that they mistakenly believe they can draw. And as discussed in the case of the "superficial" dandies, the performer's decision to affect an air of imposture, if made consciously—existentially, even!—is not a rejection of meaning, nor will she disqualify herself from saying anything profound. The profundity is in the statement being made, in the philosophical concepts that reveal themselves through her artifice. Sartre felt the need to caution his readers that existentialism, for all its criticism of unchecked emotional impulse, is a humanistic philosophy: it speaks not only to the objective reality, but more poignantly to the personal, individual experience, of being a person in the world. Here too, the "existentialist" performance, that celebrates rather than tries to overcome the distance between composer, performer, and audience, should be interpreted as a truly humanistic enterprise. Though it emanates, as Ravel said about his own work, from a more cerebral facet of the self, it is no less authentic, no less human, than any other choice of how to approach the piano.

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