

Ravel's String Quartet: History and Analysis

1. Introduction

- a. “‘My String Quartet,’ said Ravel, ‘represents a conception of musical construction, imperfectly realized no doubt, but set out much more precisely than in my earlier compositions.’ All the same, though not to contradict the composer, it is noticeable how, if this work really represents so absolute a conception of structure, it does so with extraordinary vigour, rhythmical ease and melodic verve. The intense suavity of this grave, youthful music makes it appear the most spontaneous work Ravel has ever written. The outbursts of lyricism find forceful expression within the framework of an uncompromising classicism without breaking it; they move so freely within it that the composer sometimes used to doubt its success.”¹

2. Composer's Biography

- a. Born March 7, 1875 - Died Dec. 28, 1937.
 - i. Born in the French village of Ciboure; three months later the family moved to Paris.
- b. Father – Pierre-Joseph Ravel
 - i. Swiss heritage
- c. Mother – Marie Delouart
 - i. Basque heritage
- d. At age seven Ravel began studying the piano with Henri Ghys, and five years later attempted his first compositions. In 1889, at age fourteen, he began attending piano lessons and classes at the Conservatoire de Paris, and in 1895 he began to devote himself entirely to composition, enrolling in a composition class under Gabriel Fauré and studying counterpoint with André Gédalge in 1897.
 - i. “...he later described both teachers as crucial influences on his technique and musicianship. Although he produced some substantial works during this period...he won neither the fugue nor the composition prize and was dismissed from the composition class in 1900. He remained with Fauré as an auditor until he left the Conservatoire in 1903.”²
- e. “He was, by now, *because of the Quartet, Schéhérazade, and Jeux d'Eau* [his first period], looked upon as suspect and a dangerous revolutionary by

¹ *Quote by Roland-Manuel, trans. by Cynthia Jolly. Roger Nichols, Ravel Remembered (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 102.*

² Barbara L. Kelly, “Ravel, (Joseph) Maurice”, (Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy [Accessed 10 May 2007]), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>, 1. 1875–1905.

the more bigoted members of the Institute, one of whom went so far as to declare: ‘M. Ravel may look upon us as old fogeys if he pleases, but he will not with impunity make fools of us.’... There were violent protests in the national Press... and musicians of all shades of opinion were shocked by what had now become ‘l’affaire Ravel’. The thing had become a public scandal... Meanwhile, whatever Ravel’s feelings may have been, he said nothing, took no action and remained aloof from the controversy that raged round him.”³

f. *Influences*

- i. “[D]espite a Parisian upbringing, Ravel always felt close to his Basque heritage, and by extension, to Spain”⁴, as can be evidenced in some of his later works such as *Habanera* (later incorporated into his *Rapsodie Espagnole*), *L’Heure Espagnole*, and *Boléro*.
- ii. Great Paris Exhibition of 1889. Though only a boy of fourteen, he “too was struck by the Javanese gamelan and the performances of Russian music given by Rimsky-Korsakov”.⁵ Yet, apart from the “gapped” scale, of which Ravel was especially fond, “the direct influence of this exotic music... is on the whole less discernable in [his] music than in that of Debussy”; Ravel’s music tends to be more modal and takes its color more from European sources than Asian.⁶
 1. “He was growing up at a time when new ideas were in the air and music, no less than painting, was waking to new life and preparing to break down the barriers imposed upon it by stuffy nineteenth-century conventions.”⁷
- iii. A statement made once by composer Jules Massenet during a lecture on composition – “in order to know your own technique, you must learn the technique of other people”⁸ – greatly inspired Ravel, and he quoted it frequently;⁹ when speaking of teaching, for example, Ravel has said that “by studying the masters, he [the student] must learn not to ape them, but to study himself, as they have done.”¹⁰

³ Rollo H. Myers, *Ravel: Life and Works*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd., 1960, 26-7.

⁴ Barbara L. Kelly, “Ravel, (Joseph) Maurice”, 1. 1875–1905.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Myers, *Life and Works*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸ Rollo H. Myers, *Ravel: Life and Works* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd., 1960), 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Calvocoressi, “Maurice Ravel” (*The Musical Times*, 54, no. 850 [1 Dec. 1913]), 787.

- iv. "Gédalge stressed the supremacy of the melodic line and based his teaching on the works of Bach and Mozart, all of which would influence Ravel profoundly."¹¹

g. *General Style/Methods*

- i. "Although a progression is discernible in Ravel's work, influenced by important events in his life, his musical character developed early."¹²

1. "In this he was exceptional among composers, for his first published compositions were astonishingly mature...extraordinary technical accomplishment at an age when most students are only feeling their way."¹³

- ii. "Ravel's sketches bear witness to his relentless drive towards technical perfection. He was astonishingly meticulous, and rather than correct some minuscule details in a score, he would frequently copy over the entire autograph...Ravel continued to make corrections in his scores even after the works had been published."¹⁴

1. "In my own work of composition I find a long period of conscious gestation, in general, necessary. During this interval, I come gradually to see, and with growing precision, the form and evolution which the subsequent work should have as a whole. I may thus be occupied for years without writing a single note of the work after which the 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 realize 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."¹⁵
2. "Ravel could and often did compose with considerable speed... However, the majority of his works were thought out at a leisurely pace, and then painstakingly refined and polished."¹⁶
3. "The poetry and drama of machinery impress him more than the beauties of nature...the natural bent of his mind towards mechanical toys, automata of all kinds, puppets and everything artificial..."¹⁷

¹¹ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 20.

¹² Barbara L. Kelly, "Ravel, (Joseph) Maurice: 5. Style"

¹³ Meyers, *Life and Works*, 22.

¹⁴ Arbie Orenstein. "Maurice Ravel's Creative Process." *The Musical Quarterly*, 53 no. 4 (Oct. 1967): 468.

¹⁵ Ibid. (Quote by Maurice Ravel, *Contemporary Music*, in *The Rice Institute Pamphlet*, April 1928, p. 141. Cf. Bohdan Pilarski, *Une conférence de Maurice Ravel à Houston*, in *Revue de musicologie*, Dec. 1964, pp. 208, 209.)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rollo H. Meyers, *Life and Works*, 28.

iii. “His harmonic language is firmly diatonic and his use of figured bass in sketches and teaching confirms his attachment to functional tonality...Ravel rarely obscured his bass lines...Extended chords, 9ths and 11ths especially, are integral to Ravel's harmonic language...to create a richer texture replete with arpeggio movement, pauses and rubato. He also favoured the diminished octave or major 7th...Ravel used parallel 4ths and 5ths...Parallel triads abound...frequent use of both simple and compound octaves, often in treble and bass registers...Ravel used the tritone for colouristic purposes; in the *Shéhérazade* overture and the first movement of the String Quartet it occurs within the context of the whole-tone scale. In the cadenza of *Jeux d'eau*, the juxtaposition of F major and C major triads even gives a suggestion of bitonality...Ravel's use of chromatic passing notes and unresolved appoggiaturas resulted in what could be regarded as localized bitonality...Although Ravel was not at the forefront of Modernism, his advocacy of certain principles, notably those of economy and objectivity, and his openness to jazz and bitonality, lent these preoccupations a certain respectability on account of his own secure status.”¹⁸

1. Not an iconoclast, but rather an emancipator...He did not seek to disrupt either the grammar or the syntax of music, but was content to work in classical forms and on the basis of the generally accepted harmonic system of his day...he created a language of his own...¹⁹
2. “He considers the affectation of modernism as unwholesome as the academical tendencies to which many contemporary composers remain subject.”²⁰

3. The Quartet

a. *History*

i. Completed 1903 (begun 1902).

1. “Although Ravel’s String Quartet is now a standard work in the chamber music repertory, while it was being written it gave rise to many conflicting opinions...the first movement was not considered worthy of the composition prize, and Fauré found the last movement too short. It has been claimed that Debussy wrote to Ravel, urging him not to change one note of the Quartet, but this letter has not come to light. Following the first performance, by the Heymann quartet on March 5, 1904, the critics were sharply divided. Pierre Lalo observed that ‘in its harmonies

¹⁸ Barbara L. Kelly, “Ravel, (Joseph) Maurice: 5. Style”

¹⁹ Rollo H. Meyers, *Life and Works*, 95.

²⁰ Calvocoressi, M.D. "Maurice Ravel." *The Musical Times*, 54, no. 850 (1 Dec. 1913): 787.

and succession of chords, in its sonority and form, in all the elements which it contains and in all the sensations which it evokes, it offers an incredible resemblance with the music of M. Debussy.’ On the other hand, Jean Marnold, writing in the *Mercure de France*, praised the new work, and boldly asserted that ‘one should remember that name of Maurice Ravel. He is one of the masters of tomorrow.’”²¹

- ii. Dedicated to Gabriel Fauré.
 - 1. First two movements were originally conceived as part of a collaborative project dedicated to Fauré by four of his students.
- iii. “Though in no way revolutionary, the Quartet was considered by the pundits to be too unorthodox and was actually counted against him when Ravel was a candidate for the Prix de Rome. Even Fauré found fault with the last movement, which he thought was badly balanced.”²²
- iv. Has been arranged for piano solo and two pianos (four hands), by Lucien Garban; and for piano duet (four hands) by Maurice Delage (published by Durand).

b. *Analysis*

- i. Central Key: F major
 - 1. 1st movement = F major
 - 2. 2nd movement = A minor, the relative minor of C major (V of F)
 - 3. 3rd movement = G \flat major; the movement begins in A minor, but with a flatted second (B \flat). Through a series of complex and rich modulations, the final chord before the key change to G \flat major is spelled as a C \sharp - enharmonically creating the dominant of the new key.
 - 4. 4th movement = return to F major, a half-step below the end of the previous movement.
- ii. Instrumentation: string quartet – two violins, viola, and cello
- iii. *Structure*
 - 1. Four movements:
 - a. Allegro moderato – très doux (F major)
 - i. Pastoral in character.²³
 - ii. Prevailing mood is lyrical, “with underlying optimism and classical restraint”.²⁴

²¹ Arbie Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 40.

²² Rollo H. Meyers, *Life and Works*, 181.

²³ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁴ Arbie Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 155.

- iii. Clear sonata form: “with themes one and two joined in various transformations in the development section.”²⁵
 - 1. “The development section is predominantly lyrical, building to its most climactic point shortly before the recapitulation.”²⁶
 - iv. “In the recapitulation, the return of the second theme is clear yet subtle, as the upper three parts are identical to the exposition, but the cello is raised a minor third, altering the passage from D minor to F major.”²⁷
 - v. “The thematic transformations found in this movement will recur in the third and fourth movements, producing a tightly knit structure...”²⁸
- b. Assez vif – très rythmé (A minor)
- i. “...the opening of this virtuoso scherzo may be said to bear the spiritual imprint of Javanese gamelang. The scherzo is largely based upon two themes, the first pizzicato in aeolian mode, and the second lyrical. Two rhythmic variants of the opening theme may be pointed out, the second of which is marked ‘quasi arpa.’”²⁹
 - 1. Quasi arpa = somewhat harp-like, occurring at Rehearsal K (Dover score). The rhythmic variant of the opening theme is found in the second violin part, providing a subtle background for the lyrical first violin.
 - ii. *Bien chanté* melody in first violin is not unlike theme 2 in the first movement.
 - iii. “Ravel here shows great skill and ingenuity, and the string writing is most effective.”³⁰
- c. Très lent (G \flat major)
- i. “This lyrical and rhapsodic movement contains numerous changes in tempo, many

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Rollo H. Meyers, *Life and Works*, 181.

- references to the first movement (...with regard to the melody and the use of perfect fifths), and material from the first and third movements skillfully woven together. Examples of instrumental color include the four soloists playing on the fingerboard”³¹
- ii. Proceeds episodically with more than one allusion to themes heard in the first movement.³²
- d. Vif et agité (F major)
- i. Alternates between 5/8, 5/4, and 3/4 time.
 - ii. “...vigorous and emphatic, abounding in rapid *tremolo* passages, arpeggios and spread chords, bringing the work to a brilliant conclusion.”³³
 - iii. “The finale alternates driving tremolo passages, mostly in quintuple meter, with lyric material derived from the first movement, chiefly in triple material...the movement concludes brilliantly with a brief reprise of the opening of the finale, followed by an ascending series of major triads.”³⁴
- iv. “Although Ravel later criticized the Quartet’s ‘imperfectly realized’ structure, it now appears to be a fresh and felicitous achievement, marking a distinctive addition to the chamber music repertoire.”³⁵
- v. “One of the clearest indications of Ravel’s debt to Debussy in the String Quartet in F is, paradoxically, the phantom presence of César Franck, a composer with whom Ravel had little in common but whose influence is perceptible here in some colouristic and melodic details and, above all, in the conscientiously ‘cyclic’ construction...Each of the three composers [Franck, Debussy, Ravel] has his own approach to the cyclic procedure...Where Debussy departs from Franck, and where Ravel departs with him, is in the freshness of the modal melody and the colouring.”³⁶
1. “Ravel placed a strong emphasis in his own work and teaching on adherence to traditional forms. He was drawn to Classical genres in the String Quartet...In addition to sonata form, Ravel also employed cyclic structures in the String Quartet.”³⁷

³¹ Arbie Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 155.

³² Rollo H. Meyers, *Life and Works*, 181.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Arbie Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 155-56.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁶ Gerald Larner, *Maurice Ravel*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 71-2.

³⁷ Barbara L. Kelly, “Ravel, (Joseph) Maurice: 5. Style”

2. “Ravel acknowledged the spiritual influence of Debussy on his String Quartet...”³⁸
 - a. “Although modeled on Debussy’s Quartet (1893), Ravel’s achievement is both mature and personal.”³⁹
 - vi. “The composer’s fascination with instrumental color and virtuosity is apparent, and the overall *modus operandi* is that of thematic transformation, which occurs within individual movements as well as between the movements.”⁴⁰
4. Conclusion
- a. “The *String Quartet*, composed...while Ravel was still a student at the Conservatoire, was his first essay in this field and to this day remains a model of its kind. The influence of Debussy, who had made history with his string quartet ten years earlier, is unmistakable,...but the work is nevertheless one of Ravel’s most perfect achievements. It is remarkable not only for its freshness and melodic charm but even more for its astonishing technical maturity.”⁴¹

³⁸ Arbie Orenstein, *Man and Musician*, 32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Rollo H. Meyers, *Life and Works*, 180.

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