

**‘Connecting Abstract Values to Artistic Choices’: Memory,
Metaphor and Interpretation in Ravel’s *Miroirs***

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Abstract

This investigation is concerned with the construction of an aesthetic understanding of *Miroirs* by Maurice Ravel, approaching the work from several scholarly perspectives, as well as that of pianist. While significant scholarship has been undertaken in relation to Ravel's life and works from perspectives of criticism, aesthetics and biography, little exists by way of exploring the performance implications of this scholarship from a pianist's perspective.

In addition to considering salient aesthetic trends associated with Ravel's *Miroirs* and this period, the research pursues three general strands. The first strand identifies the particular influence of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition' on Ravel's approach to composition generally, and to *Miroirs* particularly. The interval of a falling major/minor third is proposed as a possible 'refrain' in *Miroirs* which can be understood by the pianist both in the context of Poe's treatise, and contemporary scholarship on Ravel as 'machinist'. The second strand explores the concept of memory as an aspect of both decadent and impressionist aesthetics. A mnemoanalysis of 'Alborada del gracioso' is conducted, investigating the potential of this work to be interpreted through Michael Puri's memory analysis model. The third strand identifies timbral exploration as central to Ravel pianism, and the pianistic conceptualisation of timbre as metaphor is investigated. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach is taken to investigate the pianist's lived experience of practicing 'La vallée des cloches' from *Miroirs*.

Finally, an autoethnographic reflection reveals the challenges involved in reconciling concepts in scholarship with performance practice in this area, offering an artist's insight into the process of

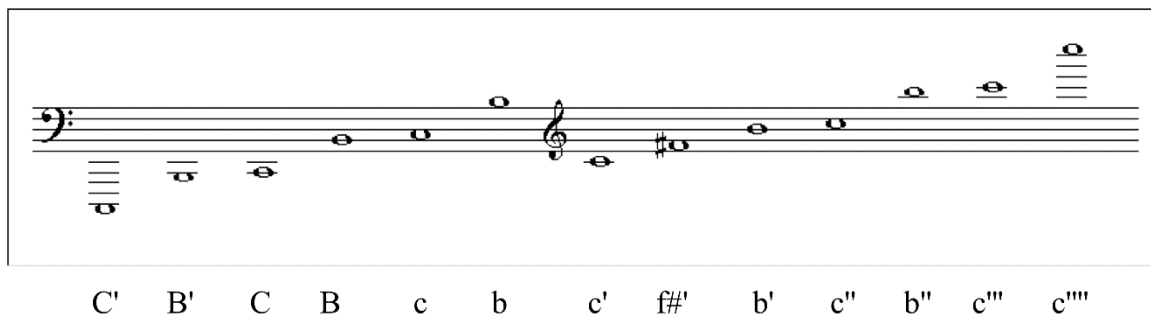
integrating 'abstract values' with 'artistic choices'. The research ultimately sheds new light on how *Miroirs* can be understood from both critical and performance perspectives.

Preface

The title quotation ‘connecting abstract values to artistic choices’ derives inspiration from the preface to Carlo Caballero’s *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*.¹ Here, the abstract values and artistic choices represent the aesthetic influence-composer relationship. The ‘abstract values’ refer to aesthetic currents – critical, literary and philosophical issues – which were absorbed by Gabriel Fauré and manifested in the ‘artistic choices’ he made in his compositional process. In the case of this thesis, the ‘abstract values’ are the emergent themes in Ravel scholarship which can be absorbed by the pianist and influence his/her ‘artistic choices’.

Musical examples included in this thesis have been taken from the G. Schirmer edition of *Miroirs*, (New York), which is a reprint of the original Eugène Demets edition (Paris, 1906), available on imslp.org.

Specific pitches are indicated according to the following illustration using the Helmholtz system:



¹ Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), prefatory note.

All translations from Manuel Cornejo's *L'intégrale: Correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens* (Paris: Le Passeur Éditeur, 2018) are mine. Other translations are detailed specifically.

Introduction: Integrating Scholarship and Performance

Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein gave the premiere performance of Maurice Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand on 5 January 1932. After the performance, a disagreement arose between Wittgenstein and Ravel over certain changes in harmony Wittgenstein had made to the score. Defending himself, Wittgenstein said 'I am an old hand as a pianist and what you wrote does not sound right,' to which Ravel replied: 'I am an old hand at orchestration, and it *does* sound right!'. Consequently, Ravel opposed Wittgenstein visiting Paris. Wittgenstein later wrote to Ravel saying 'performers must not be slaves!' to which Ravel replied: 'performers *are* slaves.'¹

This perspective places Ravel in sympathetic positioning with the textualist ideology of twentieth-century musicology, granting ontological primacy to texts and scores, and considering performer knowledge as subordinate to the meanings contained within a score. In a more extreme example of this perspective, Arnold Schoenberg questions the utility of performers at all, famously stating that

music need not be performed any more than books need be read aloud, for its logic is perfectly represented on the printed page; and the performer, for all his intolerable arrogance, is totally unnecessary except as his interpretations make the music understandable to an audience unfortunate enough not to be able to read it in print.²

The consideration of musical texts as bearers of fixed meanings, where musicological investigation begins and ends with the score, was contested in the 'New Musicology' of the 1990s, which sought

¹ Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Yale University Press, 2011), 321.

² Arnold Schoenberg, diary entry of 10 January 1940; quoted in Dika Newlin, *Schoenberg Remembered: Diaries and Recollections (1938-76)* (New York: Pendragon Press), 164.

to ‘put the music back in musicology’ and acknowledge the multi-faceted creative roles of performers.³ It placed renewed emphasis on music as temporal act rather than fixed object. While a contemporary performer would generally not amend or edit the notes of a score as Wittgenstein did, the plurality and dynamism of the meanings created by performers in relation to musical scores are now embraced by musicology. Mine Doğantan-Dack writes that ‘the interactive space between performers and musical scores is always open-ended, giving rise to an inexhaustible multiplicity of meaning-making processes and significations that remain resistant to the homogenizing and regulatory influences within scholarly discourses.’⁴ Among the factors which contribute to the construction of an interpretation are the performer’s body and technique, the acoustic properties of the instrument and performance space, the performer’s aesthetic sensibility and imagination, the performer’s previous experience of playing a particular composer – both physiological and stylistic – and the performer’s wider experience in the world. This perspective also acknowledges the limitations of a composer’s ability to communicate with performers, both through language during their lifetime and through what is recorded in history. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson writes that a composer’s

intentions ... are limited by and when and where they live; they are not communicable to performers except in a very sketchy way, supplemented while they are alive and available to be asked, by whatever they can explain in words or by example ... They certainly cannot encompass all the possibilities afforded by their scores.⁵

³ See Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ Mine Doğantan-Dack, ‘Senses and Sensibility: The Performer’s Intentions Between the Page and the Stage’, *Rivista di Analisi e Teoria Musicale* 1 (2021), 32. The term ‘meaning-making processes’ and the understanding that scores can generate ‘meanings’ for performers is adopted in this thesis from Mine Doğantan-Dack’s use of these terms. This is taken to imply the personal construction of meaning in an individual and unique way by a performer through his/her process of interpretation, and is distinct from the abstract and objective meanings generated in hermeneutics or analysis.

⁵ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, ‘Classical Music as enforced Utopia’, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15 (2016), 330-331.

While it is now recognised that the performer has considerable autonomy in the conceptualisation and creation of meaning of a work in performance, this perspective can often negate valuable insight from scholarship, or consider scholarly discourse as distinct from performance processes. It has indeed been argued that scholarly concepts have little value for the performer during a time-dependent live performance.

Perhaps we should simply acknowledge once more that both formalist and hermeneutic approaches to musical works mean dealing in abstractions and constructs under the aspect of eternity, as activities that will have little to do with real music – the performance produced and absorbed, which then disappears.⁶

This statement could be read as a resignation to the idea that meanings generated in musicological enquiry are abstractions which have little to do with performances; that the spaces that performance and musicology occupy are distinct and need not interact with one another. This thesis takes a more nuanced view; that meanings generated in musicological discourse can be interpreted by the performer and incorporated into an interpretation. It embraces the idea that current and emerging concepts in Ravel scholarship can offer fresh perspectives to the performer. That is to say, these concepts, for example, the operation of the theme of memory within Ravel's oeuvre, can provide a certain perspective or change of emphasis in the performer's interpretation, and this understanding can be added to the multifarious layers of signification already contingent in the construction of a performance.

⁶ Carolyn Abbate, 'Music—Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 512-513.

This thesis seeks to balance the idea that ‘[musical] texts are unstable, polysemic potentials for meaning rather than the bearers of extractable truths’⁷ with the idea that scholarship can lead the performer to new perspectives, understandings, inspiration, and creative insight. The research acknowledges that there is a hermeneutic element to all avenues of scholarship relating to a text – historical, analytical, critical, and performance-based – and that no single meaning can be deduced or reached. This thesis, therefore, takes the form of an investigation or exploration. It is concerned with *Miroirs* (1905) by Ravel, and the construction of an aesthetic-epistemology of this work informed by scholarship, reflection and practice.

Literature Review

Studies which relate to the life and works of Maurice Ravel are rich and diverse, with musicological enquiry approached from many viewpoints. The twentieth-century in particular saw an aesthetic reappraisal of Ravel; studies became more interdisciplinary, and new modes of reading the music were introduced. While abundant research exists and continues to emerge which interprets his music from a scholarly perspective, little exists by way of interpreting this scholarship from a performer’s perspective. This thesis attempts to synthesise work across various musicological disciplines to create an understanding of *Miroirs*, and find a way to articulate interpretative challenges encountered by the pianist navigating the space between the artistic, intellectual and performative. As such, this thesis draws on criticism, aesthetics, philosophy and performance studies, reading anew, from a pianist’s perspective, certain aspects in relation to *Miroirs*.

⁷ Ian Maxwell, ‘Music as Cultural System’, *Context: Journal of Music Research* 31 (2006), 5.

Significant twentieth- and twenty-first century biographers of Ravel include Alexis Roland-Manuel, Arbie Orenstein and Roger Nichols. Nichols' comprehensive 2011 biography – including correspondence, anecdotal information and musical criticism – provided a deep context to this study.⁸ Manuel Cornejo's 2018 volume of Ravel's correspondence (1895-1937), writings and interviews also provided an invaluable primary source in the original French language.⁹

Ravel's oeuvre has consistently inspired an aesthetic-philosophy-led musicology centred around decoding or uncovering subliminal truths, themes and modes of interpreting the music, exemplified from the writings of Theodor Adorno through to the more recent scholarship of Michael Puri. Puri's scholarship, which deals with themes of memory, decadence, sublimation and desire, contributed to the construction of an understanding of contemporary themes in Ravel studies.¹⁰ Puri notes that there are still gaps in Ravel scholarship, positing that many studies on Ravel 'remain to be written'.¹¹ *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music*, edited by Peter Kaminsky, provides an attempt to redefine aspects of Ravel studies for the twenty-first century.¹² In this volume, Puri analyses Adorno's understanding of Ravel, and is later influenced by this in his own scholarship.¹³

⁸ Alexis Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel et son oeuvre* (Paris: Durand, 1914); Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Yale University Press, 2011); Arbie Orenstein, (ed.), *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews* (New York & Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁹ Manuel Cornejo (ed.), *L'intégrale: Correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens* (Paris: Le Passeur Éditeur, 2018).

¹⁰ Michael Puri, *Ravel the Decadent, Memory, Sublimation and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Michael Puri, 'Dandy, Interrupted: Sublimation, Repression, and Self-Portraiture in Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 60 (2007), 317-372; Michael Puri, 'Memory and Melancholy in the Epilogue of Ravel's "Valses Nobles Et Sentimentales"' *Music Analysis* 30 (2011), 272-308.

¹¹ Puri suggests that one such project might relate Ravel to Schumann: 'there is a distinct possibility that Schumann represented a model for Ravel as a composer, considering the latter's investment in such quintessentially Schumannian topics as dance, coquetry, masks, musical ciphers, humour, childhood and nostalgia.' Michael Puri, 'Memory and Melancholy in the Epilogue of Ravel's "Valses Nobles Et Sentimentales"', *Music Analysis* 30 (2011), 275.

¹² Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011).

¹³ Michael Puri, 'Adorno's Ravel' in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011) 63-82; Michael Puri, *Ravel the Decadent, Memory, Sublimation and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

In the same volume, Barbara Kelly interrogates Roland-Manuel's construction of Ravel as an artificialist, and traces the conception of Ravel's association with the aesthetics of imposture and artifice.¹⁴ Stephen Huebner investigates the influence of literary figures Edgar Allan Poe, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Léon-Paul Fargue, Tristan Klingsor and Henri de Regnier on Ravel, in an attempt to attribute the 'classical' traits of his neo-classicism to their aesthetic influence.¹⁵

Deborah Mawer's construction of Ravel as 'machinist' as well as her nuanced treatment of metaphorical signification in Ravel's music added to the aesthetic understanding in this thesis.¹⁶ Alexandra Kieffer's realist reading of 'La vallée des cloches' offered an alternative perspective to the representational or symbolist lens in which this work is customarily viewed.¹⁷ 'The Philosophy of Composition' by Edgar Allan Poe similarly contributed to the aesthetic understanding of Ravel's oeuvre and approach to composition, and is central to the arguments proposed in Chapter 2.¹⁸ Articles by Judd Hubert and Margaret Mein helped to provide an understanding of literary symbolism.¹⁹

It emerged that scholarship which pertains in particular to *Miroirs* exists frequently in the form of PhD, DMA and MA dissertations. Among those consulted was David Korevaar's dissertation of

¹⁴ Barbara Kelly, 'Re-presenting Ravel: Artificiality and the Aesthetics of Imposture' in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 41-62.

¹⁵ Stephen Huebner, 'Ravel's Poetics: Literary Currents, Classical Takes' in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 9-40.

¹⁶ Deborah Mawer, 'Musical objects and machines,' in Deborah Mawer (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Alexandra Kieffer, 'Bells and the Problem of Realism in Ravel's Early Piano Music', *The Journal of Musicology* 34 (2017), 432-472.

¹⁸ Edward H. Davidson, (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956).

¹⁹ Judd Hubert, 'Symbolism, Correspondance and Memory', *Yale French Studies* 9 (1952), 46-55; Margaret Mein, 'Baudelaire and Symbolism', *L'Esprit Créateur* 13 (1973), 154-165.

2000, ‘Ravel’s mirrors’, which is a frequently-cited work exploring the symbolist dimension of *Miroirs* through analysis.²⁰ Other dissertations investigated include those by Norma Pohl-Doris, Carla Dodek and Iwan Llewelyn-Jones.²¹

An investigation into the ability of music to represent extra-musical phenomena led to the consultation of texts by Suzanne Langer, Peter Kivy and James Hepokoski.²² These provided philosophical context relating to the aesthetics of music, music as symbol, and programme music. Further understanding of the description of music as metaphor was gleaned from the scholarship of Roger Scruton and Michael Spitzer.²³

Mine Doğantan-Dack documents, in a range of contexts, the uncharted waters she continues to navigate in the field of artistic research. Revealing new understandings about the role of the performer in performance-creation, her work has been particularly pertinent to this thesis because of her position as both pianist and scholar. Her articles and chapters relating to the phenomenology of artistic pianism – including exploration in the concepts of gesture, timbre and meaning-making – have often provided a means of articulation in this thesis.²⁴ Equally helpful has been Doğantan-

²⁰ David Korevaar, ‘Ravel’s mirrors’ (DMA dissertation, The Juilliard School New York, 2000).

²¹ Carla Marion Dodek, ‘Miroirs d’après Perlemuter: A Short Biography of Vlado Perlemuter with a Commentary on His Interpretation of Maurice Ravel’s “Miroirs”’ (DMA dissertation, Rice University, 1989); Norma Pohl Doris, ‘Gaspard de la nuit by Maurice Ravel: A theoretical and Performance Analysis’ (PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, 1978); Iwan Llewelyn-Jones, ‘Studies in pianistic sonority, nuance and expression: French performance practices in the piano works of Maurice Ravel’ (PhD dissertation, Cardiff University, 2016).

²² Peter Kivy, *New Essays on Musical Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 3rd edn, 1957); James Hepokoski, ‘Program Music’ in Stephen Downes (ed.), *Aesthetics of Music: Musicological Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²³ Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Mine Doğantan-Dack, ‘A Sketch for a Hermeneutical Phenomenology of the Piano’ in Mine Doğantan-Dack and John Dack (eds), *Music and Sonic Art: Theories and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018)

Dack's grasp and elucidation of the state and evolution of contemporary artistic research in relation to the textualist paradigm of the twentieth century. Doğantan-Dack also influenced the phenomenological methodology adopted in Chapter 4. John Rink contributed to the understanding of musical structure-as-process and music's time-dependency in this thesis.²⁵

A range of works not necessarily associated with the music of Ravel are also considered, particularly in the autoethnographic reflection of Chapter 5. These include the autobiography of Irish fiddle player Martin Hayes, *Small Steps Towards a Theory of the Visible* by John Berger, and a visiting exhibition to the National Gallery of Ireland, mostly of sculpture, by Alberto Giacometti.²⁶

Chapter 1 seeks to form an understanding of Ravel's character and personal relation to his art, and analyses the artistic movements and preoccupations which influenced Ravel in the conception of *Miroirs*. Chapter 2 examines more closely the particular influence of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition' on Ravel's aesthetic approach to *Miroirs*, and proposes the interval of a falling major/minor third as a possible 'refrain' which can be understood by the pianist in the context of Poe's treatise. Chapter 3 explores the concept of memory as an aspect of both decadent

45-58; Mine Doğantan-Dack, 'In the Beginning was Gesture: Piano Touch and the Phenomenology of the Performing Body' in Anthony Gritten and Elaine King (eds), *New Perspectives on Music and Gesture* (Surrey and Boston: Ashgate, 2011), 243–260; Mine Doğantan Dack, 'Senses and Sensibility: The Performer's Intentions Between the Page and the Stage', *Rivista di Analisi e Teoria Musicale* 1 (2021), 23-68.

²⁵ John Rink (ed.), *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); John Rink, 'The (F)utility of Performance Analysis', in Mine Doğantan-Dack (ed.), *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 127-148.

²⁶ Martin Hayes, *Shared Notes* (Dublin: Transworld Ireland, 2021); John Berger, *Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020); Alberto Giacometti, 'Giacometti: From Life', *National Gallery of Ireland*, Exhibition of bronze and plaster sculptures, paintings, drawings and prints, 9 April – 4 September 2022, [Visited on 5 June 2022].

and impressionist aesthetics, and conducts a Mnemoanalysis of ‘Alborada del gracioso’, investigating if this work can be interpreted through Michael Puri’s memory-analysis model. The operation of metaphor and its functioning for the pianist in gestural and sonic terms is explored in Chapter 4, which addresses the role of timbral conceptualisation in *Miroirs*. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this chapter then seeks to investigate the pianist’s lived experience of creating an interpretation, and the thought-processes involved therein. Chapter 5 provides an autoethnographic reflection on the nature of conducting artistic research in this area, and concludes by elucidating the emergent tenets of the research.

Chapter 1: A Personal and Aesthetic Portrait

This chapter seeks to form an understanding of Maurice Ravel's character and the cultural context in which *Miroirs* was conceived. It begins by considering Ravel's personal relation to his art and historical details relating to *Miroirs*' composition. It then investigates the complex web of aesthetic concepts associated with Ravel and turn-of-the-century French culture more broadly – Impressionism, Symbolism, Decadence and Melancholy – considering the perspectives of contemporary criticism in the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the conception of *Miroirs*.

1.1 Ravel: Personality and Perspective on Composer's Relation to his Art

If the possibility is considered that Ravel's personality is reflected in his music and compositional style, several sources suggest that a deep inner life existed beyond an inscrutable façade. The poet and fellow *apaches* member,¹ Tristan Klingsor,² wrote of him that 'he seemed mysterious because he was too reticent to show the passion there was in him deep down.'³ Also suggesting his emotional restraint and introspection Klingsor noted that 'if some new work had to be sight-read ... Ravel listened without moving. He was comparing, inwardly analysing and, while appearing to be idle, working and immersing himself ever more deeply in the magical, mathematical world of music.'⁴ Ricardo Viñes, Ravel's long-time collaborator, friend, and performer of many premieres

¹ 'In about 1902 ... Ravel became part of a group of literary, musical and artistic contemporaries known as [Les] Apaches, ("The Ruffians") ... who met regularly to share ideas on contemporary literature, music and art.' Barbara Kelly, 'Ravel, (Joseph) Maurice' in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.52145>> [Accessed 22 April 2022].

² Tristan Klingsor (real name Leon Leclerc) was a French poet, painter and composer. Ravel set three poems from his collection *Sherherezade* in 1903.

³ Tristan Klingsor, *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers* (Paris: Editions du Tambourinaire, 1939); quoted in Roger Nichols, *Ravel Remembered* (Cambridge: Faber and Faber, 1987), 13.

⁴ Klingsor, *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familier*; quoted in Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 14.

of his music (including *Miroirs*), recorded that ‘the real essence of the man has always seemed to me to resist definition, and that his complex, even contradictory character makes nonsense of attempts to classify it.’⁵

Several testaments provide insight into a man who was, beneath an aloof exterior, loving and affectionate, and that he favoured this quality of restrained or concealed emotion both in life and in art. According to Marguerite Long he often said that ‘one doesn’t have to open up one’s chest to prove one has a heart’⁶ and fellow *apaches* member, Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi wrote that ‘behind the cutting manner, irony and aloofness, there lurked an even greater capacity for affection.’⁷

Most endearingly, Ravel’s early biographer Alexis Roland-Manuel describes that

No pen can be expected to transmit the delightful spontaneity which lay at the heart of this little man of iron, who never truly revealed himself except to his intimate friends, and then not by effusions of which I have shown him to be incapable, but by sudden, unexpected confessions which manifested a candour and consciousness of self, free alike from vanity and falsity.⁸

Calvocoressi writes in *La Revue Musicale* about the danger of presenting Ravel in too narrow terms (delicate, imposture, artifice) which ‘tended to mask the very normal, classical, and especially

⁵ Ricardo Viñes, *La Revue Musicale* (December, 1938); quoted in Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 37.

⁶ Marguerite Long, *La Revue Musicale* (December, 1938); quoted in Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 161.

⁷ Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, *Musicians Gallery*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1933); quoted in Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 180.

⁸ Alexis Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel* transl. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dover, 1947); quoted in Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 196. Alexis Roland-Manuel was professor of aesthetics at the Paris Conservatoire, and lifelong disciple and biographer of *Ravel et son oeuvre* (Paris: Durand, 1925).

human character of Ravel.⁹ Roland-Manuel suggests that Ravel's own character can be demystified through the study of his work, writing that:

Ravel himself may remain an enigma, but his music, like his distinctive fingers, offers some clues to his personality: outwardly cloaked by self-control, his cool public persona in contrast to his emotional private self. His music mirrored his character, and, in the case of *Miroirs*, reflected the sympathetic personalities and inner lives of a group of friends who, in Fargue's words, "knew, day by day, what the others were thinking or doing."¹⁰

Barbara Kelly describes Ravel as having a more nuanced perspective on a composer's relation to his work, 'a position that neither excludes the creator nor regards the artwork as a reflection of the composer's character.'¹¹

1.2 *Miroirs*

Miroirs is a suite of five pieces for solo piano, written between 1904 and 1905, each dedicated to a member of the artist-group *les apaches*. 'Noctuelles' is dedicated to the poet Léon-Paul Fargue; 'Oiseaux tristes' is dedicated to the pianist Ricardo Viñes; 'Une barque sur l'océan' is dedicated to the painter and set-designer Paul Sordes; 'Alborada del gracioso' is dedicated to the music critic Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi; and 'La vallée des cloches' is dedicated to the composer and pianist Maurice Delage. The period during which Ravel worked on *Miroirs*, roughly a year from October 1904 to late 1905, appears to have been significant in Ravel's development, marking a transition in status from quasi-student to autonomous artist. Between 1900 and 1905 Ravel attempted five

⁹ Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, 'Ravel: un point d'histoire et point d'exégèse', *La Revue Musicale* (December, 1938); quoted in Barbara Kelly, 'Re-presenting Ravel' in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 49.

¹⁰ David Korevaar, 'Ravel's mirrors' (DMA dissertation, The Juilliard School New York, 2000), 50.

¹¹ Kelly, 'Re-presenting Ravel' in Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel*, 41.

times to win the Prix de Rome in what became known as the first ‘Affaire Ravel’.¹² He was unsuccessful each time except for winning third prize in 1901 for his cantata *Myrrha*.¹ On his last attempt in May 1905, he was ‘eliminated in the first round, having written a fugue containing parallel 5ths and ending with a chord containing a major 7th.’¹³ These failures are described by Barbara Kelly as indicating an ‘uneasy relationship with authority’ and that Ravel was ‘unable to conform to the expectations of the conservatoire despite his desire to succeed.’¹⁴ At this time, Ravel had already partially conceived of *Miroirs*, having performed ‘Oiseaux tristes’ for his fellow *apaches* (to mixed reception) in the previous October 1904.¹⁵ ‘Une barque sur l’océan’ was completed in May 1905, ‘Noctuelles’ in October 1905 and ‘Viñes found Ravel correcting the proofs of the whole set on Christmas Eve 1905.’¹⁶

Perhaps, more than any other composition by Ravel from this time (for example, the *Introduction and Allegro* or the *Sonatine*), *Miroirs* asserts a new direction for Ravel, where any remaining desire to conform is trumped by a confidence in his own creatively original instincts. Commenting on this creative shift, Ravel records that ‘*Miroirs* (1905) form a collection of pieces for piano which mark in my harmonic evolution a change considerable enough to have disconcerted those who were most accustomed, up to then, to my style.’¹⁷

¹² Kelly, ‘Ravel, (Joseph) Maurice’ in *Grove Music Online*. [Accessed 22 April 2022].

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ This took place on 11 October 1904. Ricardo Viñes claims he was the only one to have liked the piece on first hearing, and M. D. Calvo Coressi corroborates, stating it was the only piece of his to have ‘bewildered’ them: ‘He [Ravel] was rather disconcerted to find us indifferent to a piece into which he put so much of himself.’ M. D. Calvo Coressi *Musicians Gallery*, 66; quoted in Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2011), 59.

¹⁶ Nichols, *Ravel*, 71-72.

¹⁷ Maurice Ravel, ‘Esquisse autobiographique’, *La Revue musicale* (December, 1938); quoted in Manuel Cornejo, *L’intégrale: correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens, entretiens* (Paris: Le Passeur Éditeur, 2018), 1439.

Considering Kelly's description of Ravel's nuanced perspective on a composer's relation to their art, it is necessary to exercise a degree of circumspection when interpreting biographical details of Ravel's life at this time in relation to the conception of *Miroirs*. According to Roger Nichols, Ravel finished writing 'Une barque sur l'océan' in May 1905 and subsequently embarked on a cruise with friends on the yacht *Aimée* from 4-25 July 1905.¹⁸ In correspondence from this voyage Ravel records the following:

Yesterday excursion to Alkmaar. Cheesemarket with continual bell ringing. On the way one of the most magnificent sights. A lake surrounded by windmills. Over the fields, windmills to the horizons. Whichever way you look you see nothing but turning sails. In front of this mechanical landscape, you end up thinking you are an automaton too. So I hardly need to tell you that I am not concentrating on anything. But I'm storing it all away and I think all sorts of things will come out of this cruise.¹⁹

While it might be tempting to suggest that 'Une barque sur l'océan' was inspired by this trip, it appears that this was already conceived (in first-draft form at least).²⁰ The bell ringing could possibly have inspired 'La vallée des cloches', however. Similarly, it might be tempting to consider the crash of the *Tourbillon de la Mort* earlier in 1905 as potential basis to claim that darker themes are prevalent in *Miroirs*.²¹ As with the experience on the Cruise *Aimée* in June 1905, it is necessary to balance the notion that this encounter with death has any bearing on the content of *Miroirs* with Ravel's 'nuanced perspective on a composer's relation to his work'.²²

¹⁸ Nichols, *Ravel*, 392.

¹⁹ Ravel writing in a letter to Maurice Delage from his cruise on the *Aimée*; quoted in Nichols, *Ravel*, 66.

²⁰ Nichols, *Ravel*, 71-72.

²¹ From 1903, Ravel's brother Edouard, with the help of their father Joseph, were in the process of developing an automobile engine named *Le Tourbillon de la Mort*. This was first presented at the *Casino de Paris* on 22 March 1905 and caused a sensation. 'The car, driven by a Mlle Randal, made a complete somersault ten metres in the air', and the performance was described in *Le Figaro* as 'intrepid' and 'heroic'. The car disastrously crashed on 14 April 1905 and Mlle Randal was killed. This took place in the middle of the period in which Ravel worked on *Miroirs*. Nichols, *Ravel*, 70-71.

²² Kelly, 'Re-presenting Ravel' in Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel*, 41.

As a suite of pieces with programmatic titles unified by an umbrella title, *Miroirs* finds affinity in the *Images* of Debussy. As a more extended work of five pieces, however, *Miroirs* is the longest suite of solo piano music written by Ravel,²³ and is both harmonically and formally innovative. Despite this, *Miroirs* often appears only at the periphery of scholarship.

Musicological criticism in Ravel studies involves the exploration and understanding of a complex web of aesthetic concepts which connect Ravel to broader artistic movements; these include impressionism, symbolism, decadence, neo-classicism and modernism. Themes in Ravel scholarship which are extensions of, and common to, these artistic movements include artificiality and imposture, memory, melancholy, pastiche, irony, sublimation, desire, dandyism, grief, mourning, self-portraiture and the grotesque.

1.3 Impressionism

Impressionism is a ‘philosophical, aesthetic and polemical term borrowed from late 19th-century painting.’²⁴ Jann Passler cites the earliest description of the concept of impressionism in David Hume’s *Hume’s Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), ‘in which he describes an impression as the immediate effect of hearing, feeling or seeing on the mind.’²⁵ A new preoccupation with the interaction between subject and object took hold in the ideas of the French positivists of the 1860s and the painters of the 1870s.²⁶ Jules Castagnary, the critic who coined the

²³ Durations: *Gaspard de la nuit*: c. 20 minutes, *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*: c. 15 minutes, *Tombeau de Couperin*: c. 25 minutes, *Miroirs*: c. 27/28 minutes.

²⁴ Jann Pasler, ‘Impressionism’ in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.50026>> [Accessed 1 February Year 2022].

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* French positivists of the 1860s were philosophers Emile Littré and Hippolyte Taine, and among the French painters of the 1870s were Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and Alfred Sisley.

term impressionism, stated that impressionist painters ‘render not the landscape but the sensation produced by the landscape’.²⁷ Synthesising subject and object through an ‘impression’, these painters were not concerned as much with representing reality as the effect of an experience, opening up a new dialectic between subject and object, viewer and painting.²⁸ Where before, realist painting sought to portray reality faithfully, as it appeared, impressionism engages the viewer to stimulate their own experience. In this connection, ideas of temporality, memory, and the invocation of past experience are present.²⁹

Maurice Ravel’s compositional aesthetic has evaded precise and satisfactory definition in some part because of the confusing label impressionism. Roy Howat states that impressionism is a term of convenience which is here to stay, however ambiguous or functionally unhelpful it may be.³⁰ Howat seeks to shed light on how the ‘impressionism’ of late nineteenth century French painting can be applied to the contemporaneously composed music of Ravel and Debussy, and how this may be understood in a present-day context. Howat discusses ‘the exactitude of musical “impressionism”’, drawing compelling links between impressionist painters’ ‘new awareness of colour relationships, following discoveries about optics that showed how our perceptions are manipulated by juxtapositions of light and colour’ with the harmonic innovations of Debussy, Ravel and Fauré.³¹

²⁷ Jules Castagnary, in a review in *Le Siècle* (1874); quoted in Pasler, ‘Impressionism’ in *Grove Music Online*. [Accessed 1 February Year 2022].

²⁸ Pasler, ‘Impressionism’ in *Grove Music Online*. [Accessed 1 February Year 2022].

²⁹ See Chapter 3, 55.

³⁰ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Writing almost a century earlier in 1927, Edward Burlingame Hill emphasises the impressionist notion of creating ‘atmosphere’, and notes that ‘in respect to musical impressionism Debussy was the pioneer and Ravel the follower’.³² He states that Debussy and Ravel enlarged upon Erik Satie’s use of harmonic combinations for the purposes of obtaining a specific ‘atmosphere’.³³ Burlingame Hill stresses that although Debussy, Satie and Ravel all explored harmonic combinations to create atmosphere, Ravel maintained harmonic independence to Debussy, and his manner of resolving structural problems was also distinct from that of Debussy.³⁴ Broadly considered pianistically as a revolutionary work, Nichols holds that Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* ‘must be regarded as the key work for the “Impressionist” school of French piano writers.’³⁵ Ravel remarked that *Jeux d’eau* was ‘the starting point of all the pianistic novelties that have been remarked on in [his] output,’³⁶ and also commented that when *Jeux d’eau* was published Debussy had only written three pieces for piano (*Pour le piano*), which ‘from the pianistic standpoint ... says nothing really new.’³⁷ Ravel refers here to his treatment of the piano in terms of sonority, which marries the singing quality of Chopin with a music-box percussive treatment of the piano, with much sustained pedal.

Hume’s definition of an impression as an immediate effect on the senses (1748), and Castagnary’s description of impressionism as portraying the sensation produced by the landscape (1874) grants a quality of ‘evocation’, of ‘summoning’, and of ‘capturing’ to art termed ‘impressionist’. Burlingame Hill’s description of impressionism as using ‘specific harmonic combinations to create

³² Edward Burlingame Hill, ‘Maurice Ravel’, *The Musical Quarterly* 13 (1927), 135.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2011), 41.

³⁶ Maurice Ravel, ‘Esquisse autobiographique’, *La Revue musicale* (December, 1938); quoted in Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2011), 41.

³⁷ Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader* (New York: Columbia, 1990) letter 29; quoted in Nichols, *Ravel* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2011), 41.

atmosphere’ considers colour combinations as analogous to harmonic combinations, and colour and harmony as the materials of these art forms. With regard to *Miroirs* and impressionism, the visual depictions of the titles, at least in the first three, – moths, sad birds, a boat on the ocean – could be said to imply ‘impressionist’ subjects. In terms of expressive direction in the score, however, there is not much else to indicate a singularly ‘impressionist’ ideal.³⁸

1.4 Symbolism

*‘Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.’*³⁹

Ravel’s aesthetic has been widely connected to ideas of French literary symbolism. Symbolism was a dominant poetic trend in the second half of nineteenth-century-France, led principally by poets Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé. Debussy and Ravel were admirers of symbolist poetry and both produced musical settings of three poems by Stéphane Mallarmé in 1913, with two of these three poem-settings employing the same poems. Ravel deemed Mallarmé the supreme French poet, and of his poetry he said ‘it’s not so much about the exact significance of the words, but their tangible shimmering which guides you; that which suggests the play of light, the colour of precious stones...’⁴⁰ Ravel’s creative process has also been described in poetic terms. Carrine Perret states that Ravel was ‘incontestably a musician-poet ... Ravel pursues expressive intentions in the poetic lineage.’⁴¹ Ravel also used poetry as thematic inspiration in works for piano such as *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Perret’s suggestion is deeper, however, than simply a musician

³⁸ The term ‘lointain’ appears in ‘Noctuelles’ and ‘La vallée des cloches’ and implies a spatial dimension, which is also frequently deployed by Debussy.

³⁹ ‘Perfumes, sounds, and colours correspond.’ Charles Baudelaire, ‘Correspondances’, *Les fleurs du mal* <<https://fleursdumal.org/poem/103>> [Accessed 15 June 2022].

⁴⁰ Maurice Ravel, ‘Ravel Shows Mastery Leading Symphony’, *The San Francisco Examiner*, 4 February 1928; quoted in Manuel Cornejo (ed.), *L'intégrale: Correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens* (Paris: Le Passer Éditeur, 2018), 1523.

⁴¹ Carine Perret, ‘Le Romantisme Ravélien, Un Héritage Choisi’, *Musurgia*, 13 (2006), 18 (translation mine).

borrowing words to set to music. She implies that Ravel's artistic process can be compared to that of a poet; that his artistic intentions are poetic in nature.

It has been suggested that it was Charles Baudelaire's poem *Correspondances* which anticipated, in particular, much of French Symbolist Poetry (and indeed much of Modern French poetry).⁴²

Correspondances fuses sensory imagery, unifying disparate sensations. Margaret Mein writes that

Baudelaire is mainly preoccupied with the passage from one sense perception to another but the *correspondances* between the concrete and the abstract, the sensual and the spiritual (*la symbolique*), also absorb him. In his poetry, symbolism takes on a threefold dimension, as the poet establishes links between concepts, feelings and things. The sensorial is often coupled with an abstraction, to their mutual enhancement.⁴³

Writing about Baudelaire's *Je n'ai pas oublié, voisine de la ville*, Judd Hubert also identifies a three-dimensional symbolism, here between space, time and feeling. 'Baudelaire recaptures the past by transforming it into a painting, and, as in many paintings, he focuses our attention on a mythical center, in space, time and feeling.'⁴⁴ This poem deals with the recreation of the past as memory, its transformation and idealisation in the present.

Although Ravel sought to distance himself from the 'symbolism of Debussy' later in life,⁴⁵

Deborah Mawer writes that the titles in *Miroirs* suggest 'symbolist *correspondances* and

⁴² Margaret Mein, 'Baudelaire and Symbolism', *L'Esprit Créateur* 13 (1973), 163.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

⁴⁴ Judd Hubert, 'Symbolism, Correspondance and Memory', *Yale French Studies* 9 (1952), 55.

⁴⁵ 'Nevertheless, I think that I have always personally followed a direction opposite to that of the symbolism of Debussy.' Maurice Ravel, 'Musique Contemporaine', lecture delivered at the Scottish Rite Cathedral Houston, USA, 7 April 1928; quoted in Manuel Cornejo (ed.), *L'intégrale: Correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens* (Paris: Le Passeur Éditeur, 2018), 1434.

ambiguities between the aural and the visual, between supposed reality and reflected simulation, between external and internal.’⁴⁶ Mawer is suggesting that it is possible to discuss *Miroirs* within the aesthetics of symbolism. Similarly, David Korevaar uses Ravel’s reference to Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar to interpret *Miroirs* in symbolist terms, as a work which moves beyond ‘scene painting’, but which provides portraits of the five dedicatees of *Miroirs*, and a self-portrait of Ravel himself.⁴⁷

The title *Miroirs* ... has authorized my critics to consider this collection as being among those works which belong to the impressionist movement. I do not contradict this at all, if one understands the term by analogy. A rather fleeting analogy, moreover, since impressionism does not seem to have any precise meaning outside the domain of painting. In any case, the word ‘mirror’ should not lead one to assume that I want to affirm a subjectivistic theory of art. A sentence by Shakespeare helped me to formulate a completely opposite position: ... ‘the eye sees not itself But by reflection, by some other things.’ (*Julius Caesar*, act 1, scene 2).⁴⁸

Korevaar draws further symbolist reading from *Miroirs* in the form of number symbolism. Howat notes that Ricardo Viñes was a ‘known numeromaniac’ and there was a general ‘symbolist preoccupation with numbers and parascience.’⁴⁹ Korevaar uses the close friendship between Ravel and Viñes to make statements about the literary, the occult and number-symbolism, and identifies the number five as particularly important.⁵⁰ Howat affirms this symbolist connection, stating that ‘one of the central symbols to all esoterica is the pentagram or five-pointed star, whose most basic geometric property is that its lines all intersect at their two points of golden section.’⁵¹

⁴⁶ Deborah Mawer, ‘Musical objects and machines,’ in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 50.

⁴⁷ Korevaar, ‘Ravel’s mirrors’, 175.

⁴⁸ Maurice Ravel; quoted in Roland Manuel, ‘Une Esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel’, *La Revue Musicale* (December 1938), in Arbie Orenstein, (ed.), *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews* (New York & Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1990), 35.

⁴⁹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 59.

⁵⁰ Korevaar, ‘Ravel’s mirrors’.

⁵¹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 59.

Here, it is worth noting that there are varying interpretations of ‘symbolist’ in operation: the poetic symbolism of Baudelaire understood in a contemporary context by scholars such as Hubert and Mein; the musical ‘symbolism of Debussy’ to which Ravel refers; and various symbolisms, for example, number symbolism, explored by David Korevaar in his PhD thesis ‘Ravel’s mirrors’. All imply a text which bears the potential for diverse readings and multi-layered ‘meanings’. The difficulty with music is that its abstract nature hinders any one ‘meaning’ from being reached. Mawer connects the suggestiveness of literary symbolism through reference to Baudelaire’s *Correspondances* to the ambiguous suggestiveness of *Miroirs*’ titles. She is clear, however, that although the aesthetic of symbolist poetry and music might be compared, their materials are fundamentally different; music can never imply the same meaning as language. In this sense, it is possible to understand music as metaphor. Mawer acknowledges that dealing with music as distinct from other artistic disciplines considers music as metaphor. The essence of the materials of music when compared to painting, sculpture and poetry are different, in that a further metaphorical layer is adopted in order to discuss its content.

In formulating a definition of Ravel’s “l’objet juste”, we must accept that in music, as distinct, say, from sculpture, we are already adopting a metaphor (or perhaps extending the symbolist concept of *correspondances*) - at least, apart from the score, we are not dealing with physical objects.⁵²

Roger Scruton, too, regards music’s essential state as that of metaphor.

there are contexts in which metaphors seem indispensable, not merely because they are part of some unique literary experience ... but because we are using them to describe something other than the material world; in particular because we are attempting to describe how the world seems, from the point of view of the active imagination ... The indispensable metaphor occurs when the way the world seems depends upon an

⁵² Mawer, ‘Musical objects and machines’, 48.

imaginative involvement with it, rather than our ordinary cognitive goals. And this is the case when we listen to music.⁵³

Scruton proceeds to claim that metaphor cannot be separated from the description of music because ‘it defines the intentional object of the musical experience. Take the metaphor away, and you cease to describe the experience of music.’⁵⁴ To this end, considering music’s essential state as that of metaphor, and the aesthetic of *Miroirs* as that of symbolist creates a two-layer metaphorical frame. The consideration of music as metaphor is pertinent in the context of *Miroirs* because it allows for diverse interpretations within the aesthetics of symbolism. In this connection, Mawer writes that ‘any [symbolist] associations that arise are culturally and temporally defined and result in multiple interpretations depending on the experience of composer, performer and listener.’⁵⁵ The symbolist dimension is not fixed, but dependent on the imagination of performer and listener.

1.5 Decadence

The aesthetics of decadence in relation to Ravel’s output, and the convergence of several aspects of decadence – memory, desire, sublimation and dandyism – have been explored by Michael Puri. Puri appears to derive his aesthetic reading of Ravel in part from Theodor Adorno’s criticism on Ravel. For Adorno, Ravel renounces putative ‘bourgeois’ features of art, which are; ‘unmediated expressivity, sincerity, creativity, originality, organicism, interiority and depth, all hallmarks of the romantic “form-giving personality”’, and is consequently enabled to access new depths and truths in art ‘embracing the essential falsity of art and valorizing the surface over the interior.’⁵⁶ Puri describes Adorno’s core understanding of the aesthetics of Ravel’s music as ‘aristocratic

⁵³ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91-92.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁵ Mawer, ‘Musical objects and machines’, 50.

⁵⁶ Michael Puri ‘Adorno’s Ravel’ in Kaminsky, (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel*, 65.

sublimation of mourning’, and describes sublimation in this context as ‘the transformation and externalization of a negative emotion felt deeply by the artist into a more positive affect represented in the artwork, as well as the gain in poise and beauty that such a transformation entails.’⁵⁷ Through this understanding, real-life experience, such as mourning, is sublimated into the creation of a work of art, and a form of catharsis is implied through this ‘gain in poise’.⁵⁸

Decadent aesthetics also imply that the artist’s life becomes part of his/her art.⁵⁹ Marguerite Long records that Ravel ‘was something of a dandy, anxious to follow fashion or even to set it. He dressed very carefully and had a penchant for nice ties, the choice of which was often the subject of endless discussion’.⁶⁰ Puri too describes Ravel as dandy, comparing him to the character Esseintes from Joris-Karl Huysmann’s *À rebours*, a novel liked by both Ravel and Viñes.⁶¹ Esseintes leads a life of sensuality and indulgence, devoid of moral responsibility, and experiments with finding correspondence between the senses, sound and colour, and also celebrates the symbolist poet Mallarmé.⁶² The act of capturing friends in musical-portrait-form in *Miroirs* could be considered as dandy, where life becomes art, and vice-versa. For Puri, the idealisation of the past as memory is a significant aspect of decadence, and Puri draws comparisons between Ravel and Proust as contemporaries, and notes Baudelaire’s influence also.⁶³

⁵⁷ Puri, ‘Adorno’s Ravel’ in Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel*, 66.

⁵⁸ It is unclear whether this means that the life-suffering is in fact present in the work of art, or that the suffering provides the impetus to create a work of art, but is not present therein.

⁵⁹ Melvyn Bragg, (presenter) with Neil Sammells, Kate Hext and Alex Murray, ‘The Decadent Movement’, *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4, (18 November 2021), produced by Simon Tillotson
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0011lrn>>

⁶⁰ Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Ravel* (London, 1973) quoted in Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 31.

⁶¹ Michael Puri, *Ravel the Decadent, Memory, Sublimation and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

⁶² Barbara Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 98/99.

⁶³ See Chapter 3, 55.

1.6 Poetics of Melancholy & Death

The theme of melancholy appears frequently in Ravel scholarship as a strand relating to the aesthetics of impressionism, decadence and symbolism. Melancholy is the present state in which the subject is left through the idealisation of the past, in both Puri and John Berger's aesthetics.⁶⁴ Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe considers 'melancholic beauty' to be the most poetical of tones, and Ravel was deeply influenced by Poe's treatise 'The Philosophy of Composition'.⁶⁵ An extension of the theme of melancholy, or perhaps melancholy in its realist state, is the theme of death. While it is arguably unorthodox to associate Ravel with the theme of death, several indicators suggest the presence of this dark theme. Jillian Rogers reads *Le tombeau de Couperin* as a work of mourning, composed for Marguerite Long in an attempt to assist her mourning the loss of her husband in World War I.⁶⁶ Considering the titles and inspiration of Ravel's other works such as *Gaspard de la nuit*, *Pavane pour une infante Défunte* and *Une grande sommeil noir*, a preoccupation with darker themes seems to be consistently present. It could be argued that the theme of death only presents itself in Ravel's work in the post-war period; however, Roger Nichols provides a suggestion that it manifested early, and remained with Ravel throughout his life.

For Ravel, the search lay not so much beyond him as within him, in finding new and more accurate means of expression for preoccupations which formed themselves and which were not to change in essence after this year of 1908: fairy-tales, visual images, deep depression, sardonic humour, exotic fantasy, formal precision, almost-vulgar high spirits and, the last to break through the barrier of his *pudeur*, an increasing awareness of evil and the realisation that 'in the midst of life we are in death.'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See Chapter 3, 55.

⁶⁵ See Chapter 2, 'Shared Principles: Poe & Ravel', 37.

⁶⁶ Jillian Rogers, 'Mourning at the Piano: Marguerite Long, Maurice Ravel, and the Performance of Grief in Interwar France', *Transposition: Musique et Sciences Sociales* 4 (2014), [Accessed 2 June 2022].

⁶⁷ Nichols, *Ravel*, 98.

In keeping with testament to Ravel's private and inscrutable nature, Helene Jourdan-Morhange noted that Ravel 'never spoke of death and was afraid of it.'⁶⁸ Nichols suggests that Ravel's sometimes timid demeanor actually concealed a tortured soul.⁶⁹

1.7 Conclusion

For several reasons the musical content, meaning or 'truth' of *Miroirs*, as is possible to glean through scholarship and biography, remains substantially elusive – and this may be intentional. Several testaments paint Ravel as an inscrutable character who was in fact loving and affectionate. This does not wholly chime with Puri's connection to the character Esseintes from Huysman's *À rebours*, who leads a life 'devoid of moral responsibility'. Adorno's construction of Ravel's aesthetic as 'the aristocratic sublimation of mourning', however, is supported both by Nichols' and Jourdan-Morhange's claims that Ravel was preoccupied with, but afraid of, death. The association of *Jeux d'eau* with impressionism, and Ravel's self-confessed wish to move beyond this, coupled with the striking harmonic innovation in *Miroirs* suggest that the aesthetics of impressionism, however ambiguous and polemical, are insufficient in describing *Miroirs*. However, Mawer, Korevaar and Howat contribute to the convincing case that *Miroirs* finds apt description in the aesthetics of symbolism. Through portraiture, self-portraiture, number symbolism, and reference to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, it seems possible Ravel was playing with referential ideas of meaning and layers of signification within *Miroirs*. While it can be accepted that although the symbolic dimension of music is plural, and subject to the interpretation of performer and listener, an understanding of the aesthetics of symbolism is helpful to the performer. An understanding of

⁶⁸ Hélène Jourdan Morhange, *Ravel et Nous* (Paris: Editions du milieu de monde, 1945), 45; quoted in Nichols, *Ravel*, 348.

⁶⁹ Nichols, *Ravel*, 348.

Baudelaire's fusion of the 'sensual and the spiritual', or that the sensorial is often coupled with an abstraction, creates a two-layer metaphorical/symbolist frame. In this reading, the pianist can relate to *Miroirs* on two levels, adopting both a sensory metaphor, and a deeper, symbolic abstraction. This symbolic abstraction may be influenced by Ravel's preoccupation with darker themes or fear of death. For example, 'Oiseaux tristes' can on one level evoke the naturalism of bird-song, while also expressing an existentialist melancholy.

Chapter 2: Maurice Ravel and ‘The Philosophy of Composition’

‘Les bonnes larmes ne nous sont pas tirées par une page triste mais par le miracle d’un mot bien mis à sa place.’¹

This chapter explores Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ and its possible influence on Maurice Ravel’s compositional process generally, with interpretative implications addressed in *Miroirs* specifically. The chapter begins by considering the tenets of Poe’s treatise in relation to *Miroirs*, blending ideas of aesthetic influence with contemporary Ravel scholarship. It then proposes the falling major/minor third as a symbolic ‘refrain’ of *Miroirs*, contextualising this idea in relation to Poe’s refrain in *The Raven*, and Deborah Mawer’s construction of Ravel as ‘machinist.’

2.1 Ravel, Poe & ‘The Philosophy of Composition’

It has been well established that Ravel was strongly influenced by American poet, essayist and novelist, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). Letters of correspondence, interviews, Ravel’s own writings and transcriptions of lectures given by Ravel provide evidence of his admiration of and affinity with Poe’s aesthetic aims. Ravel claimed that Poe was his third teacher, after his composition teachers Gabriel Fauré and André Gedalge.²

¹ Jean Cocteau quoted in Renée Bouveresse, *L’expérience esthétique* (Paris: Armand Colin-Masson, 1998), 34. ‘Good tears are not drawn by a sad page but by the miracle of a well-placed word.’ Quoted also by Nadia Boulanger in the documentary ‘Mademoiselle’, < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdiBa9HhjZ0>> [Accessed 10 June 2022]. This quotation puts in mind the technically rigorous means employed by Ravel for higher aesthetic aims, emphasising the affective impact of good craftsmanship.

² Jessie Fillerup, ‘Ravel, “La Valse”, and the Purloined Plot’, *College Music Symposium*, 49/50 (2009), 345.

The aesthetics of Edgar Allan Poe, your great American, was of singular importance to me as well as the immaterial poetry of Mallarmé - limitless visions but of precise drawing, enclosed in a mystery of dark abstraction, an art where all the elements are so intimately linked that one cannot analyse its effects but only perceive them.³

There are many examples in which Ravel states that art should be balanced between the emotional and the intellectual, and that he learned this specifically from Poe. In an interview with political journalist Andrés Revesz published on 1 May 1924, Ravel is quoted as having said

Sincerity is the worst default in art, art must correct the faults of nature. Art is a beautiful lie. The most interesting thing in art is to overcome difficulties. My master in composition is Edgar Allan Poe through the analysis of his marvelous poem *The Raven*. He taught me that true art is found between intellectualism and emotion.⁴

Although critics have found great variety of quality among the works of Poe, it has been suggested that a large part of his achievement was through his influence on other literary movements, notably on French Symbolism, as a result of the excellent translations of his work by Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry. ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, written in 1846, is an essay by Edgar Allan Poe outlining the precise and methodical process he underwent to compose his poem *The Raven*. Poe describes how he conceived of *The Raven* consciously and intentionally in terms of form, tone, sonority and length. He claims that no aspect of the poem was wrought by chance or stroke of inspiration, but calculated through a series of deliberate decisions.

³ Maurice Ravel, ‘*Musique Contemporaine*’, lecture delivered at the Scottish Rite Cathedral Houston, USA, 7 April 1928; quoted in Manuel Cornejo (ed.), *L'intégrale: Correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens* (Paris: Le Passeur Éditeur, 2018), 1434. Ravel’s description of Poe’s aesthetic influence recalls the *Correspondances* of Baudelaire. His admiration for the ‘precise drawing’ of Mallarmé that creates ‘dark abstraction’ suggests the multi-layer metaphor of symbolism.

⁴ Andrés Revesz, ‘El gran músico Maurice Ravel habla de su arte’, ABC (Madrid) 1 May 1924, transl. from Spanish to French by Manuel Cornejo; quoted in Cornejo (ed.), *L'intégrale*, 1492.

It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition — that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.⁵

It is worth noting some literary figures, T. S. Eliot included, did not believe that Poe wrote *The Raven* in the way that he described, stating that ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ was merely an original creative writing exercise.⁶ This is important to a degree, but does not change the fact that many times in his life Ravel stated he was strongly influenced by this work. What is of value is Ravel’s interpretation of Poe’s principles of writing poetry, and its translation into principles of the composition of music. In an article published in 1931 in *La Petite Gironde* Ravel writes ‘the most beautiful treatise on composition ... the biggest influence on me is his “Philosophy of Composition”. Mallarmé may have pretended that it was only a mystification; I remain convinced that Edgar Poe has composed his poem ‘The Raven’ as he indicated.’⁷ Stephen Huebner suggests that Ravel follows more the aesthetic of ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ than the actual process, and further suggests that this may be because of ‘the perennial difficulties involved in analogies between music and language’.⁸ It is worth noting also that Ravel would have read Baudelaire’s French translation of Poe, and Ravel stated that ‘Poe was luckiest to have Baudelaire as his translator.’⁹ This applies to both ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ which Ravel viewed as an instructional treatise, and to the poetry by Poe he admired. Huebner notes that in Baudelaire’s preface to his translation of ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, Baudelaire asserts that ‘accidents

⁵ Edward H. Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), 454.

⁶ Jerome McGann, *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe: Alien Angel* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 70.

⁷ Maurice Ravel, ‘Mes souvenirs d’enfant parresseux,’ *La Petite Gironde* 1931; quoted in Cornejo (ed.), *L’intégrale*, 1444.

⁸ Stephen Huebner, ‘Ravel’s Poetics: Literary Currents, Classical Takes’ in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 17.

⁹ Maurice Ravel, ‘Ravel Shows Mastery Leading Symphony’, *The San Francisco Examiner*, 4 February 1928; quoted in Cornejo (ed.), *L’intégrale*, 1523.

and the irrational were [Poe's] two great enemies.'¹⁰ Baudelaire's translation may have provided a certain emphasis, but it is beyond the scope of this work to explore this idea.

2.2 Shared Principles: Poe & Ravel

The methodical, technically fastidious nature of both Poe and Ravel's processes is often emphasised. Poe addresses structural questions of form and versification in *The Raven*, stating that his 'first object ... was originality'.¹¹ He uses a combination of octametre acatalectic and heptametre catalectic metres, and various combinations of trochees in each line, stating that none of the individual lines of the poem are original in themselves, but they have never been combined to form a stanza.¹²

The fact is that originality (unless in minds of very unusual force) is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition. In general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought, and although a positive merit of the highest class, demands in its attainment less of invention than negation.¹³

This quotation conveys a method of chiselling an idea down to its most pure form, eliminating extraneous material. In a lecture at the Rice Institute in April 1928, Ravel describes his process:

I may be ... occupied for several years without writing a single note of the work – after writing goes relatively rapidly; but there is still much time to be spent in eliminating everything that might be regarded as superfluous, in order to realise as completely as possible the longed-for final clarity. Then comes the time when new conceptions have to be formulated for further composition, but these cannot be forced artificially, for they come only of their own free will, and often originate in some very remote perception, without manifesting themselves until long years after.¹⁴

¹⁰ Stephen Huebner, 'Ravel's Poetics: Literary Currents, Classical Takes' in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 17.

¹¹ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 459.

¹² *Ibid.*, 460.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Maurice Ravel, 'Musique Contemporaine', lecture delivered at the Scottish Rite Cathedral, Houston, USA, 7 April 1928; quoted in Arbie Orenstein, 'Maurice Ravel's Creative Process', *The Musical Quarterly*, 53 (1967), 468.

Ravel perhaps identified with, or was inspired by, Poe's meticulous process of negation.

In 'The Philosophy of Composition', after Poe describes how he has reached the decision that he would compose a poem and not a short-story/novel/prose, and this poem should 'at once suit the critical and popular taste', he begins with a discussion on the question of length and what he describes as creating a Unity of Effect.¹⁵ He considers what the ideal length of a poem, and a piece of art in general, should be, stating that a poem should 'intensely excite, by elevating the soul', and all such 'intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief.'¹⁶ He states that longer works of art, such as Milton's 'Paradise Lost', are successions of 'poetical excitements interspersed ... with corresponding depressions', and suggests the length here ultimately weakens the 'totality' or 'unity of effect', as the reader does not experience the entire work of art in one sitting.¹⁷ He concludes the discussion of length by stating that a poem of about hundred lines (the Raven is a hundred and eight lines) is the proper length. Arbie Orenstein writes that

Ravel's art was not that of the sweeping fresco painter, but rather that of a miniaturist, who could, on occasion, convincingly fill a large canvas. Even when the canvas was large, however, it consisted of small brushstrokes expertly placed side by side.¹⁸

The suites for solo piano *Gaspard de la Nuit*, *Tombeau de Couperin* and *Miroirs* are all collections of shorter works, the individual pieces of which could be said to have a considered Unity of Effect. Debussy was also influenced by Poe, and Roy Howat suggests that 'Reflets dans l'eau' (*Images*, I) was written with Poe's essay in mind.¹⁹ He refers to Poe's initial decision that the optimum length of a poem should be about a hundred lines, and compares it to 'Reflets dans l'eau' (*Images*, I)

¹⁵ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 455.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Arbie Orenstein, 'Maurice Ravel's Creative Process', *The Musical Quarterly*, 53 (1967), 475.

¹⁹ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 56.

which has ninety-four bars, commenting that this ‘sits nicely’.²⁰ While Debussy could very possibly have used Poe’s model when composing ‘Reflets dans l’eau’ (*Images*, I), it is important to consider the material differences between experiencing or absorbing a musical performance compared with reading a poem. It is difficult to compare the number of lines written by a poet and the number of bars written by a composer, considering music’s time-dependency (this may be an example of the difficulty in language-music comparisons to which Huebner refers). Poe’s conception of a Unity of Effect might be described as the duration with respect to experiencing a work of art in a unified manner. This invites consideration as to whether *Miroirs* was conceived as a work to be performed in full, with an over-arching Unity of Effect, or whether each of the movements can be performed individually, evoking a distinct Unity of Effect. Howat’s comparison with Debussy’s ‘Reflets dans l’eau’ (*Images*, I) would suggest the latter.

Poe considers the impression he wants to transmit to the reader when composing *The Raven*, stating that ‘beauty is the sole province of the poem.’²¹ He defines beauty as ‘that intense and pure elevation of the soul’, and states that this effect is best produced through the form of a poem. He believes that the pleasure experienced through the contemplation of the beautiful is ‘most pure’.²² He explains that the satisfaction of the intellect or ‘object truth’, and the excitement of the heart or ‘object passion’ are effects better produced by prose, but that beauty is best expressed through the medium of poetry.²³ He states that truth and passion may be introduced in the poem to serve as contrast, ‘as do discords in music’ but the essence and atmosphere of the poem should be one of

²⁰ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 56. A deeper analysis of Debussy’s compositional process appears in Howat’s *Debussy in Proportion* (New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²¹ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 456.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

beauty.²⁴ Poe resolves that the most supreme manifestation of beauty is in sadness, and that ‘melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all poetical tones.’²⁵ He has deduced that the impression he intends for his poem to transmit to the reader is therefore one of melancholic beauty. Writing about his appreciation of the piece *Mélancolie* by Chabrier, Ravel wrote that it reminded him of Manet’s *Olympia*, stating that they both shared the same melancholy tone, simply transposed to different media, and also notes that *Olympia* ‘gave his adolescence one of its most beautiful emotions.’²⁶ Across his oeuvre, Ravel has consistently sought to convey tones of ‘melancholic beauty’. ‘Ondine’ from *Gaspard de la nuit* and *Pavane pour un Infante Défunte* are notable examples. Less obvious are the pieces in the *Miroirs* suite, though each could be said to have a tone of melancholic beauty. Puri writes that ‘Oiseaux tristes’ ‘juxtaposes two contrasting principles throughout: the sprightly innocence of birdsong and the brooding melancholy of its human auditor, as laid out in the schema of its opening measures.’²⁷

In ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ Poe decides that the Raven will answer the queries of the lover with the word ‘nevermore’ and these queries would become less and less ‘commonplace’, resulting in the climax which should ‘involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair.’²⁸ He details the verse he wrote first, the climactic verse, in which the lover asks the Raven if he will ever see his ‘sainted maiden named Lenore’ again, to which the Raven must reply ‘nevermore’. Poe, thus, has created the ending of his poem first, and takes this as his starting point.²⁹ It is possible

²⁴ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 456.

²⁵ This is an example of a point in his essay where, although Poe set out to deliver a treatise of his composition that was ‘mathematical’, his logic becomes subjective, and the reader is asked to adopt his interpretation of the word ‘beauty’, and accept his proposition that ‘melancholy is its highest manifestation.’

²⁶ Maurice Ravel, ‘Mes souvenirs d’enfant paresseux’, *La Petite Gironde* (1931) ; quoted in Cornejo (ed.), *L’intégrale*, 1444.

²⁷ Michael Puri, *Ravel the Decadent, Memory, Sublimation and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

²⁸ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 459.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

that Ravel adopted this principle of ‘beginning at the end’ during the composition of ‘La vallée des cloches’. Alexandra Kieffer notes that Ravel once told a student that the final chord of ‘La vallée des cloches’ was his rendering of the peal of the Savoyarde bell in the Basilica of the Sacré-Coeur, Montmartre.³⁰ ‘The pitches in Ravel’s chord are, in fact, an uncanny rendering of the pitches of the Savoyarde, down to the ascending grace notes evoking the physical striking of the bell’³¹ (example 2.0). Kieffer also suggests that, because of their register, the opening G# octaves of ‘La vallée des cloches’ are too high to invoke a church bell. Kieffer proposes that the G# octaves could be ‘resonating upper-partial of another bell’, and the entry of the pentatonic quartal harmony in bar three, and the parallel fourths of bars four and five, complete the soundscape of the resonance of a single bell (example 2.1).

Example 2.0: Ravel, ‘La vallée des cloches’, bars 52-54.

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³⁰ Henriette Fauré, *Mon maître Maurice Ravel: son oeuvre, son enseignement, souvenirs et légendes* (Paris: Les Editions ATP, 1978), 78; quoted in Alexandra Kieffer, ‘Bells and the Problem of Realism in Ravel’s Early Piano Music’, *The Journal of Musicology* 34 (2017), 461. See also Deborah Mawer, ‘Musical objects and machines,’ in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 50.

³¹ Kieffer, ‘Bells and the Problem of Realism’, 461-462.

Example 2.1: Ravel, 'La vallée des cloches', bars 1-3.

The musical score for Ravel's 'La vallée des cloches', bars 1-3, is presented in two staves. The top staff is for the right hand (m.d.) and the bottom staff is for the left hand (m.g.). The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'Tres lent.' with a quarter note equal to 50 beats per minute. The dynamic is 'pp' (pianissimo). The right hand part begins with a series of chords in the upper register, while the left hand part plays a more melodic line. The instruction 'très doux et sans accentuation' is written above the right hand part.

The idea of the opening octaves as upper-partials of tones that have been already initiated can provide the pianist with a conceptual space in which to create the sounds of the beginning of the piece. This reading prompts the pianist to imagine a sound already ringing, and initiate the opening octaves 'inside' this sound.³²

While the fact that the rendering of the bells as sonically realistic is significant, it is important to note that this still renders the Savoyarde bell as a symbol, owing to music's essential metaphorical state.³³ Kieffer's study in sonic realism can, however, assist the performer in their construction of 'La vallée des cloches' within the aesthetics of symbolism.

The consideration of the final chord of the piece as the Savoyarde bell also has a temporal implication in relation to all five pieces in *Miroirs*. The performer might consider, for instance, the

³² For a discussion on sound conceptualisation see Chapter 4, 76.

³³ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91.

lives of *Miroirs*' five dedicatees, and Ravel's own life, and perhaps the religiously symbolic significance of a bell knelling their ultimate conclusion. In this existentialist reading, the performer might strive for the emotional depth of a late Brahms intermezzo, or a late Beethoven sonata in 'La vallée des cloches'. The critic Jean Marnold believed that Ravel was in fact concerned with the works of 'late, last period Beethoven' during the composition of *Miroirs*.

Coming after the picturesqueness of *Jeux d'eau*, the romantic grace of the Quartet and the sparkling exoticism of 'Asie', the *Miroirs* make a very similar impact to the sudden revelation of Kreisleriana in the work of Schumann ... I have been assured ... that at the very moment of their gestation ... [Ravel] was, by his own admission, passionately absorbed in the works of Beethoven, the late, last-period Beethoven.³⁴

Poe discusses in detail how he deliberately created two further stanzas at the end of the poem to bridge the poem's overall meaning and impact into that of the unreal and metaphorical. He states that the bird learned the word 'nevermore' by rote, and so up until the point where the speaker of the poem asks the raven to 'Take thy beak from out my heart', the poem remains in the realm of the real. Introducing this metaphorical reference to the poem, according to Poe, prompts the reader 'to see the moral in all that has been previously narrated', and suggests that the Raven now becomes an emblem of 'Mournful and never ending Remembrance'.³⁵

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting,
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door,
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon that is dreaming,
And the lamplight o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor

³⁴ Jean Marnold, *Le Mercure musical*, 1 February 1906; quoted in Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2011), 79. It would be interesting to explore this unusual Beethoven-Ravel connection further. A possible striking comparison might be drawn between the third movement of Beethoven's penultimate sonata in A flat, op. 110, and 'Oiseaux Tristes'. The combination of Ravel's self-stated aim for an improvisatory freedom and melancholy tone reflects the structurally free unfolding and bleak atmosphere of the third movement of op. 110.

³⁵ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 463.

Shall be lifted – nevermore³⁶

It is clear how this traversal from the real to the metaphorical domain was an antecedent to the prevalence of this idea in the aesthetics of symbolism. In the context of *Miroirs*, the peal of the Savoyarde bell too might be considered as a symbol.

It is clear how Ravel's process was broadly inspired by Poe's aesthetic. There seems to be a duality present in both Ravel and Poe's approaches to composition: an often-emphasised rigorous focus on craftsmanship, and a sometimes-overlooked deeper layer of metaphor, symbol and abstraction. An understanding of this duality might help the pianist in his/her approach to interpreting *Miroirs*. On a 'micro' scale, and owing to the economy of means which has emerged as a feature of the style of both Ravel and Poe, the pianist might endeavour to be especially fastidious in the consideration of every sound. On a 'macro' scale, the pianist may try to have a very focused metaphorical conception of each particular movement from *Miroirs*, adopting the brevity and clarity of expression elucidated in Poe's Unity of Effect and Unity of Impression. The cyclic implication of the Savoyarde Bell knelling the suite to a close, coupled with Marnold's suggestion that Ravel was concerned with late works of Beethoven while writing *Miroirs*, speaks of a work more profound than may be initially apparent.

2.3 The Refrain

The Refrain is aesthetically and structurally central to Poe's conception of *The Raven*. He states that the refrain is a 'pivot upon which the whole structure might turn' and needs no justification or analysis as it is so 'universally employed'.³⁷ He does, however, offer an analysis of its effect,

³⁶ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 463.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 456-457.

suggesting that the success of the refrain is the variety of ‘impression upon the force of monotone – both in sound and thought’.

I resolved to diversify, and so heighten the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of the application of the refrain – the refrain itself remaining for the most part, unvaried.³⁸

Poe justifies his use of a short, single-word refrain by stating that the shorter the refrain, the more varied its application can be. He decided on the long ‘o’ and ‘r’ sounds of ‘nevermore’ as sufficiently ‘sonorous and susceptible to protracted emphasis’. Combining all of these criteria for an effective refrain, together with the melancholic tone, Poe chose the word ‘Nevermore,’ and a raven, a bird of ill-omen, as its deliverer.³⁹ This controlled study of repetition is very familiar in the context of the music of Ravel; Bolero is the most frequently cited example. ‘Le gibet’, the central movement of *Gaspard de la Nuit*, also employs a striking, unwavering B \flat knell as ‘controlled monotony’, a pivot about which the musical material is woven.

2.4 Falling thirds – major and minor - A poetic symbol or ‘refrain’

In her discussion on Ravel as a ‘machinist’ who composes with ‘musical objects’, Deborah Mawer writes that across Ravel’s repertory

a musical object – an artefact or device – is a fixed, passive entity, distinct from a motive which engenders organic growth and development ... An important criterion is that the object should be presented in relief from its surroundings, positioned with some detachment or abstraction, so that we clearly perceive its identity ... Igor Stravinsky famously remarked that “when I compose an interval I am aware of it as an object”, and

³⁸ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 457.

³⁹ Establishing the raven uttering ‘nevermore’ as his ominous fulcrum of monotony, Poe asks himself what the most melancholic subject is, and when is this most poetical, concluding that death is most melancholic when it ‘allies itself to beauty’ and finally settles on the subject of a lover lamenting the loss of his beautiful, deceased mistress. Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 458.

for Ravel, the signature interval, objectified across his repertory, is the perfect fourth, often used in descent or with the two pitches in parallel.⁴⁰

Throughout the five movements of *Miroirs* it is possible to consider the falling third, both major and minor, as a musical object, and perhaps the signature interval of *Miroirs*; or in the context of Poe's treatise, its 'refrain.' While perfect fourths abound (a simple example in *Miroirs* is the treble figure in 'La vallée des cloches'), these are more often presented harmonically than melodically, and so their identity is not experienced in the same way as the falling thirds.⁴¹ Similar to Poe's refrain, the falling third is short, and so susceptible to protracted emphasis. Because of its direction as falling rather than rising, and the often 'sighing' shape – where the first note is accented, fading into the second – the character of this refrain is melancholic. In 'Oiseaux tristes', 'Une barque sur l'océan' and 'La vallée des cloches', the falling third is presented in their opening bars. In both 'Une barque sur l'océan' and 'La vallée des cloches', it involves the same pitches E-C#, but at differing registers (examples 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4).

⁴⁰ Mawer, 'Musical objects and machines', 48.

⁴¹ Simon Trezise writes that 'melody is central to much of Ravel's music.' Simon Trezise, 'Renaissance and Change, 1848 to the death of Debussy' in Simon Trezise (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to French Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 142.

Example 2.2: Ravel, 'Oiseaux tristes' bars, 3-6.

Musical score for 'Oiseaux tristes' bars 3-6. The score is in 12/8 time and features a piano accompaniment. The upper staff (treble clef) contains the melody, with notes circled in green and some marked with 'm.g.' (mezzo-giochiato). The lower staff (bass clef) contains the piano accompaniment, with notes circled in green and some marked with 'm.d.' (mezzo-dolce). The score includes dynamic markings such as 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'ppp' (pianississimo). A handwritten note in purple indicates 'minor 3rd' between two notes in the lower staff. The score is numbered '3' at the beginning.

Example 2.3: Ravel, 'Une barque sur l'océan' bar 1-5.

Musical score for 'Une barque sur l'océan' bar 1-5. The score is in 6/8 time and features a piano accompaniment. The upper staff (treble clef) contains the melody, with notes circled in purple and some marked with '1'. The lower staff (bass clef) contains the piano accompaniment, with notes circled in purple and some marked with 'en dehors'. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'PIANO'. The score is numbered '1' at the beginning. The text 'D'un rythme souple - Très enveloppé de pédales' is written above the upper staff.

Example 2.4: Ravel, 'La vallée des cloches', bars 4-7.

4

p un peu marqué

mf

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2.5 Musical Structure – as Plural and Process

John Rink, Daniel Leech Wilkinson and others advocate for the fundamental reconceptualisation of musical structure, one that takes into account the creative role of performers. Rink takes an alternative notion of structure as ‘a range of potential, inferred relationships between the various elements and parameters active within a work’.⁴² Rink proposes that musical materials do not

⁴² John Rink, ‘The (F)utility of Performance Analysis’, in Mine Doğan-Dack (ed.), *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015) 129.

constitute musical structure but they afford the ‘inference of structural relationships’.⁴³ He states that ‘structural inference [is] individually and uniquely carried out whenever it is attempted’, and therefore musical structure should be seen as ‘constructed not immanent; as pluralistic, not singular.’⁴⁴ Rink emphasises that musical structure should be viewed as a ‘process’ and not as ‘architecture’ because of music’s ‘time-dependency’.⁴⁵

Rink proposes that structure is relational, inferred over time rather than an immutable aspect of a work’s ontology. In the context of *Miroirs*’ symbolist aesthetic, Mawer also suggests that although the work can be read in symbolist terms, ‘any [symbolist] associations that arise are culturally and temporally defined and result in multiple interpretations depending on the experience of composer, performer and listener.’⁴⁶ In this connection, this thesis proposes the falling third as both an element of inferred structure within the movements of *Miroirs*, and a symbolic refrain, as influenced by Poe’s treatise on composition. The following examples from each of the movements of *Miroirs* illustrate instances in which the symbolic refrain of the falling third is present, and where musically it is possible to highlight this feature.

2.6 The falling third as a refrain in *Miroirs*

In ‘Noctuelles’, the first semiquaver, right hand a", and the fourth semiquaver tied to the second beat g♭" could be heard as a falling minor third (enharmonically a"-f#" , example 2.5). This gives the same pitch and stresses as the a"-f#" falling minor third in ‘Alborada del gracioso’, bar 12 (example 2.14).

⁴³ Rink, ‘The (F)utility of Performance Analysis’, 129.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mawer, ‘Musical objects and machines’, 50.

Example 2.5: Ravel, 'Noctuelles', bar 1-4.

1 *Très léger* (♩ = 128 environ)
PIANO
pp
pp
mf
pp

In the middle section of 'Noctuelles', Ravel plays with the 'musical object' of the falling minor third (example 2.6). The minor thirds form part of harmonised melodic fragments, accompanied by syncopated octave Fs in the left hand.

Example 2.6: Ravel, 'Noctuelles', bars 37-40.

37 *Pas trop lent* (♩ = 80 environ) *sombre et expressif*
mf
p
5

Bar 122 of ‘Noctuelles’ features another minor third in octaves, at the close of the piece (example 2.7). Here it is presented with an *expressif* indication, and an accent on the two Fs indicates that the shape should be that of a slur, a kind of melancholic ‘sighing’ from F to D. This idea is repeated in ‘Oiseaux tristes’ (example 2.2).

Example 2.7: Ravel, ‘Noctuelles’, bars 121-125.

The image shows a musical score for Ravel's 'Noctuelles', bars 121-125. The score is in 3/4 time and features a piano (pp) dynamic. The tempo is marked 'Presque lent'. The music is written for piano and includes markings such as 'pp lointain' and 'pp expressif'. A green bracket highlights a descending interval in the upper voice, and purple circles highlight specific notes in both staves.

After the opening bird-calls of ‘Oiseaux tristes’, the falling major third d'-bb is heard, presented over Eb minor harmony. Beat three of bar four introduces a B'4 in the bass, over which the d'-a# (enharmonically bb, heard as a falling major third) is repeated, creating a minor third between the bass B'4 (example 2.8).

Example 2.8: Ravel, 'Oiseaux tristes', bars 3-6.

The image shows a musical score for Ravel's 'Oiseaux tristes', bars 3-6. The score is in 12/8 time and features a falling minor third interval in the upper melody. Handwritten annotations include green brackets and circles highlighting specific notes, and a purple bracket labeled 'minor 3rd' indicating the interval between two notes in the lower register. Performance markings include 'pp', 'm.d.', and 'm.g.'.

The falling minor third also appears as the upper melody in 'Une barque sur l'océan', e^m-c^{##}, in bars 1-20, and the same idea is repeated when this material is transposed to C# minor at bar 60. A major third appears in bars 21-23 as F#-D in differing registers (example 2.9).

Example 2.9: Ravel, 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 21-23.

Musical score for Example 2.9, Ravel's 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 21-23. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (D major). It features a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand has a melodic line with a trill in bar 22, and the left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. Green circles and brackets highlight specific notes in the right hand.

The $d\#-b\#$ of bar 49 corresponds to the $e\#-d'$ of bars 79 and 80 (which is enharmonically $f'-d'$), all of which can be heard as falling minor thirds (examples 2.10 and 2.11).

Example 2.10: Ravel, 'Une barque sur l'océan', bar 49-50.

Musical score for Example 2.10, Ravel's 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 49-50. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (D major). It features a forte (*f*) dynamic. The right hand has a complex melodic line with a trill in bar 49, and the left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. Purple circles and a green bracket highlight specific notes in the right hand.

Example 2.11: Ravel, 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 79-80.

The coda, if taken from bar 124, employs the falling minor third E-C# of the opening. The filigree arpeggiation which flits up and down around this melody is also made up of the B-G# minor third relationship, and the bass accompaniment in bars 125 and 127 also highlight this harmony, A#-C#, in octaves (example 2.12). The final chords are two E-C# minor thirds arpeggiated in octaves at the upper register of the piano, offering *Miroirs*' signature interval to close (example 2.13)

Example 2.12: Ravel, 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 123-128.

123

The musical score consists of three systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (bars 123-124) features a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a rhythmic accompaniment. A purple bracket highlights a chord in the treble staff, and a purple circle highlights a note in the bass staff. Dynamics include *sf* and *pp*. A 'Red.' marking is present below the first system. The second system (bars 125-126) continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns. Purple circles highlight notes in both staves, and a purple bracket highlights a chord in the treble staff. Dynamics include *pp* and *mf*. The third system (bars 127-128) concludes the passage. Purple circles highlight notes in both staves, and a purple bracket highlights a chord in the treble staff. Dynamics include *ppp* and *p*.

Example 2.13: Ravel, 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 132-139.

The image shows a musical score for Ravel's 'Une barque sur l'océan', bars 132-139. The score is in 3/4 time and features a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note bass line and a melodic line in the right hand. The music is marked with dynamics such as 'pp' and 'pppp'. Several notes and chords are circled in purple, and some are connected by brackets, highlighting specific harmonic and melodic elements.

The opening bars of 'Alborada del gracioso' present the falling third in the bass line (f'-d'), though here it is arguably not objectified in the same 'relief' to other material, as in the examples from the other movements. A more pronounced falling third is presented in the melody in bar 12 on the fourth to fifth quavers, a"-f#", in the top voice (example 2.14). The f#" can be heard as an appoggiatura, resolving on the sixth quaver beat in chord of Cm7. This is prolonged in bar 31 where the non-melody note f#" is resolved on the last chord C minor with Bb bass (Example 2.15).

Example 2.14: Ravel, 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 9-16.

Example 2.15: Ravel, 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 30-32.

At a different register, this falling a'-f# is heard in the middle section (*Plus lent*) in bar 73, but without the appoggiatura idea, the melody continuing down to C# (example 2.16).

Example 2.16: Ravel, 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 67-77.

The musical score for Example 2.16 consists of two systems. The first system, starting at bar 67, shows a piano introduction with a bass line of falling minor thirds. The right hand has a melody with a trill. Dynamics include *pp*, *ff*, and *mf*. The tempo is marked *Plus lent* and the style is *mf* *expressif en récit*. The second system, starting at bar 77, features a right-hand melody with a trill and a bass line with a falling minor third. Dynamics include *pp*. The tempo is marked *1er Mouvement très mesuré*. A *2 Ped.* instruction is present.

In addition to the opening pairs of falling minor thirds in 'La vallée des cloches' (example 2.17), in bars 39-41 Ravel appears to consider the falling third from several angles (example 2.18). The bass Eb-C minor third descends from the accented F; this Eb-C can be echoed in the voicing of the right hand chords, while a minor third provides the inner harmony (example 2.18).

Example 2.17: Ravel, 'La vallée des cloches', bars 4-5.

The musical score for Example 2.17 consists of two systems. The first system, starting at bar 4, shows a piano introduction with a bass line of falling minor thirds and a right-hand melody with a trill. Dynamics include *p*. The style is *p un peu marqué*. The second system, starting at bar 5, features a right-hand melody with a trill and a bass line with a falling minor third. Dynamics include *p*.

Example 2.18: Ravel, 'La vallée des cloches', bars 37-40.

The musical score for Example 2.18 consists of two systems of staves. The first system (bars 37-40) includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is marked with a *mf* dynamic and has the word "Voice" written in green above it. The piano accompaniment features a *p* dynamic in the right hand and a *pp* dynamic in the left hand. Handwritten annotations include green brackets under the vocal line, orange circles around notes in the piano right hand, and purple circles around notes in the piano left hand. The second system (bars 41-44) is marked *très calme* and features a *pp* dynamic in the right hand and a *ppp* dynamic in the left hand. Handwritten annotations include green brackets under the vocal line and purple circles around notes in the piano left hand.

A low, sombre, elongated bell E-C# in bar 48 marks the return on the opening material in the 'beginning of the end' (example 2.19).

Example 2.19: Ravel, 'La vallée des cloches', bars 47-49.

The musical score for Example 2.19 consists of two systems of staves. The first system (bars 47-48) includes a piano accompaniment. The piano accompaniment features a *pp* dynamic in the right hand and a *pp* dynamic in the left hand. Handwritten annotations include a green bracket under the piano left hand and a purple circle around a note in the piano left hand. The second system (bars 49-50) includes a piano accompaniment. The piano accompaniment features a *pp* dynamic in the right hand and a *pp* dynamic in the left hand. Handwritten annotations include a purple circle around a note in the piano left hand.

2.7 Conclusion

The consideration of the falling thirds as the ‘pivot about which the whole structure might turn’⁴⁷ presents a symbolic ‘refrain’ in *Miroirs*, and the opportunity for the pianist to infer alternative elements of musical structure. The pivot of the falling third gives the pianist a symbolic focus, but also a unifying characteristic in five pieces which are otherwise structurally independent. These falling thirds constitute Mawer’s ‘musical objects’ because they are almost always presented on their own and rarely developed. To this end, the pianist is addressing the symbolist aesthetic of the work, and its possible compositional influence in Poe’s ‘The Philosophy of Composition’. However, the suggested operation of a symbol in this music must take the form of a ‘meaning to’ or a ‘meaning for’, in this case, the performer. It is not suggested that a symbolist connotation can be drawn in an absolute manner, but rather that the musicology has prompted the notion of the symbol in the music for the performer, and that it holds a meaning that is symbolic ‘for’ them, inspiring them to make a certain imaginative connection which affects all manner of artistic processes, for example, the production of sound or agogic emphasis.⁴⁸

In practical performance terms, this might mean that the pianist is conscious of projecting the falling thirds when they appear, and thinking of the falling third relationship where the first note is stronger and the second weaker as a common characteristic, emphasising the ‘intoning’ of this short figure, as a melancholic symbol. In the more subtle instances, as in the opening figure of ‘Noctuelles’ (example 2.4) and bar 12 of *Alborada de gracioso* (example 2.12), this might mean that the pianist voices these figures to promote the falling third relationship, and can at certain times use agogic expression to highlight this. Another example of the subtle projection of this idea is in

⁴⁷ Davidson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 456-457.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 4, Section 2, 86, and Appendix 1: ‘Phenomenological Diary Entries 1-4’, for insight into how musicological concepts are manifested and enacted musically.

'La vallée des cloches' bars 39-41, where the Eb-C of the left hand can be echoed in the subsequent right hand chords, through carefully considered voicing (example 2.15). In the same way metaphorical association can be subject to the imagination of the performer, so too can musical structure depend on signification created in performance. While this idea does not constitute by any means a full conception of the form of the five pieces of *Miroirs*, it can provide a unifying characteristic, symbolic fulcrum, or added layer of signification creating depth in interpretation, and an example of how hermeneutic and formalist ideas of musical works can be absorbed into an interpretation.

Chapter 3: Memory and ‘Alborada del gracioso’

This chapter explores the theme of memory as an aspect of contemporary scholarship on impressionist and decadent aesthetics. It then conducts an mnemoanalysis of ‘Alborada del gracioso’ using Michael Puri’s memory analysis model, investigating if the work may be read through the lens of the theme of memory. The chapter concludes with a discussion which deals with the implications in performance of conceptualising ‘Alborada del gracioso’ in terms of memory.

3.1 Memory as an Aspect of Impressionist and Decadent Aesthetics

John Berger proposes the theme of memory as ‘the unacknowledged axis of all of Monet’s work.’¹ He sheds light on this under-explored territory relating to the original ‘impressionist’ painter, whose 1872 painting *Impression Soleil Levant* caused the critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary to coin the term ‘impressionist.’² Berger connects ideas of sadness, memory and transience, proposing that an impressionist painting, unlike any painting up to this point, does not invite the viewer into the depicted scene, but instead offers them a captured moment in time, prompting their own memories. ‘You cannot enter an Impressionist painting, it extracts your memories.’³

¹ John Berger, *Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 63.

² *Ibid.*, 55.

³ *Ibid.*, 61.

Impressionism, when applied to music, is a polemical term for several reasons: because it is borrowed from painting, because what it implies is ambiguous, and because it often generically groups Debussy and Ravel together, blurring distinctions between their artistic aims.⁴ Michael Puri suggests that ‘memory, conceived as the presence of the past, may be said to pervade the music of Maurice Ravel, thereby helping to unify what is otherwise an eclectic body of work.’⁵ Perhaps, as Puri and Berger suggest, the convergence of the artistic aims of painting and music in *fin de siècle* Paris is better understood through the operation of memory as a common concept. Puri proposes the lens of decadence as an apt aesthetic mode through which to view Ravel’s work.⁶ Memory, as an aspect of decadence, involves the idealisation of the past, resulting in a melancholic present. Puri focuses his study of memory on ‘those aspects that seem most helpful in understanding Ravel’s music,’ and through the functioning and thematisation of memory within Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche de temps perdus*. He links Proust and Ravel together, describing them as ‘Parisian dandies’ born four years apart.⁷ Memory operates for Proust and Ravel as an apotheosis of decadent expression through its idealisation of the past, resulting in a melancholic present, nostalgic for the past. Nostalgic memories become the most rarified objects for the decadents, according to Puri, and therefore are most desirable.⁸

3.1.1 Artificiality and Memory

For both Berger and Puri, there is a re-creative and therefore changeable aspect to memory. ‘An impression is more or less fleeting, it is what is *left behind* because the scene has disappeared or

⁴ See Chapter 1, ‘Impressionism’, 15.

⁵ Michael Puri, ‘Memory and Melancholy in the Épilogue of Ravel’s *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*,’ *Music Analysis* 30 (2011), 272.

⁶ See Chapter 1, ‘Decadence’, 22.

⁷ Michael Puri, *Ravel the Decadent, Memory, Sublimation and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*

changed ... an impression later becomes like a memory, impossible to verify.’⁹ Puri notes the ‘creative’ or ‘recreative’ aspects of memory, in that memories are not immutable but can be transformed in the present.¹⁰ This implies a falsity associated with memory, as memory is reconstructed. Berger suggests that the past conjured in memory is not always completely true or what it may seem, stating that ‘to admit that every appearance could be thought of as a mutation and that visibility itself should be considered flux.’¹¹

3.1.2 Transience in Music Performance

What all music has in common with Berger’s spirit of impressionism is its temporal transience. Close to impressionist painting, ‘impressionist’ music arguably strives for the same fleeting transience, capturing the essence of a moment, or the feeling of a moment, because of its nature as something which exists for the time of its re-creation and then ceases to exist, as in the invocation of a memory. Comparing the essential material difference between painting and music; an impressionist painting captures one moment, evoking a sense of the time before and after the painting’s moment in the viewer’s imagination . An ‘impressionist’ piece of music exists during its time of performance, its ‘performance moment’, and whatever evocations it can conjure in the listener’s imagination take place during this moment, or in the listener’s memory. There is arguably more of a time-dependency associated with experience of a piece of music compared with the experience of a painting. Poe’s ideal temporal dimensions of a poem in terms of its Unity of Impression and Unity of Effect also consider the time-dependency of this form of aesthetic

⁹ Berger, *Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible*, 59.

¹⁰ Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 17.

¹¹ Berger, *Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible*, 54.

experience.¹² Relating this to Ravel, an aesthetic which is concerned with the fine distillation of expressive intent emerges, where time is considered both thematically and materially.

3.2 Mnemoanalysis of ‘Alborada del gracioso’

Puri’s mnemoanalyses focus on Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloé* and *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*. As Puri does not include any movement from *Miroirs* in his mnemoanalyses, this chapter investigates whether the theme of memory may be operating in ‘Alborada del gracioso’ from *Miroirs*. ‘Alborada del gracioso’ stands out from the other movements of *Miroirs* through the Spanish implication of its title, and so immediately suggests connection to Ravel’s past, his Basque heritage. The investigation will employ Puri’s methodology which seeks to represent the disciplines of memory and music equally, through the following set of questions which address content, timing, transformation, agency and value.¹³

Puri’s Methodology

Content: What constitutes the present and the past?

Timing: When does the past reappear, and how long does it last?

Transformation: How has the past been altered in its reappearance in the present?

Agency: Who or what is remembering the past?

Value: What is the value of the past for the remembering subject? ¹⁴

¹² See Chapter 2 page 27.

¹³ Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 22.

¹⁴ Ibid.

3.2.1 Content: ‘Alborada del gracioso’

Puri identifies three musical scenarios which involve memory in terms of the content of the piece, that is, the aspects of the work which constitute reference to, or the presence of, the past. These are: historical memory, contextual memory and a musical moment or text.¹⁵

Puri’s historical memory deals with a musical form, rhythm or tonal system which is taken or borrowed from the past. The primary occurrence of historical memory in ‘Alborada del gracioso’ is the form *Alborada*, literally meaning ‘song of the dawn’, which according to Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt ‘is a form of serenade of North Spanish origin from the mountain region of Galicia.’¹⁶ Stuckenschmidt suggests that Ravel may also have been thinking of ‘old troubadour songs with which the knights parted from their ladies at the break of day.’¹⁷

Roger Nichols writes that convincing evidence has been produced to support the idea that the outer sections of ‘Alborada del gracioso’ are in the style of an Andalusian *seguidilla*, enclosing a central *copla*.¹⁸ He explains that Ravel’s decision to ‘abandon the traditional 3/8 time signature of the *seguidilla* in favour of longer bar lengths explains why these are irregular (6/8 and 9/8).’¹⁹ David Korevaar also notes that the middle section of ‘Alborada del gracioso’ is a Spanish *copla*.²⁰

¹⁵ Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 22.

¹⁶ H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel, Variations on his Life and Work* (London: Calder and Boyars), 84.

¹⁷ Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel*, 84.

¹⁸ Roger Nichols (ed.), *Maurice Ravel, Miroirs* (London: Edition Peters, 1995), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ David Korevaar, ‘Ravel’s mirrors’ (DMA dissertation, The Juilliard School New York, 2000), 122. A *copla* is ‘[a] verse form of Hispanic origin, usually sung, consisting of four eight-, six- or five-syllable lines generally rhymed *ABCB*. Often improvised, *coplas* relate humorous incidents, amorous sentiments, current or historical events or merely

Ravel's mother, Marie Delouart, was born in Ciboure in 1840 and was, according to Stuckenschmidt, 'probably descended from the gypsies who reached the Basque country in the 17th century.'²¹ Marie's mother Sabine, Ravel's grandmother, was a fisherwoman of Ciboure or a 'kaskarote' (translated as 'worthless').²² Étienne Rousseau-Plotto writes that the fisherwomen of Ciboure 'had a reputation for agility and were remarkable dancers of the fandango'.²³ Roger Nichols records that Ravel's mother 'seems not to have been specially gifted in this domain [of music], except as a singer of Basque and Spanish lullabies that were surely a profound influence on the young Ravel.'²⁴ The complex blend of *seguidilla* and *copla* (related to the *jota* and *fandango*²⁵) in 'Alborada del gracioso' can be considered as the operation of historical memory. The suggestion that Ravel's mother Marie was a gifted singer of Spanish lullabies implies that she may be the singer of the central *copla* in 'Alborada del gracioso'. Taking both of these interpretations – as historical dance form and song, connected to the singing of Ravel's mother – satisfies Puri's first aspect of content memory (historical – form and tonal system).²⁶

comment on daily life or the natural environment of the singer.' William Gradante, 'Copla' *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* [Accessed 21 January 2022].

²¹ Étienne Rousseau-Plotto; quoted in Nichols, Roger, *Ravel* (Yale University Press, 2011), 4.

²² Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Yale University Press, 2011), 4.

²³ Etienne Rousseau-Plotto, *Ravel, portraits basques* (Anglet: Séguier, 2004); quoted in Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Yale University Press, 2011), 5.

²⁴ Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Yale University Press, 2011), 8.

²⁵ The *copla* is both a feature of the *seguidilla* and *jota*. The *jota* is a form of courtship dance traditional in Northern Spain. 'Closely akin to the fandango, the jota is probably a fertility dance of Aragonese origin, although legend states that it was brought north from Andalusia by the exiled Moorish poet Aben Jot.' 'Jota', *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, (20 July 1998) <academic-eb-com.elib.tcd.ie/levels/collegiate/article/jota/44017> [Accessed 16 June 2022].

²⁶ A further layer of historical memory in 'Alborada del gracioso' could be identified in the fast repeated guitar-like passages in bars 43-57 and 174-190, which recall the sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. Howat supports this idea, noting that Roland-Manuel 'recalled Scarlatti sonatas as virtually the only score he ever saw on Ravel's piano.' While this may be considered as another example of historical memory, this also provokes consideration of agency. If Ravel is considered as the remembering subject, the evocation of Scarlatti's sonatas might be considered as less meaningful than the personal Basque connection in the form of historical memory and his mother's singing.

Puri's second strand of content-memory deals with contextual memory. This consists of any material that comes from the past of the piece itself, or another movement, 'a compositional device commonly referred to as "cyclic form."' Occurrences of contextual memory within the work are more complex to describe because it is difficult to distinguish between instances of repetition, and instances where the psychology of memory may be invoked. Puri lists the following as situations of repetition where memory is more than likely not at work: when repeated material seems to belong to the present (especially immediately repeated material); when it unambiguously conforms to the dictates of conventional form (for example sonata form); and when it has been altered so much from its original version as to make it highly unlikely for listeners to recognise it in the past.²⁷ However, Puri states that 'these are only rules of thumb and may not apply in certain circumstances – such as a sonata-form movement that is so distant from common practice and heterogenous in its material that the moment of recapitulation no longer seems routine.'²⁸ 'Alborada del gracioso' fits this last description as a movement strict in form but removed enough from standard classification as to allow elements of the recapitulation to be considered as memories.

'According to Burnett James, Ravel, "once demonstrated to Maurice Delage that the structure of Alborada was as strict as a Bach fugue."²⁹ Howat describes a Fibonacci sequence-based reading of Alborada's structure, stating that presented motives develop the material by becoming antecedents to consequent motives. 'The initial planting of motives as consequents (or as a structural close at bar 22), measured by constant completed units of 6/8 metre, sets in motion a

²⁷ Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 23.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Roger Nichols (ed.), *Maurice Ravel, Miroirs* (London: Edition Peters, 1995), 7.

sequence of numbers (5,8,13,21) that follow the Fibonacci series, as a close approximation of the Golden Section.³⁰ Korevaar contrastingly proposes a symmetrical five-part reading of the work.³¹ These contrasting interpretations of the form of ‘Alborada del gracioso’ are unified in their understanding of it as being very calculated. However, this is not necessarily identifiable to the listener, and so instances of structural repetition may be considered as memories, according to Puri’s model.

The following are two examples of contextual repetitions in ‘Alborada del gracioso’. The first is the rhythmic figure which first appears at bar 33 in B flat major and reappears at bar 166 in E flat major (examples 3.1 and 3.2). The first time it appears it proceeds from B flat, arriving at the guitar-like repeated-note passage in G sharp major. From bar 166 to bar 173 it proceeds through more modulations, arriving at the second repeated-note passage in C sharp major.

Example 3.1: Ravel, ‘Alborada del gracioso’, bars 33-34.



³⁰ Roy Howat, ‘Ravel and the Piano’ in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93.

³¹ Korevaar, ‘Ravel’s mirrors’.

Example 3.2: Ravel, 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 164-169.

The image shows a musical score for Ravel's 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 164-169. The score is written for piano and consists of two systems. The first system starts at bar 164, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and the instruction 'sans ralentir'. The music features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. A 'Ped.' (pedal) marking is present under the first few notes. The second system begins at bar 166, marked with a very piano (*ppp*) dynamic and the instruction 'très sec et bien rythmé'. This section features a more complex rhythmic pattern with accents and a 'ppp' marking. The score concludes with a double bar line at the end of the second system.

A second example of contextual repetition features the glissando scale passages in bars 44 and 46 (example 3.3), which reappear in bars 175, 177 and 179, as the infamous double-note glissandi (example 3.4). While it is more likely that these are aesthetically considered as structural developments rather than the operation of memory within the piece, it could be argued, especially in the first example, that the repeated material at bar 166 is a memory, faintly reoccurring *ppp*.

Example 3.3: Ravel, 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 41-48.

41

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (bars 41-42) is in B-flat major (two flats) and 6/8 time. It begins with a piano introduction. The right hand plays a series of chords, while the left hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment. A dynamic marking of *p subito* is present. The second system (bars 43-44) and the third system (bars 45-48) are in B major (two sharps). The right hand features a rapid, melodic line of sixteenth notes, while the left hand continues with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The key signature changes from B-flat major to B major between the first and second systems.

Example 3.4: Ravel, 'Alborada del gracioso', bars 172-180.

172

glissando

p

glissando

f

ff

f

Puri's third strand of content-memory requires a scenario involving a musical moment and a text - 'an expressive direction, an epigraph, a programmatic scenario, a libretto, lyrics.'³² The 'gracioso' in the title, according to Stuckenschmidt, is the 'jester in Spanish comedy, the fool in household of a Spanish nobleman, as Calderon and Lope de Vega like to portray him in their plays.'³³ Writing to Ferdinand Sinzig of Steinway and Sons New York in September 1907, Ravel confirms this

³² Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 22.

³³ Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel*, 84.

notion by describing the Spanish literary origins of the Alborada, and explaining how it evades precise translation into English.

I understand your bafflement over how to translate the title ‘Alborada del gracioso’. That is precisely why I decided not to translate it. The fact is that the gracioso of the Spanish comedy is a rather special character and one which, so far as I know, is not found in any other theatrical tradition. We do have an equivalent though, in the French theatre: Beaumarchaise’s Figaro. But he’s more philosophical, less well-meaning than his Spanish ancestor. The simplest thing, I think, is to follow the title with the rough translation ‘Morning Song of the Clown’ (Aubade du Bouffon). That will be enough to explain the humoristic side of the piece.³⁴

This fulfils Puri’s third aspect of content memory, which can include ‘a programmatic scenario’. The title ‘Alborada del gracioso’ evokes the past, through aspects of Spanish literary and folk tradition. ‘Alborada del gracioso’ satisfies all three of Puri’s criteria in terms of content-memory which represents the past; the historical dance-form of Alborada, and the copla and seguidilla as features of the Northern Spanish ‘jota’, Ravel’s reference to the Alborada of the Spanish literary tradition, and the potential to read the central copla as a memory of Ravel’s mother singing him Basque lullabies.

While the contextual repetitions detailed in examples 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 are more likely to be features of structural development rather than memory material, the coda can be considered as a more convincing and striking occurrence of memory. This investigation will continue by exploring the artistic implications of considering both the central copla and the coda of ‘Alborada del gracioso’ in terms of the theme of memory.

³⁴ Maurice Ravel in a letter to Ferdinand Sinzig of Steinway and Sons, New York, 14 September 1907; quoted in Roger Nichols (ed.) *Maurice Ravel, Miroirs* (London: Edition Peters, 1995), 7. The original letter in French appears in Manuel Cornejo (ed.), *L'intégrale: Correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens* (Paris: Le Passeur Éditeur, 2018), 168-169. Here the recipient of the letters seems to be unknown. Cornejo writes ‘à un destinataire inconnu’.

3.2.2 Copla & Coda

If the central *copla* section is considered as a memory of Ravel's mother singing to him as a child, Ravel himself becomes the remembering agent. David Korevaar makes a convincing case for *Miroirs* as being both portraits of their dedicatees, and also collectively a self-portrait.³⁵ Korevaar suggests that because Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi (the dedicatee of 'Alborada del gracioso') was the resident music critic within Ravel's circle, there is potential for him to assume the 'court-jester' persona in 'Alborada del gracioso'.³⁶ However, Calvocoressi 'never seems to have seen the *Alborada* as a portrait of himself as a court-jester, despite his wide knowledge of Ravel's music and character, as well as his evident awareness of the composer's capacity for irony.'³⁷ It seems more credible that Ravel himself is the remembering agent. This has bearing for the pianist in interpreting the central section, invoking the Spanish lullaby-singing of his mother. In the case of the Coda, it could be considered that the listener is the remembering agent, faced with a tumult of fragmentary past motives. It could also be Ravel, invoking a montage of his past.

With thoughts on duty and melancholy we spiral back to our original point of departure while simultaneously arriving at the core of Adorno's understanding of Ravel: the interpretation of his music, particularly the childlike moments, as the "aristocratic sublimation of mourning".³⁸

The mourning sublimated by Ravel through the composition of 'Alborada del gracioso' could possibly include the loss of his grandmother, or his Basque heritage. If *Alborada* is read as a self-portrait, the idea that the central section is a Basque lullaby sung by Ravel's mother is a compelling one, and this has significance for the value attributed to the work. Although the *copla* implies a

³⁵ Korevaar, 'Ravel's mirrors'.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁸ Michael Puri, 'Adorno's Ravel' in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 66.

‘courtship dance traditional in northern Spain’ and also ‘a genre of folk song that precedes and accompanies the dance or is sung only,’³⁹ it can be interpreted as combining features of Spanish-musical roots with the operation of memory. If the piece is considered on a macro-scale in the context of Ravel’s life, the Spanish influence comes from Ravel’s mother, and this would have been most keenly felt in childhood, a period during which it is known that she sang him Spanish lullabies.

The most basic alteration of Ravel’s past as memory in the present is the fact that the singing of his mother is represented on the piano. From bar 71, the music is marked *Plus lent* and *expressif en récit*. The material proceeds in four-bar phrases, alternating the slower, recitative material (perhaps the ‘sung’ copla) with interludes of copla rhythm *au mouvement*, marked *très mesuré* (perhaps the ‘danced’ copla). The ‘sung’ material can be imagined by the pianist as having words, declaiming them with a deep *cantabile mf* tone. The *très mesuré* material is then marked *pianissimo*, which could invoke the dancing of Ravel’s grandmother in Ciboure. The contrast in dynamic here can help the pianist create two memory strata – the first is Ravel’s mother, singing in the ‘foreground’ of the memory, while the *au mouvement* rhythmic material can be considered as the dancing with the fisherwomen of Ciboure in the ‘background’ of the memory.

³⁹ ‘Jota’, *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica (20 July 1998) <academic-eb-com.elib.tcd.ie/levels/collegiate/article/jota/44017> [Accessed 16 June 2022].

Example 3.5: Ravel, 'Alborada del gracioso' bars 67-96.

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The musical score consists of five systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (bars 67-72) is in 3/4 time and features a bass line with chords and a treble line with a melodic line. Dynamics include *pp*, *ff*, and *mf expressif en récit.* The tempo is marked *Plus lent*. The second system (bars 73-78) includes the instruction *1er Mouvement très mesuré* and *2 Ped.* The third system (bars 79-84) includes *Plus lent mf*, *m.g. enlevez la sourdine*, and *2 Ped.* The fourth system (bars 85-90) includes *Plus lent mf*, *1er Mouvement*, and *pp*. The fifth system (bars 91-96) includes *Plus lent mf* and *m.g.*

In bar 125 the *copla* reaches a climactic point, and jolts the pianist into the present with a sequential melody not previously heard.

The Coda of ‘Alborada del gracioso’ is probably the piece’s most striking occurrence of contextual past. The second subject material from bar 12 is heard as a fragment in bars 200 and 201. It has a new expressive, elastic quality, and lasts only two bars, disappearing to make way for an iteration of a melody from the *copla* in the tenor, which is presented this time accompanied by the opening fandango/alborada rhythm. This melody, previously presented *plus lent*, adopts an urgent quality played at the *tempo primo*. Bars 209 and 210, and bars 211 and 212, present the two subjects in a two-phrase sequence. The second subject material is heard with an interruption of the distinctive *copla* repeated notes. This happens twice, before the listener is plunged back down to the pianissimo ‘fandango’ rhythm which builds to the end. All of this has the effect of a flashing montage, described by Howat as the most exciting moment in French impressionist music. The fragmentary montage reaches its climax at bar 219, where the opening subject is presented *forte* in octaves, building to the end *sans ralentir*. Puri writes that ‘the moment of recollection in the *Sonatine*’s Menuet seems to represent or reenact psychological interiority, just as its recurrent musical subject brings forth subjectivity in and through the act of memory.’⁴⁰ The Coda of ‘Alborada del gracioso’, especially bars 200-212 creates a different form of ‘psychological interiority’; one of a flashback. The conjuring of fragmentary imagery of Ravel’s mother singing, and the ‘kaskarote’ dancing, can provide the pianist with an idea to which they can commit, in order to convincingly portray the contrasting characters during this challenging passage. Successful

⁴⁰ Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 26.

delineation of lines and contrast in memory material can contribute to Puri's idea of past experience being felt as something 'shockingly new'.⁴¹

⁴¹ Puri writes that 'for readers of the novel [*À la recherche de temps perdu*] they call attention to an important paradox of memory: how the return of past experience can be felt as something shockingly new. Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 17.

Example 3.6: Ravel, 'Alborada del gracioso', Coda, bars 200-214.

200 *expressif*
cédez très peu

pp

revenez au mouvement

p subito

au Mouvement

pp

très marqué

p subito

pp subito

f

mp

ff

pp subito

p

3.3 Conclusion

While previous chapters have elucidated the difficulty associated with descriptions of Ravel's music as 'impressionist', the connection between Berger and Puri's aesthetics of impressionism and decadence here, through the theme of memory, offer a tangible common aesthetic aim. Further connection to Poe's Unity of Effect and Unity of Impression underpin an aesthetic which very much considers the time of the aesthetic experience, the relationship between art and observer/listener/reader, and therefore the evocative potential of this music.

Positioning Ravel as the remembering agent in the context of 'Alborada del gracioso' as a work involving the psychological interiority of memory implies significant performance considerations. Recalling John Rink's reconceptualisation of musical structure as process, pluralistic not immanent, the operation of the theme of memory can act as a kind of inferred structure.⁴² Rather than delivering structural information through analytical understanding, the pianist can relate to the work in narrative terms, treating the piece as a work which represents Ravel's Basque heritage, childhood memories, and the shock of the transformation of these memories as they recur. In this reading, it is interesting to consider the narrative perspective of the performer – whether they themselves might adopt the 'I' position, as Ravel himself. Imagining the middle section as Ravel's mother singing a lullaby effects the pianist's sound production and gesture.⁴³

⁴² See Chapter 2, 41.

⁴³ For a discussion on gesture and sound see Chapter 4, 76. The performer might also adopt the 'I' perspective as Ravel's mother here. I performed 'Alborada del gracioso' in concert on 30 August 2022. During my preparation for this performance, the memory-related material in Ravel literature was fresh in my mind. I noticed that I very much associated the central copla with the singing of Ravel's mother, and the alternate rhythmic material as Ravel's grandmother dancing, more distantly in the background of the first 'memory'. This provided a vivid imaginative space in which to conceptualise this material – in terms of sound and narrative. I also noticed that I had a very strong sense of the evocation-in-time of this music – its dependence on the moment of performance – and so this turned out to be a very visceral, exciting performance for me, where I was fully committed to the playing. The tumbling of ideas in the coda as a flashback was particularly exciting. It is possible that other factors contributed to this feeling, for example

The performer's conceptualisation of 'Alborada del gracioso' in terms of memory humanises the work. This perspective emancipates the piece from abstract aesthetic complexity and provides a personal thread which connects the performer to Ravel and his life as a living man, who – while navigating the challenges of an early-career composer (*Prix de Rome* failures included) – was perhaps nostalgic for an idyllic childhood, for the affection of a loving mother; and, potentially, for a lost Spanish identity represented in the complex mélange of influence in this work.

This perspective would also prompt the performer to consider its relation to the other works in the set; whether there is an over-arching theme of memory present throughout, and the importance of this. In contemporary concert practice, it is common to play one movement from *Miroirs*, or a selection from *Miroirs*, or all of *Miroirs* as a set.⁴⁴ When adopting the interpretation of 'Alborada del gracioso' as a 'memory' piece, it would be important for the pianist to consider this in relation to the other works.

Finally, it is necessary to balance the consideration of 'Alborada del gracioso' as a 'memory' piece with the fact that Michael Puri's mnemoanalysis model, while deeply considered, may be constructed with *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* in mind. All three aspects of 'content memory' seem to relate perhaps a little too neatly to the particular characteristics of *Valses Nobles et*

the openness of the audience, the acoustic, or the piano, but I feel that having connected ideas of memory, time, and lost time, to Ravel in his life, I had a greater awareness of the power of this music to evoke, and so my focus seemed to be less on 'playing' and more on 'evoking'.

⁴⁴ Chapter 2 explores the falling third as a unifying 'refrain' of all five pieces in *Miroirs*, and proposes this as another form of structural inference possible within their performance.

Sentimentales (the *fin de siècle* waltz form, the epigraph). Puri's methodology is perhaps not as transferable as is initially apparent.

Chapter 4: Conceptualising Sound and the Phenomenology of Practice

A defining innovation that late nineteenth-century French music brought was a focus on colour, that is timbre, and the search of musical expression through the study of timbre. Barbara Kelly notes that ‘the search for sonority for its own sake marks the Symbolist *esprit du temps* of Debussy, Ravel and his circle.’¹ Timbral exploration and control is one of the most elevated aspects of Western Art Music practice. Beauty and control of tone represent the acme of artistic facility, and this is, arguably, most prevalent pianistically in the study and performance of ‘impressionist’ music. *Miroirs*, with its programmatic titles, representational symbolist aesthetic, and potential to evoke the theme of memory, poses wide-ranging potential for experimentation in sonority. This chapter is presented in two sections: Section 1 seeks to examine how pianists represent, store and enact timbre through the over-arching concept of metaphor. It explores how pianists translate metaphorical ideas presented in music into gesture in order to realise timbral conceptions. Section 2, through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, analyses diary entries recorded by the author while practicing ‘La vallée des cloches’ from *Miroirs*, in order to demonstrate the lived conscious experience of a pianist addressing issues of timbre, gesture and interpretation.

¹ Barbara Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 95.

Section 1: Thinking in Metaphor

It is common to describe music and musical performance through the use of metaphor; in fact, it is often easier to refer to music metaphorically than to describe what actually takes place sonically and physically. Roy Howat writes that ‘in Ravel’s *Gaspard de la Nuit* we can almost taste the sulking tear at bar 87 of “Ondine,”² and that ‘for Fauré, as much as for Debussy and Ravel, evocations of bells are a recurring colour, standing out rather in the manner of Van Gogh’s characteristic crimson splashes.’³ Howat here moves between synaesthetic metaphors of taste, sound and sight. He is describing the ‘exactitude of musical impressionism’⁴ but in doing so he moves constantly between metaphorical boundaries, putatively writing about ‘painting in sound’ yet describing bell sounds as colour, and ‘tasting’ Ondine’s tears. While the point he is making is that these ‘impressionist’ composers sought to evoke extra-musical phenomena, and that their art was not distinct from the impressionist painting of the time, it is worth considering the basic idea that music, and particularly the French music in question, is cross-sensory, and is commonly understood in metaphorical terms.⁵

4.1 Metaphor and Pianism

Pianists also have strong recourse to metaphor. They employ metaphor in two salient interconnected ways: when describing a physical gesture, and when describing sound. Gestural metaphors can include ‘sinking into the keys’ or ‘drawing the keys towards you.’ Sonic metaphors can include ‘singing tone,’ timbral ‘colour,’ and tonal ‘depth,’ ‘sparkle’ or ‘lightness.’ Heinrich Neuhaus stated that ‘teachers inevitably and constantly use metaphor to define the various ways of

² Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ Roy Howat, ‘The exactitude of musical “Impressionism”’ in *The Art of French Piano Music*, 1-51.

⁵ See ‘Symbolism’, Chapter 1, 18.

producing tone on the piano. We speak of fingers fusing with the keyboard, of ‘growing into the keyboard’ (Rachmaninov’s expression) as if it were resilient and one could ‘sink’ into it at will.’⁶ These gestural and sonic metaphors are interconnected because the gesture serves the sound, and for trained pianists they are inextricable. A repertoire of gestures and their sonic counterparts are built up over years of embodiment. It is arguable that metaphorical thinking is more prevalently used in and pertinent to artistic pianism than in the practice of other instruments because the piano is a percussion instrument which pianists strive to make sound un-percussive. Consequently, the sounds are connected in the imagination, and a piano performance is created through a synthesis of aural, gestural and imaginative activity. Pianists’ constant attunement with their instrument helps to build a library of audio-tactile imagery from which they can draw. In this sense, the sound is created or anticipated first in the imagination, and then transformed into an embodied choreography. Tobias Matthay describes this complex process of anticipating music in the mind when playing the piano in metaphorical terms:

In Music we choose some particular sequence of beats or pulses, and upon this particular form of *extension in space*, or Time-spacings, upon this thoroughly tangible *time-canvas* of Pulse we lay the *progression* of our musical picture, whether as composers or players – just as the painter must lay out *his* work on his canvas.

It may strike you at first that this is “a very waste of words” but I assure you we are here face-to-face with one of the most fundamental laws of our art, and the teaching of it.⁷

⁶ Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K. A. Leibovitch (London: Kahn & Averill, 1993), 62.

⁷ Tobias Matthay, *Musical Interpretation, Its Laws and Principles, and Their Application in Teaching and Performing* (Boston: Boston Music Co., 1913), 13; quoted in Stephen Siek, *England’s Piano Sage: The Life and Teachings of Tobias Matthay* (London & Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 225.

It is common for pianists to imagine a crescendo on a single note so that musically it ‘moves’ towards the next, creating a sense of, or illusion of, an actual crescendo. In reality, the tone begins to die from the moment it is initiated.⁸

4.2 The Piano: the Instrument of Fantasy

The abstract or imaginative representation of sound for the pianist is heightened because of two putative ‘negative’ attributes of the piano. The first is that pitch is not created by the pianist, but by the hammer hitting the string, and so pitch production is inherently inexpressive (Mine Doğantan-Dack writes that ‘pitch does not require any *artistic* interaction with the instrument’).⁹ The second is that the piano tones begin to die away from the moment they are initiated. Danae Killian-O’ Callaghan regards ‘the pianist’s art [as] confined to positive articulation of a sound-world perpetually dying away.’¹⁰ Mine Doğantan-Dack proposes the melodic interval, therefore, as the most expressive act of pianistic artistry, and outlines that the phenomenological experience of playing the piano in the Western Art Music tradition consists of a very active imaginative element, where timbre, polyphony and phrasing are attended to psychologically, and in turn transformed into an embodied choreography. She writes:

⁸ In a piano lesson I was once asked to ‘enter, physically, into the sound.’ The particular sound was the first D sharp of the opening melody played by the left hand of *Ondine* from *Gaspard de la Nuit*, and my teacher was helping me to create the smoothest possible legato line. A combination of being imaginatively ‘inside’ the tone, and such focussed attention to the sound helped to create this legato - but also the piano became less ‘pianistic.’

⁹ Mine Doğantan-Dack, ‘A Sketch for a Hermeneutical Phenomenology of the Piano’ in Mine Doğantan-Dack and John Dack (eds), *Music and Sonic Art: Theories and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 48.

¹⁰ Danae Killian-O’ Callaghan, ‘Unveiling the Melodic Interval: A Phenomenology of the Musical Element in Human Consciousness’ (MA dissertation, Victorian College of the Arts, The University of Melbourne) 1.

This basic necessity of grounding pianistic artistry in the spaces in between individual keys, and in temporal spans needed to traverse these spaces, is the foundation on which the piano rises – in the experience of its practitioners – as the instrument of the psychological, of the imaginary, of fantasy and illusion.¹¹

While it is true that a pianist cannot change the quality of the note once initiated, it can be argued that timbral quality is as expressive as the playing of an interval; however, musical context is needed to elicit an affective response to timbre. Doğantan-Dack cites a study undertaken by Bruno Repp in which audiences assess the aesthetic quality of a performance of the opening bars of Chopin's etude op. 10 no. 3. Repp speculated that other variables – for instance, touch – might play a greater role than timing and dynamics in making aesthetic evaluations.¹² Although it is one of the most valuable assets of a pianist, the precise physical basis and the psychological effects of touch are not well understood.¹³

4.3 Choosing the Metaphor

It is possible for the pianist to choose how they hear a sound; the pianist can have a perception of, or attitude towards, a sound, chord or phrase, and this influences its sonic realisation. Michael Spitzer argues that although listeners have no choice but to hear music as human, they have plenty of latitude with respect to how they hear music's human aspects. 'Representation, language and embodiment comprise three distinct and richly organised domains of human experience. It is astonishing that the listener can decide, at will, to hear the same phrase as a living tableau, a vocal

¹¹ Doğantan-Dack, 'A Sketch for a Hermeneutical Phenomenology of the Piano', 51.

¹² Bruno Repp, 'A Microcosm of Musical Expression: III, Contributions of timing and dynamics to the aesthetic impression of pianists' performances of the initial measures of Chopin's Etude in E Major, *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 106 (1999), < <https://doi.org/10.1121/1.427078> > [Accessed 21 June 2022].

¹³ Mine Doğantan-Dack, 'In the Beginning was Gesture: Piano Touch and the Phenomenology of the Performing Body' in Anthony Gritten and Elaine King (eds), *New Perspectives on Music and Gesture* (Surrey and Boston: Ashgate, 2011), 253.

utterance, or a person.’¹⁴ He asks how the three ‘cross-domain’ metaphors of representation (image), language, and embodiment, relate to the three technical or ‘intra-musical’ metaphors – music as harmony, as rhythm and as melody. He argues that these two sets of metaphors line up in stable couples ‘so that there is a natural fit or isomorphism between harmony and painting, rhythm and language, and melody and life’ and through this shows an original perspective on ‘the age-old relationship between the musical and the so-called extramusical.’¹⁵ Although Spitzer writes from a listener's perspective, it is helpful and insightful to consider his propositions as a pianist. A pianist spends significant practice time ‘searching’ for a particular sound, a sound (timbre/colour) which aligns with a synthesis of the composer’s directions and the pianist’s artistic conception of a work. This process can be physical, involving the inculcation of a specific combination of gestures into the body so that the pianist’s artistic aims for the music are embodied and can be recreated automatically in performance. An element of this process of ‘searching’ for a particular sound also entails an imaginative aspect, ‘thinking of’ a phrase in a certain way, imagining a series of chords, for example, as a non-musical entity. Spitzer explores the philosophical impact of thinking of music as metaphor and relates these ideas to Baroque, Classical and Romantic Music. His research does not relate directly to either performance or French impressionist music, but it is worthwhile to consider his scholarship in relation to these. Spitzer’s idea in its simplest form is that the metaphorical pairings are melody and life, harmony and painting/image, and rhythm and language. Spitzer explains the melody and life relationship taking the simple example of two crotchets, F followed by E:

Like a person moving through space, it traverses two coordinates of the pitch spectrum, F and E. Alternatively, the phrase is compounded of two living cells, F and E. Or perhaps a seed, F, grows into a two-note cell. The

¹⁴ Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

phrase might even be heard to objectify a life-force disembodied from any agency – a force of will or desire, perhaps. Regardless of the problem of individuation, the metaphor of “music as life” is a compelling one. It can even determine how one can relate to a musical work – as if it were an actual person. To anthropomorphize a tone is the first step to thinking of a concerto as an emperor, or an orchestral suite as a carnival of the animals.¹⁶

Although this quotation does not specifically relate to playing the piano – or indeed to playing music at all (it is based on listening) – this description of selective conceptualisation of sound chimes with the pianist’s art of ‘fantasy’ and ‘illusion’. It is one of the ways in which variations in tone colour is achieved.

4.4 Genre/Style: Another Metaphor

In the same way the pianist can choose how to hear a melody, rhythm or harmonic sequence metaphorically, it is possible that he/she can have autonomy in choosing the Gestalt of the work, their aesthetic conception of it as a whole. It is interesting to consider what can be gleaned about the pieces in *Miroirs* by simply considering their titles in relation to the score. The titles serve a quasi-programmatic purpose, disambiguating the musical materials, capturing an idea in the imagination. James Hepokoski defines programme music in the following way:

While broader understandings of the term have been advanced to include all illustrative music, program music is most scrupulously regarded as that subset of representational music whose otherwise idiosyncratic formal structures or musical materials are most readily grasped by mapping the details of the music onto a governing

¹⁶ Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought*, 12. Comparing this with the idea of ‘entering into the sound’ of the first melody D sharp of ‘Ondine,’ it becomes apparent that there are many ways to internally conceptualise a simple melody metaphorically.

external narrative or temporal sequence of images. A piece's backdrop or storyline, that is, plays a vital role in helping one to understand its ongoing musical processes.¹⁷

'Noctuelles', without its title, becomes strikingly abstract, its 'idiosyncratic structures' (polyrhythms and polytonality) are more readily understood through the imagining of fluttering moths. The bell peals of 'La vallée des cloches', without the implication of the title, would cease to represent an extra-musical sound. The titles of the movements of *Miroirs* certainly imply a programmatic element, however, considering the symbolist implication of Ravel's aesthetic and *Miroirs* particularly, it does not seem artistically sufficient to assume only a programmatic reading. Hepokoski writes that:

Fundamental to all associative listening and relatable to the general, though somewhat different, question of musical signification is the operation of metaphor: one thing is heard as being like, or otherwise equated with, another, different thing ... Metaphor theory is currently a burgeoning field, one that is anything but settled. Consequently one should speak rather of recent metaphor theories, in contestation not only with each other but also with other modes of approach to such issues.¹⁸

Miroirs offers the interpreter programmatic titles within a symbolist frame. The pianist therefore has to consider the surface programmatic metaphors of bells, moths, gushing water; and a symbolist dimension: the programme as a metaphor itself. Programme music as metaphor takes an extra-musical depiction as a metaphor for something else, a feeling, for example. Although it seems to be another step removed from the music – through music – through title – through metaphor – it is arguably closer to the expressive intention of the music. There are two levels of metaphor – the first relates to metaphor implied by the title. The second level refers to the value attributed to this metaphor; what it represents for the performer in the context of the whole work. In 'La vallée des

¹⁷ James Hepokoski, 'Program Music' in Stephen Downes (ed.), *Aesthetics of Music: Musicological Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

cloches', for example, the bell peals might not only portray bells, but represent the ends of the lives of the dedicatees of *Miroirs*, or Ravel's own death.

4.5 Timbre

Mine Doğantan-Dack suggests that 'one area of research that has been neglected in music psychology is the ways that performers experience, represent and store timbre.'¹⁹ She suggests that this may be because of timbre's elusive quality, in that it is

phenomenally the least mimetically available attribute of sound because we cannot faithfully reproduce in our own voice the timbres of natural events and musical instruments ... For listeners, the pitches and rhythms of a melody can be made one's own more readily than its original timbre.

Doğantan-Dack argues that a performer's timbral memory is based on the constant attunement of a performer's kinaesthetic relation to his/her instrument.

The timbre represents the unique interaction between their body and the instrument, the experiential result of the constant attunement of the force they apply to initiate and sustain the sounds and the counter-force exerted by the instrument. In this connection, I would argue that the performer develops a memory for tone colour that is based on their kinaesthetic sensations.²⁰

James Hepokoski notes the physiological aspect of metaphor, which puts in mind Doğantan-Dack's ideas about gesture and timbre: 'A number of these [metaphor] theories recast earlier concepts of metaphor and so claim to be informed, to a greater or lesser degree, by ongoing research in cognitive science, with its interest in its physiological embodiment of the mind.'²¹

¹⁹ Doğantan-Dack, 'In the Beginning was Gesture', 250.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ James Hepokoski, 'Program Music' in Stephen Downes, (ed.), *Aesthetics of Music*, 71.

This chapter has presented a duality of metaphor – the conceptualised metaphor of the sound or ‘sonic metaphor’, and the metaphor which describes the gesture serving the sound, or ‘gestural metaphor’. These become unified as one Gestalt and are inextricable. Doğantan-Dack notes that the challenge in articulating this process may increase with the level of skill of the performer.

One difficulty that a phenomenology of the performing body needs to tackle has to do with the fact that “with increasing skill mental representations for performance become successively more dissociated from the movements involved” (Gabrielsson 2003: 240); while performing, performers often do not focus on their bodily movements but on conceptual issues such as interpretation.²²

The interpretation Doğantan-Dack refers to might be a metaphorical idea – rippling waves, distant bells, a rich tenor voice, or a deeper signification implied by the metaphor, for example, the spiritual connotation of bell peals – which is the performer’s central focus. The resultant physical gestures enacted are inseparable from the mental images and response to auditory feedback. The higher the performer’s level of skill, the more difficult it is to separate the elements of the actions involved in initiating sound at the piano.

Section 2: ‘La vallée des cloches’: a Phenomenological Sketch through the use of a Practice Diary

The following section investigates the author’s exploration through practice of ‘La vallée des cloches’ using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Four diary entries were recorded detailing the thought-processes of the author while practising ‘La vallée des cloches’ over a period of a week. This piece had previously been studied, practiced and performed twice before by the

²² Doğantan-Dack, ‘In the Beginning was Gesture, 252. See Alf Gabrielsson, ‘Music Performance Research at the Millennium’, *Psychology of Music* 31 (2003), 240.

author, in 2011 and in 2018. The methodology employed resulted in a slower practice process because of the frequent pauses to record ideas.

4.6 Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Methodology

According to Arthur Sloan and Brian Bowe ‘the viewpoint of hermeneutic phenomenology is: a belief in the importance and primacy of subjective consciousness, an understanding of consciousness as active – as meaning-bestowing, essential structures to consciousness of which we gain direct knowledge by a kind of reflection.’²³ During the practice sessions an open, undirected attitude was adopted. The author strived to express and record his thoughts accurately – where his attention was focused in terms of sound, gesture, phrasing and signification – as they registered. Doğantan-Dack notes that phenomenology is an appropriate means through which to document this type of information:

with its methodological basis in intentionality and directionality, phenomenology offers a particularly apt tool for exploring the relationship between a performer and her instrument, since the former’s musical, aesthetic, expressive and communicative intentions and actions are always directed towards, and achieved through the latter ... Phenomenology of artistic pianism varies in accordance with the kind of repertoire that is performed; contemporary non-tonal repertoire, for example, would require additional physical “vocabulary” compared to tonal repertoire from the so-called common-practice period. A detailed phenomenological project would also consider the commonalities among the complete works of each composer in terms of the embodied engagement they generate with the piano.²⁴

²³ Arthur Sloan & Brian Bowe, ‘Phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology: the philosophy, the methodologies and using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate lecturers' experiences of curriculum design’, *Quality & Quantity*, 48 (2014), 1297.

²⁴ Doğantan-Dack, ‘A Sketch for a Hermeneutical Phenomenology of the Piano’, 48.

The full text contained in the four recorded diary entries can be viewed in Appendix 1. Here, excerpts from the diary entries are included to illustrate a pianist's conscious experience of making interpretative decisions related to the performance of 'La vallée des cloches'. The diary entries record a range of valuable insights, which includes the type of thoughts which register in the performer's consciousness; how he is influenced by concepts in the literature; how these concepts are personalised; and how new significations emerge only through practice.

4.7 'Messiness' of Artistic Processes

As Doğantan-Dack's scholarship reveals, gesture, sound and mental image become unified for the performer as one Gestalt, and are inextricable. This is evident in the following extract:

I think of these [e#s in bar 6] as a bell being struck in a true and uninhibited way – not as echoes or resonances. I experiment with playing these with my thumb and third finger together. I press my thumb into the back of the last joint of my third finger, and try and play deeply, with a 'striking' motion, relaxing my wrist after each gesture. I find that if the 'strike' is too short, the sound becomes too percussive and piano-sounding. I try and 'soften' this percussive sound slightly by remaining a bit longer in the key before releasing. I am searching for a sound that has the kind of 'ringing' quality of a bell. I think about the feeling of being in a church or very close to a bell, and how sometimes I feel the reverberations in the body; like my body is also the instrument. I try again to play the e#s, and imagine that they reverberate in my body. I finish this session by playing through from bar 1 -11 again.²⁵

Here, the conceptualisation of sound, through the metaphor of a church bell, is symbiotically linked to the gesture enacted. There is an element of searching, physically, for a mental audio-image. The following extract also displays the 'messiness' of artistic processes involved in interpretation, with several layers of thought registering all at once. Technical issues relating to articulation, balance

²⁵ See Diary Entry 1, Appendix 1, 118.

of texture and pedalling register together with deeper conceptual ideas about the agency of the singer in the *largement chanté* section of ‘La vallée des cloches’.

I do not want too much ‘muddiness’ between the first and second beats of bar 20, but I need to sustain the bass B \flat and F, so I try to flutter-pedal to clear some of the sound, but to hold on to some of the bass.

I try to ‘enter into’ the D \flat octave (beat two) so that I can smoothly connect it to the next melody note F octave, giving the impression of one smooth line.

I notice that there are many thoughts going through my head:

- I have played this piece before, so my muscle memory has presented me with the gestures I need to realise this. I am already able to balance the melody of the central section with the outer bells.
- The outer bells need to get gradually softer. They are slurred and each have a staccato mark. The first in each group has an accent. I experiment with different parts of my fingers – the tip, just before the nail, and the pads, the flat of the last joint – to see what works.
- I think of the singing voice, and wonder who might be singing this melody. It feels too personal to be Maurice Delage. There is something very deep and sorrowful about this melody. I think about it being Ravel, and try and imagine him singing this melody.²⁶

4.8 Research-inspired Interpretation

Owing to the fact that the diary entries were recorded after significant scholarly enquiry was undertaken relating to *Miroirs*, they reveal that concepts and ideas encountered in scholarship entered the consciousness of the pianist as he practiced, in the form of signification he constructs in ‘La vallée des cloches’. In the following extract, the ideas of Deborah Mawer and Michael Puri are present during the practice session.

As I continue, I notice the C-F relationship in the melody from bar 22-23. A few things strike me at once:

²⁶ See Diary Entry 2, Appendix 1, 121.

- This might be an example of the perfect fourth relationship prevalent in Ravel's output that scholars refer to (Howat, Mawer). C rises to F (bar 22 beats 1-2) and F falls to C (bar 23 beats 1-2).
- This is like a mirror. The changing bass harmony – B \flat and F to A \flat – and the addition of the G \flat in the bells in bar 23 give me an impression of a refraction of light in this 'mirror' image. The image in bar 22 is changed in the reflection in bar 23.
- Once I imagine a reflected image, in my imagination I vaguely see a pond reflecting a pink sky at dusk, and the 'bells' of the top stave become for me droplets which gently project water-rings or resonances. I play again.
- The image of a pond reflecting the sky stays in my mind as I continue to play the *expressivo* phrases. As I noted in the last session, this for me has a higher, more spiritual feeling. As I continue playing the new (to this practice session) material (from upbeat to bar 27-31), I notice how I relate this back to the 'terrestrial' material of the *largement chanté* melody. Playing again, the *expressivo* phrases feel like a kind of 'escape' from the material on either side. This puts in mind Puri's 'psychological interiority of memory' and I wonder if I can think of the *espressivo* phrases as a sort of nostalgic recollection in between the 'present time' of the piece. With this in mind on my next attempt, I notice that bars 23 and 26 become transition bars in and out of the 'memory' material. When I think of these bars as a memory, the sound I make changes. It is lighter, less robust, and the legato is created with the pedal and less with the tactile connection.
- I am reminded in a simplistic way of Proust and the famous passage where the narrator describes, as he tastes a madeleine in adulthood, being transported back to the blissful memory of this as a child. To consider this material as a memory is one interpretative option.²⁷

Ravel's signature perfect fourth²⁸ inspires the pianist to interpret this material in relation to the title – 'mirrors', which in turn evokes an image of a sky and a pond, which in turn prompts the recollection of Puri's memory work and Ravel, which in turn provides a structural frame for this section, taking the form: present – memory – present. Not only does the theme of memory, drawn

²⁷ See Diary Entry 3, Appendix 1, 124 .

²⁸ Deborah Mawer writes that 'for Ravel the signature interval, objectified across his entire repertory, is the perfect fourth, often used in descent, or with the two pitches in parallel.' Deborah Mawer, 'Musical objects and machines,' in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48.

from scholarship, provide a localised structure, it also affects the quality of sound: ‘When I think of these bars as a memory, the sound I make changes. It is lighter, less robust, and the legato is created with the pedal and less with the tactile connection.’ In another instance, the scholarship of Alexandra Kieffer in relation to the potential realist evocation of bell peal resonances is considered, but the idea seems to be unconvincing for performance, being too subtle.

I then remember Alexandra Kieffer’s suggestion that the opening bells are too high to be individually struck bells, but that they could be considered as the higher peals of a lower bell. I imagine these being the faint reverberations of a bell that was struck before the piece begins, and try again.

This results in a more dampened sound. I notice that I create this by playing with ‘flatter’ tips of my fingers – less grip – and I don’t differentiate between the two notes in each octave. I am imagining a less bright, more dull sound. I have the feeling that I prefer the brighter bell sounds to Kieffer’s more realist suggestion, because I think Kieffer’s idea might be too subtle, but I resolve not to decide yet and remain aware of it as I continue.²⁹

4.9 Performance as Meaning-bestowing

In addition to demonstrating both the complexity and ‘messiness’ of processes of artistic research, and the possibility of incorporating abstract scholarly principles into an interpretation, the phenomenological diary demonstrated the (singular) meaning-bestowing nature of the practice of the music. That is, ideas which previously did not strike the pianist and which were not directly encountered in the literature emerged only through the physical act of playing the music. In the following example, the potential evocation of the sound of the organ in ‘La vallée des cloches’ is considered. The idea is then bolstered by Kieffer’s suggestion of the Sacré-Coeur bell’s presence in the piece.

²⁹ See Diary Entry 1, Appendix 1, 116.

I play this a few times, and notice that the voicing in the C major chords (bars 16, 17 and 18) really remind me of the organ. The strong thirds (Es) in the middle register and the low C put in mind the registers of an organ, with the low C being the pedal. This all reminds me of Alexandra Kieffer's realist reading of 'La vallée des cloches', and I wonder if the church organ might also feature as well as the bell of the Sacré-Coeur. I check to verify if any of the other *Miroirs* are written across three staves – they are not. I will check later if anything in the literature relates this piece to the organ.³⁰

Structural information is also more pertinent during practice; or the practice and playing of 'La vallée des cloches' re-emphasises music's time-dependency, taking the music out of the conceptual abstraction of the scholarship.

I will begin today by playing from bar 27 to the end of the piece. I have the sense that breaking up the piece like this is helpful to articulate the localised thought-processes I have, but that each section of the piece has relational meaning to what happens on either side of it, and so I need also to consider it as one evolving idea in time.³¹

While many rich, varied and sometimes intellectual concepts entered into the pianist's consciousness and consequently into his interpretation, there were moments when the sounds guided the playing. Processes specific to the phenomenology of performing the piano – such as the connection of dying tones – meant that the sounds 'led' and the pianist 'followed'. The following extract demonstrates that thoughts are often not intellectual, but there is a full-body 'knowing' of the music; the interpretation exists in the dynamic interaction between the instrument and the performing body.

I play through the piece from the start. This time, I do not consciously try and register everything going through my mind, but enjoy the experience of playing. I get physical enjoyment from the tactile experience of making sounds, and listen intently. From bar 32-41 I think I probably moved the music on (hopefully imperceptibly),

³⁰ See Diary Entry 2, Appendix 1 page 120.

³¹ See Diary Entry 4, Appendix 1, page 127.

moving through the ritualistic repeated material. I react to the sounds of the piano, leaving the dying sounds dictate the movement in time.³²

4.10 Conclusion

Thought-processes involved in artistic decision-making at this level are complex and often involve several layers or strands striking the performer at once, validating Mine Dogantan-Dack's claim that 'processes of artistic research are highly messy cognitively, affectively and creatively.'³³ In several instances, the diary entries record waves of thoughts entering the consciousness of the pianist which address sound production, articulation, gesture and concept or 'meaning' all at once. In addition, ideas absorbed by the performer through hermeneutic and critical enquiry in Ravel scholarship influenced the performer's construction of meaning and signification in his developing interpretation. In this particular case, the performer was influenced by the aesthetic scholarship of Michael Puri, Alexandra Kieffer's 'realism' in 'La vallée des cloches', the symbolism of the falling minor third as explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis, as well as other more localised influences.³⁴ Furthermore, the diary entries revealed that some new meanings emerged only through practice or *poiesis* of performance/practice.

It is necessary to note that concepts drawn from the scholarship were interpreted by the performer, so although it can be said that these abstract values can influence an interpretation, the objectivity of their presentation in the literature is internalised, personalised and subject to the unique experience, interpretation, taste, style and proclivities of the performer. It is necessary to note

³² See Diary Entry 4, Appendix 1, 129.

³³ Mine Doğan-Dack, 'Senses and Sensibility: The Performer's Intentions Between the Page and the Stage', *Rivista di Analisi e Teoria Musicale* 1 (2021), 26.

³⁴ For example, Rink's structure-as-process, and Ravel's signature perfect fourth.

further that the diary entries were recorded during practice sessions and not after a live performance, so although scholarly concepts entered the pianist's consciousness during practice, it was not recorded if this too would take place during performance. However, this thesis takes the view that there is a bodily inculcation of ideas, or 'embodiment' involved in practice, so that interpretative decisions may be made with the influence of scholarly ideas, but these ideas may not be necessarily addressed or considered each time a piece is performed.

Chapter 5: Autoethnographic Reflection & Conclusion

This final chapter provides an autoethnographic reflection, an account from the ‘I’ perspective of the pianist, in an attempt to highlight the challenges involved in navigating the space between scholarship and practice, or in the personalisation of the objective. It includes comparison to other artistic disciplines – Irish traditional music and sculpture – in order to demonstrate the breadth of exploration involved in artistic research.

5.1 The Challenges of Synthesising Scholarship and Practice

One of the most challenging aspects of examining *Miroirs*, and Ravel’s music and musical era generally, from a musicological perspective has been reconciling concepts in Ravel analysis and criticism with performance perspectives so that this synthesis leads to more artistic insight. Initial tentative forays into Ravel scholarship highlighted (for me) the breadth and depth of Ravel discourse which exists outside the practice room and often outside the concert hall, insofar as piano studies and performances can take place without very much academic or scholarly input (aside from some programme-note writing). Some observations I gradually came to understand are that deep and insightful Ravel musicology has been produced and is still being produced since his lifetime, and similarly excellent interpretations of *Miroirs* have been recorded by pianists such as Walter Gieseking, Louis Lortie, Anne Quefelec among others. These can exist and continue to evolve without too much input from one another. As this thesis demonstrates, these can also inform one another and lead to new creative insights. Another challenge faced by fledgling researcher-performers is to absorb and adopt the ideas of the ‘new musicology’ of the 1990s which advocated a more ‘musical’ musicology, based on music as performance-act rather than as finite text. This

perspective offered ‘a renewed emphasis on music as sound and event, an ontological status lost in the mid-nineteenth century, when music’s notation gained the upper hand.’¹ When I had decided that I would like to investigate the music of Maurice Ravel, and *Miroirs* particularly, initial searches in the literature yielded material which almost exclusively pertained to biography, aesthetics, criticism and analysis. Artistic research projects which focused on the act of playing the piano did not include works by Ravel, and so it was difficult to construct a frame of reference from which to start. Contemporary research which deals with previously undocumented processes of the performer (for example, those by Mine Doğantan-Dack)² operates in an entirely different sphere to the discourse of aesthetic criticism, for example. This led to my questioning the nature of this kind of research, or the ‘direction’ of the discourse between scholarship and practice. I have become accustomed to hearing phrases such as ‘practice-based research’, ‘practice informed by scholarship’, ‘reflective practice’, ‘artistic research’ and ‘artistic research as practice in music’ within my conservatoire, and at conferences and lectures. I have come to understand that there is nuance within these disciplines. I questioned whether ‘practice-based scholarship’ implied scholarship centred around performance processes, or practice which is informed by existing scholarship (around a particular composer, for example). My reticence in pursuing a project which dealt solely with performance processes (for example, a project based exclusively on ‘gesture’ in *Miroirs*) was influenced partly by my wish not to negate or disregard the rich literature in all forms of Ravel-study. I wanted to create a broad understanding of *Miroirs* which encompassed both the aesthetic and performative – ideally which synthesised the two.

¹ John Rink, ‘The State of Play in Performance Studies’, in Jane Davidson (ed.), *The Music Practitioner*, (ed.) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 37; quoted in Mine Doğantan Dack, ‘In the Beginning was Gesture: Piano Touch and the Phenomenology of the Performing Body’, in Anthony Gritten and Elaine King (eds.), *New Perspectives on Music and Gesture* (Surrey and Boston: Ashgate, 2011), 246.

² For example, see Mine Doğantan-Dack, ‘The Role of the Musical Instrument in Performance as Research: The Piano as a Research Tool’ in Mine Doğantan-Dack (ed.), *Artistic Practice as Research in Music: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2016).

5.2 ‘Between Sensitivity and Intellect’: Over-intellectualisation and Martin Hayes

‘Art must stand in the middle — between sensitivity and intellect ... and I think it’s an ideal of our time — it seems to me — to look for a balance.’³

There exist several examples in which Ravel claims that his position on art sits between the emotional and intellectual. This has proved to be central to an aesthetic understanding of Ravel’s style, and *Miroirs* particularly. Interestingly, this duality of sensitivity and intellect can be analogous to the concepts of practice and scholarship in this research, which seeks to fuse the practical-instinctive-tacit knowledge – which as pianists we build up but often do not question or articulate – with criticism and analysis which can offer new understanding. At certain times through the course of this study, however, I have had niggling feelings that sometimes the over-analysis and over-intellectualisation of this music can be un-artistic. In his autobiography, the celebrated Irish fiddle player Martin Hayes deeply considers his connection to Irish Traditional music; the authentic, expressive feeling that is at the heart of his music-making. Comparing his experience of Leaving Certificate Poetry with his approach to music he writes:

Once I had deeply experienced the poetry, I had little interest in dissecting it into analysed fragments for the exam process. To this day, I have a similar problem with music. The more I have to think or apply my intellect in the act of making music, the less feeling it seems to contain. For me, poems, like music, are to be experienced. They can lift the heart, spark the imagination, broaden one’s thinking.⁴

³ Maurice Ravel, ‘Esquisse autobiographique’, *La Revue musicale* (December, 1938); quoted in Mateusz Glinksi (ed.), *Romantyzm w muzyce* (Varsovie: Muszyka, 1928), 113., *La Revue musicale* (1938), in Manuel Cornejo, *L’intégrale: correspondance (1895-1937), écrits et entretiens, entretiens* (Paris: Le Passeur Éditeur, 2018), 1442.

⁴ Martin Hayes, *Shared Notes* (Dublin: Transworld Ireland, 2021), 86.

Hayes's music is made up of the traditional Irish tunes handed down to him from his father's generation, esteemed musicians of East Clare and members of the Tulla Céilí Band. Writing about being 'entrusted' with this tradition he says:

I began to understand that there was a doctrine of soulfulness, feeling, depth, passion and tradition that the older, wiser souls of this music knew they were carrying. They were simply looking for more carriers, and so I felt as though they had brought me in under their wings and that such a gesture was to be cherished and respected. For me, these musical friendships with older musicians became much more than playing the fiddle; I felt like I was being entrusted with something important to our culture with the expectation that I would help preserve it.⁵

For Martin Hayes, 'preserving' the culture has not meant playing this music in the exact manner in which he first encountered it. Over the course of his career he has led many traditional and fusion groups⁶ who have creatively adapted and pushed this music beyond its folk roots. It is clear that what is important always for Hayes is the expressive feeling at the heart of his music making, whatever type of music this is. He can be vague in his expression about this, and as he notes himself, does not like to 'dissect' or analyse this too much. Comparing Hayes's position with that of a contemporary classical musician interpreting Ravel's music provokes consideration of the difference of approach in these styles, whether classical musicians are entrusted with this music as custodians of a tradition, and the extent of their freedom to interpret, adapt, and re-mould as Hayes does.

Folk and classical traditions imply great difference in approach. Ravel's music is a product of the conservatoire, conceived as result of a structured, classical training in harmony, counterpoint,

⁵ Hayes, *Shared Notes*, 76.

⁶ Martin Hayes and Denis Cahill, *The Martin Hayes Quartet, The Gloaming*.

orchestration, and piano at the Paris conservatoire. As a result, his musical-epistemological awareness is greater, his scope of influence larger, and his artistic aims arguably more defined. A similarly high level of training is required of the Ravel-pianist to execute a work such as *Miroirs*. The expressive freedom of the pianist must be carefully considered in the context of the work. Martin Hayes re-moulds comparatively simple tunes (the composers of which are often unknown) and elevates their artistic value through his own human, soulful style of fiddle-playing, and his self-confessed commitment to feeling and integrity.

The expressive potential of, and differences between, classical and folk traditions here might be clarified through Suzanne Langer's philosophy-based perspective on the expressive potential of music. Langer explains that the emotive-symptom theory of music, popular throughout the nineteenth century, considered the composer 'the original subject of the emotions depicted, but the performer ... his confidant and mouthpiece. He transmits the feelings of the master to a sympathetic audience.'⁷ Langer argues that this theory of music as self-expression is insufficient because 'the history of music has been a history of more and more integrated, disciplined and articulated *forms*' and '*sheer artistic expression requires no artistic form*'.⁸ Langer's position argues that music's expressive potential is therefore as symbol, not as direct expression of human emotion.

If music has any significance, it is semantic, not symptomatic. Its "meaning" is evidently not that of a stimulus to evoke emotions, nor that of a signal to announce them; if it has an emotional content, it "has" it in the same

⁷ Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 3rd edn, 1957) 215.

⁸ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 216.

sense that language “has” its conceptual content – *symbolically* ... Music is not the cause or cure of feelings but their *logical expression*.⁹

Perhaps the directness of Hayes’ musical expression relates to the simplicity of the form in which he is working. While Hayes reports that he is a ‘carrier’ of a tradition, his personal connection with the music speaks of his own individual expression. Ravel’s highly cogent and articulate conception of form leaves much less room for the same kind of expressive freedom. Freedom in this context can come through the conceptual relationship the performer has with the music – the meanings they attribute to localised sonic effects, as well as an over-arching metaphorical idea permeating an entire work.¹⁰ If the aesthetic influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Ravel is also considered (in terms of process), this level of interpretation warrants an interpretation that is both musically sensitive and intellectually informed.

Despite this, over-intellectualisation can sometimes be unhelpful when language fails to describe artistic processes effectively. This basic idea has emerged as a crux of this project – that a language which traverses the domains of practice and text is elusive, and linguistic description may lead to more ambiguity, or at least may not lead to more artistic insight. Ravel’s music is refined and well-constructed, but the aesthetic sensibility of a pianist may not, or perhaps need not, be expressed at the same refined level in language. Huebner writes of ‘the perennial difficulties involved in analogies between music and language’,¹¹ and while, for example, comparisons between symbolist poetry and symbolist music may lead to a deeper aesthetic understanding, language has its own

⁹ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 218.

¹⁰ As explored in Chapter 4, 76.

¹¹ Stephen Huebner, ‘Ravel’s Poetics: Literary Currents, Classical Takes’ in Peter Kaminsky, (ed.) *Unmasking Ravel, New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 17.

limitations and linguistic definition may essentialise certain artistic processes more than advancing knowledge or understanding. I find that I often have a more direct relationship with the sound of the piano than I do with some of the concepts in this thesis expressed in language, or than I can put into words. This may be why metaphor, a word on the periphery of regular speech denoting a complex conceptual phenomenon, seems most suitable in describing the cross-sensory timbral conceptualisation of the pianist.

5.3 Giacometti and Sculpture ‘in process’

Ravel’s process has emerged as having been highly calculated and meticulous, often involving the conception of an entire work in his mind before realising it on paper. Although he suggested that he required no more than a degree of dutiful obedience from the performers of his works (indeed remarking once that ‘performers are slaves’¹²), such a strict philosophy is impossible to enact in performance given the staggering amount of contingencies involved in the process of interpretation. Historical, critical and aesthetic investigation can contribute to a performer’s construction of an aesthetic epistemology of a work, but this is inevitably going to be a unique assemblage of the material to which the performer is drawn.

Owing to the cross-sensory, cross-disciplinary aesthetic of this music, the investigation has prompted the consideration of the aesthetic experience of other artistic disciplines; for instance, the viewing of a painting or the reading of a poem. Works of art in other disciplines seem to possess a certain element of ‘being finished’ when compared with a piece of music, whose full realisation

¹² Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Yale University Press, 2011), 321. See Introduction, 1.

only occurs during its performance-time. However, a visit to an exhibition of sculpture (and some paintings) by Alberto Giacometti prompted me to form an alternative view of this idea. Giacometti's sculptures are full of movement; the following description was included beside a portrait of Giacometti's wife, Annette.

In the mid-1950s Annette modelled for a series of full-length figures. In some, her features are recognisable, in others they appear almost abstract. When modelling, Giacometti's hands were in almost constant motion over the clay, re-working and removing material. The textured surfaces of these figures reflect his wish to capture the essence of what he saw, even though it seemed ephemeral, and even though he always felt that he had failed.¹³

The 'performance' of the sculpture occurs during its conception, while Giacometti is creating. This art is not re-creative, so there is a certain amount lost when it is complete. The 'capturing' time is over, and what remains is something in process, in a way similar to the evocation of a memory in an impressionist painting. In the case of Western Art Music, and particular Ravel's meticulous, perfectionistic style of composition, the process is inverted. His method is rigorous and precise, and it is up to the performer to capture in time its essence. Ravel's composition is a projection, an idea represented through symbols on a page, and the performer conjures, through the material of sound, its realised presence during its performance-time. In this way, Giacometti's effort to evoke, through the medium of clay, the essence of what was before him helped me to form an understanding of what it means to play a piece of music by Ravel.

¹³ Fondation Giacometti: Alberto Giacometti, 'Giacometti: From Life', *National Gallery of Ireland*, exhibition of bronze and plaster sculptures, paintings, drawings and prints, 9 April – 4 September 2022. [Visited on 5 June 2022].

5.4 Conclusion

Chapter 1 revealed that *Miroirs* finds apt description in the aesthetics of symbolism: through portraiture, self-portraiture, number symbolism, and reference to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, it seems possible that Ravel was playing with referential ideas of meaning and layers of signification. An understanding of poetic symbolism through Baudelaire's fusion of the 'sensual and the spiritual', or that the sensorial is often coupled with an abstraction, created a two-layer metaphorical/symbolist frame, which can be applied by the pianist to the movements of *Miroirs*. Investigation into the aesthetic influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Ravel's process in Chapter 2 also revealed a duality of means: an often-emphasised rigorous focus on craftsmanship or 'appearance', and a sometimes-overlooked deeper layer of metaphor, symbol and abstraction. The cyclic implication of the Savoyarde Bell knelling the suite to a close as suggested by Alexandra Kieffer, coupled with Jean Marnold's suggestion that Ravel was concerned with late works of Beethoven while writing *Miroirs*, adds to the interpretation of this work on two levels – superficial and profound. Chapter 2 also demonstrated how ideas in musicological discourse – or hermeneutic and formalist approaches to works – can be adopted by the performer. The falling thirds constituted Mawer's 'musical object', and at the same time Poe's 'refrain', and provided an alternative structural pivot, helping the performer to unite all five movements of this work. In the same way metaphorical association can be subject to the imagination of the performer, so too can musical structure depend on signification created in performance. In the same connection, Chapter 3 adopted ideas in contemporary Ravel scholarship and applied them to 'Alborada del gracioso', from a pianist's perspective. The connection between Berger and Puri's aesthetics of impressionism and decadence through the theme of memory offered a tangible common aesthetic aim. The construction of 'Alborada del gracioso' as a 'memory' piece involved personal identification with Ravel's Basque heritage, and the nostalgia and loss associated with irretrievable

experiences as memories. In a performance context, this engages the pianist in questions of agency and narrative.

Chapter 4 bridged the research into a more practice-focused domain, attempting to conceptualise sound, gesture and musical content through the over-arching concept of metaphor. Metaphor helped to articulate the space between imaginative sound conceptualisation, gesture and choreography of performance. The research culminated in a practice diary, kept by the author, documenting his experiences of practicing ‘La vallée des cloches’ from *Miroirs*. This revealed that thought-processes involved in artistic decision-making at this level are complex and often involve several layers or strands striking the performer at once. While Carolyn Abbate concludes that the kinds of questions hermeneutics tries to settle are ‘virtually impossible’ to address when playing or absorbed in listening to music that is materially present,¹⁴ the diary entries revealed that concepts drawn from the scholarship entered the consciousness of the performer and influenced his artistic decision-making. A pianist’s interpretation can be influenced by scholarly ideas because of the nature of his/her process – a developing relationship with a work, or a period of gestation. In this sense, the performer is constantly constructing layers of signification, not always necessarily discernible to the listener, but meaningful to the performer. Contrary to Abbate’s argument that hermeneutic and formalist ideas cannot be effectively incorporated into a performance, this thesis has shown that the significations created by musicological enquiry can be very meaningful to the performer, influencing concepts such as sound production, gesture, and artistic value. It is possible to conclude that because different performances engender different styles of performance preparation, varying degrees of opportunity exist to creatively exploit and investigate the ideas put

¹⁴ Carolyn Abbate, ‘Music—Drastic or Gnostic?’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 510.

forward by musicology. Conversely, the diary entries also revealed that some new meanings emerged only through practice or the *poiesis* of performance/practice, for example the suggestion of the church organ contributing to the spiritual sense in ‘La vallée des cloches’ for the pianist.¹⁵

The autoethnographic reflection articulated some of the challenges involved in the practice of artistic research. It then questioned the efficacy of this practice, and the ‘intellectualisation’ of practice, considering the ideas of Irish fiddle player Martin Hayes, ultimately concluding that there is an element of ineffability involved in the expression of artistic processes. Comparison between a musical text, recreated in time, and Giacometti’s sculpture ‘performed’ during its creation but immutable once complete, added to the understanding of the evocation of the transient and ephemeral, intrinsic to all music, but especially pertinent in the context of Ravel’s style.

While an awareness and deep understanding of the conception of a work and the artistic currents which surround it can reveal meaning, metaphorical/symbolist associations are essentially pluralist and depend on the imagination and interpretation of the performer. Mine Doğantan-Dack describes the potential multiplicity of meanings a score can generate:

One way of moving beyond the textualist paradigm would be to not think of the act of performing in the Western art music tradition in terms of “adding” or “imposing” expressive qualities onto a score, but rather to think of the score and its symbols as approximate (or approximating) abstractions from the universe of all possible embodied and multimodal performance experiences of a piece of music.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Diary Entry 4, Appendix 1, page 121.

¹⁶ Mine Doğantan-Dack, ‘Senses and Sensibility: The Performer’s Intentions Between the Page and the Stage’, *Rivista di Analisi e Teoria Musicale*, 1 (2021), 45.

In this connection, and as this thesis has demonstrated, the twenty-first century pianist can potentially go beyond the score, to provide alternative modes through which to view the 'text', presenting fresh insight and humanity.

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Appendix 1: Phenomenological Diary Entries 1-4

Diary Entry #1

Wednesday 22 June 2022, 11:00am.

Early Music Room, Royal Irish Academy of Music. (Steinway B)

‘La vallée des cloches’

After warming up for 10 minutes, I begin by playing through the piece with the score.

I notice that before I begin my play-through of ‘La vallée des cloches’, I can hear the G# octaves in my inner-ear, and wonder will the sound of this piano match the one in my imagination. I begin to play through the whole piece – to revise the work – and try to have a non-judgemental and open attitude. I will allow myself to re-take sections if I make a mistake.

Thoughts I remember after first play-through:

- As I played the opening bars – lone G# octaves – the opening of ‘Pure Imagination’ from Charlie and the Chocolate factory came to mind. I think this begins with a xylophone and has the same expectant but ‘suspended time’ feeling as ‘La vallée des cloches’.
- The quartal harmony of bar 3 (and each time this returns) puts an image of exotic trees with light-coloured bark gently blowing in my mind (maybe eucalyptus?). I am reminded of the paintings of Mary Swanzy which I have recently seen (online). I think I’ve seen a recording of this piece on YouTube with a painting by Gauguin as the background image – an exotic picture perhaps of his time in Tahiti. I will look up later where the Mary Swanzy paintings

come from. I certainly associate an element of exoticism with the quartal harmony in particular.

- After that first playing, I notice also that I really enjoy the harmony and register of the chords in bar 32. I return to this after and notice that the harmony resolves inwards to a deep, warm D flat chord. The resolution, and deep register, make this a physically very satisfying section to play. I have a similar feeling at bar 37, at the E \flat minor 7 chord – the *mf* dynamic and register make me want to strive for a deep, rich, warm tone.
- After this play-through I notice that the material from bar 42 to the end has a feeling of ‘after everything’ or ‘beyond’ for me; like an epilogue. It feels a bit religious or prayerful. The modulation at bar 42 gives me the feeling that the musical content is ‘elevated’ somehow.

After noting these thoughts, I resolve to focus for the moment on bars 1-11.

I begin to work on the opening two bars. I observe that I release the octaves and sustain with the pedal, even though there is no staccato mark. I am thinking of a bell sound, and trying to emulate the gesture of chiming a bell.

Because it is marked *pp*, I begin very close to the key, so that I can control the downward ‘strike’, and do not accidentally give too much weight.

As I continue playing, I notice that sometimes I hold the bottom G# of the left hand octave with my fifth finger, and release the top. I experiment with lifting my two fingers off the note, and just lifting the top.

I try to ‘bounce’ slightly the top G# in each hand, and sustain the bottom octave. I like the effect this gives – like a very high and light bell is being struck, and at the same time a ‘longer’ sound is created through my holding down the bottom notes in each octave.

I then try to think of the two bars as one unit. I play these several times, and come to the realisation that I would like to diminuendo slightly in the second bar. I keep playing through the first page, to get a sense of the G# bells within the evolving texture.

I then remember Alexandra Kieffer’s suggestion that the opening bells are too high to be individually struck bells, but that they could be considered as the higher peals of a lower bell. I imagine these being the faint reverberations of a bell that was struck before the piece begins, and try again.

This results in a more dampened sound. I notice that I create this by playing with ‘flatter’ tips of my fingers – less grip – and I don’t differentiate between the two notes in each octave. I am imagining a less bright, more dull sound. I have the feeling that I prefer the brighter bell sounds to Kieffer’s more realist suggestion, because I think Kieffer’s idea might be too subtle, but I resolve not to decide yet and remain aware of it as I continue.

I then isolate the quartal figure which begins in bar 3, marked *très doux et sans accentuation*. I try and make this as even as possible, and notice that my fourth finger which plays on E is slightly weaker than the others. I also notice that I hear this in groups of four semiquavers each starting

with the thumb G#, rather than in groups of six. I try again and see if I can feel each beat, while not ‘bumping’ or accenting any note.

This time, I notice that if I keep this very tips of my fingers ‘focussed’ but relax my hand and arm as much as possible, I can create a more ‘floating’, even texture, which puts in mind the gentle sway of the exotic trees.

When I add back in the left hand G# octaves, I try and feel each bar as two minims.

After this attempt, I notice that from my previous interpretations of this piece, I actually try and feel the whole first section, from bar 1 to the fermata in bar 11, as one ‘idea’; or that I don’t try to feel individual beats but just one evolving musical texture.

The descending figure or parallel fourths in bar 4 puts in mind the falling thirds of Chapter 2 – Poe’s refrain and Mawer’s ‘musical object’. I am definitely trying to voice this to promote the top line e'-c#. I notice that I do this by holding slightly more tension in the side of my thumb and tip of my second finger – the fingers I use to play this top line. When I play it, it feels like a symbol, or an omen. I think this may be because the material up to this point has been homogenous – the G#s and quartal harmony have been consistent. The falling thirds enter in bar 4, standing out in relief to the homogenous material.

I play again, observing and listening to all the elements I have just considered and separated. This time, I think about the relationship between the first falling-third-parallel-fourths-figure and the second, and the third. Might the second and third be echoes of the first? I experiment with this idea. I do not think it works – this figure is too spaced out for this to work, and the echoes just sound faint and not properly considered.

I turn my attention to the low accented bass G' in bar 6, marked *p*. It is the first non-pentatonic note, and introduces an element of tension to the soundscape. I know it is related to the three e#' crotchets which begin a quaver later. I consider their relationship to each other – G' and e#. I think of the G' as a deep resounding bell. The middle-register e#'s are marked *mf* – the loudest dynamic direction so far. I think of these as a bell being struck in a true and uninhibited way – not as echoes or resonances. I experiment with playing these with my thumb and third finger together. I press my thumb into the back of the last joint of my third finger, and try and play deeply, with a 'striking' motion, relaxing my wrist after each gesture. I find that if the 'strike' is too short, the sound becomes too percussive and piano-sounding. I try and 'soften' this percussive sound slightly by remaining a bit longer in the key before releasing. I am searching for a sound that has the kind of 'ringing' quality of a bell. I think about the feeling of being in a church or very close to a bell, and how sometimes I feel the reverberations in the body; like my body is also the instrument. I try again to play the e#'s, and imagine that they reverberate in my body. I finish this session by playing through from bar 1 -11 again. 12:31pm.

Diary Entry #2

Friday 24 June 2022, 09:32am

Early Music Room, Royal Irish Academy of Music. (Steinway B)

Today I will work on the middle section. I begin by playing through bars 1-11 twice, trying to pay attention to the detail in sound and gesture I explored in the last session. What struck me during these first play-throughs was the relationship between the e' of the e' - c#' figure in bar 6, with the e#' *mf* bell in the same bar. My ear today heard a sort of yearning appoggiatura between these: e' - e#'.

I decide to move on to the material after the fermata in bar 11. I play from bar 12 (*très calme*) – bar 18 and stop at the *largement chanté* section. I register that a melody line is emerging from the chords. The descending minor third (in parallel fourths) is still present as an inner part (bars 12 and 13). I start to think of this as a symbolic ‘musical object’ that remains the same. To create a line in the fragmentary chordal melodies in bars 12,13 and 14, I listen very carefully to top of the chords, and try and enter into the space between the notes. I repeat this a few times, trying to make sure the voicing here is even, and thinking about the pedalling between these bars, as some of the inner ‘musical object’ material is sustained. The top notes in the left hand chords strike me as very expressive – a#' falling to g#' (in bars 12, 13 and 14, beats 2-3). I think I want to do a slight diminuendo between these. I try again, and this time this same left hand voice in bar 14, which continues through a descending line, strikes me as being very expressive. a#' – g#' – f###' – c'.

I experiment with this section for a while and a few ideas come to mind –

- The fragmentary chordal melodies (bars 12,13,14 15 and 16) seem not to represent bells.
- The accented B \flat octaves and low C' in bar 16 are bells.

- I am beginning to associate the *très calme* direction with a spiritual, prayerful feeling. This may be owing to the idea that this piece represents the ultimate conclusion of the lives of the apaches, and Ravel. It helps to have this idea to commit to.

I play from bar 12 – 17 again, and notice that the chordal writing reminds me of the organ, and that this may contribute to the spiritual element of this piece. I try to differentiate between the sustained C major chord, and the accented B \flat bell octaves in bars 16, 17, 18 by making the bell gesture – holding the bottom note of the octave with my thumb, and ‘striking’ the top note with the tip of my fifth finger. By contrast, I try to sink deeply into the C major chord and project my fifth finger (I think with a bit of tension in this finger). I keep listening intently to the C major chord as I strike the B \flat bells.

I play this a few times, and notice that the voicing in the C major chords (bars 16, 17 and 18) really remind me of the organ. The strong thirds (Es) in the middle register and the low C put in mind the registers of an organ, with the low C being the pedal. This all reminds me of Alexandra Kieffer’s realist reading of ‘La vallée des cloches’, and I wonder if the church organ might also feature as well as the bell of the Sacré-Coeur. I check to verify if any of the other *Miroirs* are written across three staves – they are not. I will check later if anything in the literature relates this piece to the organ.

I begin to practice the *largement chanté* section.

There are several challenges involved in this section – sustaining the ‘sung’ inner melody in octaves, pedalling, and controlling the bell material.

The diminuendo shape of the bells help to shape the melodic line, as the D flat melody octave in bar 20 begins to die once it is struck. I hear the first chord of bar 20 as an appoggiatura in B \flat

minor. This is emphasised by the accent on the first beat of the bar. I aim for a rich, singing sound by sinking deeply into the keys and ‘rounding out’ with an outward-moving gesture with my arms and wrists.

I do not want too much ‘muddiness’ between the first and second beats of bar 20, but I need to sustain the bass B \flat and F, so I try to flutter-pedal to clear some of the sound, but to hold on to some of the bass.

I try to ‘enter into’ the D \flat octave (beat two) so that I can smoothly connect it to the next melody note F octave, giving the impression of one smooth line.

I notice that there are many thoughts going through my head:

- I have played this piece before, so my muscle memory has presented me with the gestures I need to realise this. I am already able to balance the melody of the central section with the outer bells.
- The outer bells need to get gradually softer. They are slurred and each have a staccato mark. The first in each group has an accent. I experiment with different parts of my fingers – the tip, just before the nail, and the pads, the flat of the last joint – to see what works.
- I think of the singing voice, and wonder who might be singing this melody. It feels too personal to be Maurice D elage. There is something very deep and sorrowful about this melody. I think about it being Ravel, and try and imagine him singing this melody.

This sorrowful atmosphere is ‘lifted’ at bar 24, when the G \flat major harmony and triplet accompaniment figure give a floating feeling to the upper melody. I think about the relationship between these two sections.

The *largement chanté* sections seems to say something serious, and slightly dark. The harmony and register contribute to this idea.

The *espressivo* G \flat major section which follows from the upbeat to bar 24 gives a lighter, less 'terrestrial' feeling, something more spiritual; 'higher'. Existential.

Practice session was interrupted so I stopped here at 10:47am.

Diary Entry #3

Monday 27 June 2022, 12:30pm.

Room 11, Royal Irish Academy of Music. (Yamaha B)

After warming up, I begin by reading through my previous diary entry to see where I left off. I was relating the long *largement chanté* phrases (bars 19-23) to the subsequent *espressivo* phrases which begin at the upbeat to bar 24. I play through this material to remind myself of this relationship.

After playing this a few times, I notice that from the C' bass which enters in bar 16, to the F-C modal harmony at bar 27, the bass line descends by step – C bar 16 – B \flat (and F) bar 17, A \flat bar 23, G \flat bar 24, F bar 26. I play this again and try and be more aware of this.

After this, I notice my focus still returns to the melodic line beginning in bar 19. I am not happy with how the first beat connects to the second. I do not want any percussive 'start' to the D \flat octave, I want it to seamlessly emerge from the previous chord. The piano I am working on today has a harder, more direct sound. I will work on this for a few minutes.

I experiment with flutter-pedalling a millisecond after I've played the D \flat octave (bar 20).

This helps to create a smoother transition from the C to D \flat . I then consider the voicing of the first beat. I have been promoting the upper C going to D \flat . I try promoting all voices equally. I prefer my original approach – promoting the octave melody throughout these phrases.

As I continue, I notice the C-F relationship in the melody from bar 22-23. A few things strike me at once:

- This might be an example of the perfect fourth relationship prevalent in Ravel's output that scholars refer to (Howat, Mawer). C rises to F (bar 22 beats 1-2) and F falls to C (bar 23 beats 1-2).
- This is like a mirror. The changing bass harmony – B \flat and F to A \flat – and the addition of the G \flat in the bells in bar 23 give me an impression of a refraction of light in this 'mirror' image. The image in bar 22 is changed in the reflection in bar 23.
- Once I imagine a reflected image, in my imagination I vaguely see a pond reflecting a pink sky at dusk, and the 'bells' of the top stave become for me droplets which gently project water-rings or resonances. I play again.

The image of a pond reflecting the sky stays in my mind as I continue to play the *expressivo* phrases. As I noted in the last session, this for me has a higher, more spiritual feeling. As I continue playing the new (to this practice session) material (from upbeat to bar 27-31), I notice how I relate this back to the 'terrestrial' material of the *largement chanté* melody. Playing again, the *expressivo* phrases feel like a kind of 'escape' from the material on either side. This puts in mind Puri's 'psychological interiority of memory' and I wonder if I can think of the *expressivo* phrases as a sort of nostalgic recollection in between the 'present time' of the piece. With this in mind on my next attempt, I notice that bars 23 and 26 become transition bars in and out of the 'memory' material. When I think of these bars as a memory, the sound I make changes. It is lighter, less robust, and the legato is created with the pedal and less with the tactile connection.

I am reminded in a simplistic way of Proust and the famous passage where the narrator describes, as he tastes a madeleine in adulthood, being transported back to the blissful memory of this as a child. To consider this material as a memory is one interpretative option.

As I play the phrase from beat 4 bar 27 to bar 31 I notice how these might correspond to bars 20 and 21. The C-D \flat relationship, repeated at the start of each bar and rising, is mirrored in the C-B \flat relationship, repeated and falling, in bars 28 and 29. I think that David Korevaar may have already considered this. More than a mirror, however, the repetition in these bars and elsewhere adds to the prayerful, spiritual feeling, and my existentialist/religious reading is reinforced.

I continue from the upbeats to bar 28. The phrases from bars 31 – 37 present the recurrent phenomenological trope of the piano – the challenge in sustaining long lines. At the beginning of bar 31 the G octave has to last five beats, the F in bar 32 has to last three and a half, and the C in bar 34 has to last a staggering thirteen and a half beats. In the case of the G octave (bar 30) and C (bar 34) I am helped by an accent. As I work on this, I notice that the G octave in bar 31 is not melodically followed by anything – the subsequent A \flat octave begins the next phrase, and so here it is a matter of initially projecting this enough within the texture. I must ‘enter into’ the sound of the F in the next bar, however, to match the following D \flat to this sound to create a legato melody. The extremely long C of bar 34 seems both to be connected to the previous phrase, and begin a new phrase (if it can be called a phrase – it is really more repeated bell-and-prayer material). The C undoubtedly requires careful projection. I am technically supposed to be playing within an *mp* dynamic. I play these phrases a few times.

I notice that I have to make sure the bell material in bars 32, 33, 34 and 35 does not draw attention away from the octave melody. This is helped in bars 34 and 35 by the *pp* dynamic. I make the decision to consider the A \flat bells in bars 32 and 33 as *p* rather than *mp* to make space for the melody.

Diary Entry #4

Tuesday June 28th 2022, 11:36am.

Early Music Room, Royal Irish Academy of Music (Steinway B)

I have just warmed up and read through yesterday's diary entry. I will begin today by playing from bar 27 to the end of the piece. I have the sense that breaking up the piece like this is helpful to articulate the localised thought-processes I have, but that each section of the piece has relational meaning to what happens on either side of it, and so I need also to consider it as one evolving idea in time. However, I have not yet re-visited in detail bars 42 – end, so I will focus on this first, and record my thoughts as they register.

After this first play-through from bar 27 I have many thoughts, but my mind feels scattered so I try to focus, and will re-take this section.

After this time, I notice the repeated $A^b - B^b$ inner part which is present effectively from bar 24 (in triplet form) and is played down an octave in crotchets from bar 28. The pattern changes rhythmically at bar 31 and is harmonised differently between bar 31 and 32. This figure continues but in thirds at bar 34. The $A^b - B^b$ (top of right hand chords) returns in bar 37 and continues to bar 41. All of this is to say that this section contains a lot of repetition. After the development of the middle sections – *largement chanté* and *expressivo* – these repeated inner patterns contribute to a sense of ritual or prayer. The long lines of the melody in the tenor register give a sense of expansion. These melodic lines for me need to be shaped, but there is definitely not a sense that the music needs to move forward – it is meditative, still. This material culminates at the fermata in bar 40. The pause here adds to the sense that the ensuing material is 'beyond' the present. I can only explain this as a sort of retrospective existential feeling. It feels both summative of the whole

cycle of *Miroirs*, and closes the ‘circle’ or ‘mirror’ of ‘La vallée des cloches’ itself, with the opening quartal harmony figure reappearing as a mirror of the opening. The ‘refrain’ (Poe) or musical object (Mawer) reoccurs in stark relief to its environment, returning in the inner voice of bar 45, repeated twice more, and then presented in the lowest possible register, stretched over a dotted minim and fading into a dark C sharp bass over which the quartal harmony returns. Having just played this to the end, I remember Kieffer’s Sacré-Coeur bell entered my mind, and instead of holding the top F# and C# minims of the right hand in bar 51, I released them and let them ring in the pedal, really imagining the physical striking of a large church bell and the consequent reverberation which can be felt in the whole body.

On a practical level, bars 42 – 46 pose challenges in the shaping and sustaining of the line. I will work now on this.

- Because the chords in bar 42 are so full, it is difficult to make the legato I would like. Ideally I would connect all notes in the two hands from one chord to the next with finger legato and pedal. This is not possible, so I have to listen very carefully and make sure I do not bump on the minim (beat three). The *pp* dynamic and sustained bass note allow me to pedal through this. (I could use the middle tonal pedal for the C#, and change the sustain pedal on each chord – but this doesn’t allow me to use the *una corda*, and I think this section needs the *una corda*. I know some pianists can use the middle and *una corda* at the same time, but I haven’t mastered this!).

I go back to bar 34, and think about the relationship between this and the *très calme* section. The darkness of the F minor – E♭ minor open bass harmony contrasts the bright C sharp major of the *très calme* (bar 42). It is important for the repetitive material not to get stuck (bars 38-41). This

means shaping the tenor melody and controlling texture (so that the accompaniment on other staves is not so present).

I play through the piece from the start. This time, I do not consciously try and register everything going through my mind, but enjoy the experience of playing. I get physical enjoyment from the tactile experience of making sounds, and listen intently. From bar 32-41 I think I probably moved the music on (hopefully imperceptibly), moving through the ritualistic repeated material. I react to the sounds of the piano, leaving the dying sounds dictate the movement in time.

I will try again, and this time record myself.

There are a few blemishes, as always happens when the recorder is on. But I am guided by the sounds, and realise that this piece is part of me, from the times I previously played it. New significations have emerged in the form of the falling third, which I am more aware of. I also notice the 'music box'-like treatment of the piano – it is very original. The piano is percussive, resonant, and smooth all in the same sound environment, really giving the impression of physical depth and space.

I finish my practice session here. 12.48pm.