A STUDY OF RAVEL'S TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN

DOCUMENT

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Ravel's "Tombeau de Couperin," a suite for piano, was published in 1918 by Durand. Its first performance was in the Salle Gaveau in Paris in April, 1919. Shortly afterwards Ravel scored four of the six movements of the piano suite for small orchestra, composed of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and horns in pairs, English horn, trumpet, harp, and strings. The new version was introduced in America in 1920. The four orchestrated movements, Prelude, Forlane, Menuet, and Rigaudon, have no programmatic content and the titles identify the forms used.

"Le Tombeau de Couperin" is a souvenir of World War I. Each movement is dedicated to the memory of a French soldier fallen in battle. The "Tombeau" form dates from the seventeenth century and is a musical "homage" to Francois Couperin, clavecinist of Louis XIV, and one of the great names of French music.

The separate movements, cast in eighteenth century dance forms often used by Couperin have been described as "tonal wreaths," not too somber nor too profuse, laid with tenderness on an unforgotten tomb.

Record Album, AR198, T66
This piece represents Ravel's extreme effort to express himself in the simplest possible manner. The music is subtly archaic; form, line and texture artfully suggest eighteenth century, but the harmony suggests twentieth century.

A transparent serenity full of color and feeling pervades this piece of classic purity written in tribute to Ravel's fallen comrades.\(^2\)

A study of the piano suite has been made. The pieces are charmingly and precisely orchestrated. They have been used for a ballet which will not be dealt with.

**First Movement**

A prelude has been defined as an introduction to suites or suitelike series of pieces; to fugues or even to nothing (e.g. Chopin, Scriabin, Shotakovitch Preludes, etc.). Couperin created a unique type of prelude, completely free in rhythm. The "disconnected" prelude has a pianistic character, usually based on a short figure or motif which is exploited by means of harmonic modulations.

The first movement of Ravel's piano suite is a prelude, a sprightly dance of eerie quality which, in places recalls the music of bagpipes. It is written in the key of E pure minor. The Prelude opens with a short introduction of four bars and the style of writing is very

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\(^2\) Goss, *Bolero*, p. 180
impressionistic throughout the piece, employing principally I, II, and IV harmony. The use of the pentatonic scale built on "A" introduces the first modulatory section which is very chromatic. The chords of the left hand descend chromatically in the tenor exactly twelve notes, then begin the process again, modulating through an $X_7$ of IV to IV in G major. For the first time a clear melodic line appears in the treble which closes in a tonic cadence just before the first ending. There is a repeat sign which goes back to the main theme. The second ending ends on the tonic cadence plus an added sixth interval which is used extensively throughout the piece.

The next modulation is to C major ($IV_9$ in G becomes $I_9$ in C), and the introductory material is presented again for four measures. A simple melody appears in the treble against a background of II and II$9$ harmony. The same melody is given in the key of B flat against an $X_9$ of V and a V chord background. The introductory material appears in the key of G with the impressionistic harmonic background built on a III$9$ chord and also I with an added sixth and a IV$9$ chord. The next section is modulatory, combining the simple melodic theme with the introductory harmonic background to modulate chromatically down to F sharp minor. In this modulatory section
there is use of consecutive fifths. The first melody appears now in F sharp minor in the treble with conventional broken chord accompaniment. The rather aimless progression of impressionistic harmony which follows leads back to the original key of F minor. Here I and IV chords are used alternately bringing the Prelude to a close with a strong plagal cadence. The tonic chord is used during the last eight measures. Rich harmonic coloring and frequent use of secondary and added sixth, ninth, and eleventh chords mark this prelude definitely impressionistic.

The Prelude is written in 12/16 time and the metronome marking is ninety-two to a dotted quarter note. The rhythmic pulse is in two.

**Second Movement**

The second movement of the suite is a three voice fugue. The fugue is the latest and most mature form of imitative counterpoint, developed during the seventeenth century and brought to its highest perfection by J. S. Bach. A fugue is written in contrapuntal style; based on a short melody, called subject or theme; and in each voice the horizontal space between one statement and the next of the subject is filled out by a freely invented counterpoint.
The theme is presented first in the original key of E pure minor. It begins in the treble on the fourth scale step which resolves to the third preparing for the tonic minor triad in the next three notes. Exactly the same interval skips are repeated in a different rhythmic pattern.

Only two notes other than the tonic triad are used, making the subject rather limited in melodic range, but very interesting in its rhythmic pattern and further development. The theme appears next in the conventional key of the dominant in the alto voice. After this the theme appears successively in the tonic key in the tenor and alto; in the key of the dominant and the mediant in the soprano. In the relative major key of G the theme proper appears in the tenor voice, after which comes the inversion in the mediant and the submediant keys. A short interlude section follows with theme fragments. The subject appears as it did in the beginning except that there are theme fragments in the alto which correspond to the conventional stretto style of fugal writing. There is a pedal point on the dominant note of B. The
stretto section which follows states the subject in inversion in the soprano and tenor voices. Then the theme is presented in the major tonic and major dominant keys, in the soprano. Fragments follow, composed of the first half of the theme, in strict and inverted forms. The fugue closes with the theme presented in the tonic key in the soprano and tenor and the dominant key in the alto, in stretto style.

The range of the fugue does not exceed four octaves. Except for two staves the fugue is written entirely in the treble clef. As is generally true of limited development sections in simple fugues, there is little of harmonic interest. Each of the three voices is important horizontally rather than vertically; thus making contrapuntal interest. The frequent use of stretto writing is an outstanding feature of the sixty-one measure fugue.

Interval skips within each voice part include only such slightly dissonant intervals as the major seventh and ninth. There is some use of chromaticism in the counter subjects.

The time signature is 4/4, marked allegro moderato, eighty-four to a quarter note. The theme is made up of eighth notes, and a characteristic use of triplets against two eighth notes appears in the episodes when
the theme proper is not present. Very characteristic is the use of eighth note rests in the subject. There is some chromaticism in the episodes which helps to color the harmony during the rhythmic pattern of two notes against three.

**Third Movement**

The Forlane is a dance from northern Italy. A sixteenth century collection of this particular dance form is in even meter, whereas, in Baroque music the Forlane is a gay dance in triple meter with dotted rhythm similar to a gigue. There is no definite formal structure in this movement.

The third movement of the suite has one sharp in the key signature with some of the cadences at the end of sections ending on a tonic E minor triad. There is a short section in E major and the final chord is an E minor triad. The key feeling cannot be analyzed to fit any certain tonality; in most instances the tone relationships are atonal.

The dissonant melody with altered chordal accompaniment definitely suggests atonality, and, in a sense the music never seems to "get anywhere." Most of the chords are augmented triads "misspelled." They are used successively without being related. The angular
melodic line has such dissonant skips as the augmented fourth, minor seventh, augmented second, major seventh. When the major and minor thirds, perfect fourth and fifth, and major and minor sixths are used in "incorrect" interval spelling they seem to be dissonant too, although the ear is accustomed to hearing these as conventional skips in a melodic line. There are many tri-tones between voices, though they cannot be considered as such with the uncertain tonality. As in the fugue, the final chord contains no third, but is tonal.

The time signature is 6/8 and is marked allegretto (ninty-six to a dotted quarter note). The melody carries a characteristic dotted rhythm \( \frac{\text{V}}{\text{II}} \). There are no unusual complexities in rhythm and there are no changes in the time signature.

This movement has an unusual variety of sections which are all presented in homophonic style. The form cannot be analyzed to fit a conventional pattern. The sections can be lettered as follows: A//:BA//:G//: DC//A//:E//:AABAF//:F:// plus a coda containing new material.
Fourth Movement

The Rigaudon is another old dance form which originated in the seventeenth century. It is of Provençal origin and was used in operatic ballets and suites. It is a lively dance in duple time and consists of three or four sections.

The fourth movement is in the key of C major in the first section. There is much use of the I, II, and IV chords with added sixths. The tonality is modal. The next section after the first eight-measure phrase has abrupt chord changes which make it impossible to analyze the harmony in a conventional manner. There is much parallelism with altered chord root progressions of seconds that result in a modal harmony until the broken chord accompaniment distorts this feeling. The contrasting section of the Rigaudon has three flats in the key signature and is in C minor. It consists of a simple melody with chordal accompaniment of many seventh, ninth, and thirteenth chords with added sixths. There is cross relation in some places, such as B flat in one voice and B natural in another voice, or D flat followed by D natural in the section after the second double bar in the key of C minor. An extension of this
section continues without sharps or flats in the key signature but conveys a key feeling of C sharp minor. The first section returns almost unchanged. The piece seems to end in F major because of a repeated V\(^7\) chord in four measures resolving to tonic F. A short extension or codetta of two measures changes the key feeling to C with the preceding strong cadence in F becoming X\(^7\) of IV resolving as V\(^7\) to I in the key of C.

The phrase structure is very clear. The form is as follows: A(1-8) B(9-36) C(37-92) A(93-100) B(101-216) Codetta (217-218). This division of measures into sections classes the piece as a second rondo form.

The time signature is 2/4. A characteristic rhythm throughout the entire piece is \(\begin{array}{c|c|c} \hline \hline \hline \end{array}\) and also \(\begin{array}{c|c|c} \hline \hline \hline \end{array}\).

The delightful changes from ff to pp create an interesting and a varied dynamic and rhythmic interest.

**Fifth Movement**

The menuet is a French dance of rustic origin. It is in 3/4 meter in moderate tempo.

The menuet is the fifth movement of Ravel's piano suite. There is one sharp in the key signature with the first phrase beginning in the key of G major and ending surprisingly with a cadence in B major. The second section of the menuet is in the key of B minor with one sharp in the signature. This section ends with a cadence.
in D major with a return to the first part beginning a whole degree higher; it ends in G major. The theme of this menuet is of haunting simplicity and melancholy charm.

The Musette, which takes the place of the conventional trio, is modal. It is a pure and moving refrain. There is one flat in the key signature and a feeling of G minor in the bass chords and feeling of D minor in the treble chord progressions. In this method of analysis the harmony becomes bi-tonal modality.

After this section, the theme of the menuet appears first in the right hand and then the theme of the musette appears in the left hand, now in G major. The second section of the menuet is in F sharp major. The coda, which uses the thematic material of the menuet, gives a very strong key feeling of G major, with a final tonic ninth chord.

This piece is very simple in style and texture without involved or complex rhythm, harmony, or thematic material. An interesting presentation of the musette theme is effected when in one measure the theme is given below the pedal note and in the next measure above the pedal note. The spacing of the chords is somewhat close except for a few places when a long pedal point on G is used.
The time signature is 3/4 and is marked allegro
moderato (ninty-two to a quarter note).

The form of the menuet is A://:BA://. The form
of the musette is AA'BA'. There is no conventional repeat
sign reverting back to the menuet. Instead, both themes,
the menuet in the treble and the musette in the bass,
appear at the same time. After a repetition of the menuet
in a distantly related key a long coda follows using all
the thematic material of the menuet.

**Sixth Movement**

A toccata is a keyboard composition in free, idio-
matic keyboard style, employing full chords and running
passages with or without the inclusion of sections in
imitative styles. Virtuosity is especially featured.

The final movement of "Le Tombeau de Couperin" is
a brilliant and forceful Toccata. There is one sharp
in the key signature, except for the middle part with
six sharps, and the ending in the parallel E major key
with four sharps in the key signature. The piece begins
in E pure minor with many seventh and ninth chords in the
root progressions of intervals of seconds. There is a
modulation to G major with a characteristic added sixth
in the tonic ninth chord. Another modulation to B flat
major repeats the pattern of sound used in the preceding section. A modulatory section leads to the second main section in G major, where the first real thematic material is presented; it emphasizes G sharp which is not in the normal diatonic scale. This theme is repeated on other degrees of the scale in G major. The extreme parallelism and use of root progressions in seconds give the harmony a modal character. Another modulatory section follows, using many $X_7$ and augmented sixth chords, centering on and around the key of G minor. The section in D sharp minor consists merely of clusters of chords emphasizing I and IV chord progressions, built around the dominant, followed immediately by abrupt chord changes in parallel progression. A part of the thematic material presented previously is repeated in different keys which work up to a thick texture of mixed chords of B major and the $V_7$ of E flat with the sixth added. The coda in E major begins with an octave bass making a $V_7$ of tonic E below a series of three major thirds and a perfect fourth which are theoretically "incorrectly spelled."
This repeated passage is followed by a series of thick mixed chords. Before the final eight bars, another series of mixed chords (a G minor seventh over an A minor seventh) appears for six measures. The tonic is emphasized with a broken octave of the tonic triad in the left hand and tonic chords repeated in the right hand. There is a chord built on the lowered sixth degree of the scale built over a tonic six-four chord before the final clash of the tonic triad. The tonality is modal with frequent use of parallel chords. There is repetition of chord progression patterns in different keys and also use of mixed chords.

The time signature is 2/4 and has one quarter note equaling the metronome marking of 144. The sixteenth note is the underlying rhythmic pattern of meter and is used throughout the entire movement until the final chord.

A characteristic repeated note is used in several places during the Toccata: in the beginning on E for two measures, an F sharp repeated several times, a B for five measures, and another F sharp for two measures.

There is no clear form. Most of the harmony is made up of seventh, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords.
There are only a few thematic phrases inserted, manifestly only to achieve variety. The whole effect is impressionistic.

**Conclusion**

"Le Tombeau de Couperin" is a clear example of the modern French school of impressionism. The suite is romantic in spirit and couched in vague, delicate, and refined language. There is much use of neomodality, parallelism, seventh, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords. The form is clear most of the time and there are clear phrases which make Ravel's style more classical than that of other impressionistic composers. A neoclassical element of simplicity of style, occasional counterpoint (at least in the fugue), use of baroque forms and even a certain amount of objectivity lend to a conservative style of writing.

The simple austerity of "Le Tombeau de Couperin" contains a depth and a poignant warmth not always found in Ravel's other compositions. It is pregnant with the suffering through which he was living at the time. This suite epitomizes all his sorrows in a manner typical of the composer. On the surface no shadow is apparent—all is color, light and even gaiety. But beneath this are undertones of tragedy—the suffering of a spirit that fears lest the world shall discover what it has to endure.¹

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