

MAURICE RAVEL'S MIROIRS FOR PIANO:  
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SOME PERFORMANCE RELATED ASPECTS

BY

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## PART I

### a. Background

Miroirs is a set of five pieces for piano that was written between the years 1904-1905 and includes: *Nocturnelles* ('Night Moths'), *Oiseaux tristes* ('Sad Birds'), *Une barque sur l'océan* ('A Boat on the Ocean'), *Alborada del gracioso* ('The Gester's Morning Song'), and *La Vallée des cloches* ('The Valley of Bells'). The third and fourth pieces of the set, *Une barque sur l'Océan* (1906, revised 1926) and *Alborada del gracioso* (1918), were later also orchestrated by the composer. The set was first performed by the Spanish pianist and one of Ravel's closest friends Ricardo Viñes on January 6, 1906, at the Société nationale de musique, Salle Érard, in Paris.

Some of the major piano pieces that Ravel wrote prior to the *Miroirs* were mainly the *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, *Jeux D'eau*, and the *Sonatine* which was written just prior to that. The period in which Ravel wrote the *Miroirs* was among his most prolific ones and saw one his largest compositional output. It came after he experienced a series of four failed attempts to win the Prix de Rome competition from the Paris conservatoire and after not being accepted by the musical establishment of that time, what was also known and referred to as the *Ravel affaire* or the Ravel scandal. Following these failed attempts Ravel was invited on a Yacht to a cruise trip through Holland by his friends Alfred Edwards and his wife. This trip left strong impressions on Ravel and must have opened him up to a lot of inspiration to draw from. In the period of three years following his return from the trip he wrote the *Sonatine*, *Miroirs*, *la Cloches Engloutie*, *Histoires Naturelles*, *Rhapsody Espagnole*, *Gaspard de la Nuit*, *L'Heure Espagnole* and *Ma Mère l'Oye*.

In 1900 Ravel joined a group of French musicians, writers, and artists, which were named *Les Apaches*, a term coined by Ricardo Viñes and which translates in English into 'Hooligans'. Each of the movements of *Miroirs* was dedicated to a different member of this group. The first of the pieces, *Noctuelles* was dedicated to the French poet Leon-Paul Fargue. *Oiseaux tristes* was dedicated to Ricardo Viñes, a close friend of Ravel's, a Spanish pianist and a leading interpreter of Ravel's, Debussy's and other leading French composers' music of that time. *Une barque sur l'Océan* was dedicated to Paul Sordes, a French painter. *Alborada del gracioso* to Michel D. Calvocoressi, a music critic who was in favor of Ravel's music, and *La Vallée des Cloches* to the composer Maurice Delage.

The order of the pieces of the set is not the order in which they were written. In fact, chronologically the *Oiseaux tristes* was the first piece that Ravel composed. It seems that the composer was inspired by a story that his friend Ricardo Viñes told him upon returning from a meeting he had with Debussy where he told him of his aim to write a piece in a form that is so free that it sounded like an improvisation, or that it was taken out of a sketch book.

b. Reflection on the title 'Miroirs' and similar titles of pieces written at that time

The title *Miroirs*, which literally translates into 'mirrors', suggests the reflections of things or objects. In this case the reflections that we see are those of night moths, birds, a boat on the ocean, a Spanish song with imitation of guitars and the sounding of bells in a valley. Ravel's portrayal of these reflections is very descriptive and appeals to the senses and imagination of the listener. These pieces create an intense atmosphere and the mood each piece sets evokes the exact images that each title suggests. One can feel he is within the particular scene or a perhaps observing a painting when listening to the music and the titles would not be necessary to bring one close to those exact images.

Ravel commented about the title *Miroirs* in his autobiographical sketch:

The title *Miroirs* (Reflections), five piano pieces composed in 1905, has authorized my critics to consider this collection as being among those works that belong to the Impressionist movement. I do not contradict this at all, if one understands the term by analogy. A rather fleeting analogy, at that, 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 subjectivist 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 I, Scene 2).<sup>1</sup>

This helps us understand the composer's intended role in helping us see those pictures through his personal though objective painting of the images in the *Miroirs*; A pictorial description rather than a subjective expression of feeling.

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<sup>1</sup> Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, 66



At around the same time that *Miroirs* was written Debussy was working on his *Images* for piano, two volumes of three piano pieces each. The title suggests some similarities to that of Ravel's but the two composers had different ideals regarding the portrayal of their music, Debussy's being a more subjective and emotional and Ravel's being objective though personal. The first piece of the first set of Debussy's *Images*, *Reflets dans l'eau* (reflections on the water) is inspired by water similarly to Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan*. Debussy's piece deals with light reflecting from the water unlike Ravel's work who deals with a boat's journey on the ocean. Also, Debussy uses different ways of depicting his water and the transformations that it goes through. It's perhaps worthy to note that Ravel's use of water themes is shown in the *Miroirs* and *Jeux d'eau* only, whereas Debussy's output for water-themed pieces is larger.

### c. Harmony

Ravel mentioned in an Interview with Alexis Roland-Manuel "The *Miroirs* form a collection of pieces for piano which mark, in my harmonic evolution, a very considerable change which disconcerted the musicians who, up to that time, had been accustomed to my style." Oct 15 1928

Harmonies in these pieces are innovative, daring and stray away from traditional harmony. In the first piece of this set, *Noctuelles*, we see an extensive use of vertical and horizontal chromaticism, use of whole tone scales, dissonants in the form of clashing appoggiaturas, avoidance of tonal triads and instances that come close to bitonality. In others he incorporated the use of modes, mainly the Dorian and Phrygian which is characteristic of Basque and Andalusian music.

#### d. Ravel and the piano

Ravel's writing for the piano was very much influenced by that of Franz Liszt's, only it was taken to another level. The first and third pieces of the set, the *Noctuelles* and *Une Barque sur l'Océan*, demonstrate this influence the most. Ravel was a master of color and effects, and his pianism requires the utmost fineness and control over the instrument. Ravel's writing for the piano in the *Miroirs* is innovative and it marks a milestone in his compositional development (Earlier pieces of his include *Jeux d'eau* and the *Sonatine*) which will later become even more elaborate in *Gaspard de la nuit*. Such innovations include the production of sound imitating effects such as the repeated notes in *Alborada del gracioso* which remind us of the rhythmic sound of the Spanish castanet instrument, or the double glissandi which was unprecedented. Another feature which was very characteristic of Ravel's pianism is the very active use of the thumb (for which his agility as a performer was also famous). In almost all the pieces in the *Miroirs* the thumb is used both to form inner lines that support the texture or to play a few notes at the same time within a passage to create a special effect or sonority (For examples in *Une Barque sur l'Océan* m.51 or *Alborada del gracioso* m.97—98). The thumb use will become even more elaborate as a consequence of this in the *Scarbo* from *Gaspard de la Nuit*.

Ravel's piano writing also evokes an orchestral texture through the use of wide arpeggios, tremolos, layering of many sound levels and the spreading through the entire range of the piano and to sometimes even leave it to lower notes that didn't exist on pianos of that period. A specific kind of virtuosity and control is required to play his pieces together with a great sensitivity of touch and richness in producing a wide range of colors.

We can also learn a lot from the piano roll recordings of Ravel himself performing his *Oiseaux tristes*, recorded in London on June 30, 1922, and *La Vallée des Cloches*. In observing these recordings it is interesting to note a few things: In the recording of *Oiseaux tristes* Ravel's indication to play the bird-like arabesque figure in the opening faster than the original tempo is very audible through his playing; however the lingering on the longer dotted note (as he suggested to do) is not so audible and it's played in a rather straight forward manner. Ravel wrote on Vlado Perlemuter's score in these measures: 'plus bref', meaning 'the shortest' and mentioned that playing this figure strictly in tempo will make the music 'lose its character'.

It seems that a great deal of the sound quality is lost through the recording and we can hear a lot of accents that one has to doubt were actually played that way in reality. For example the opening repeated notes have no difference of dynamic or tone color and they sound a bit too loud. The score marks the first note with an accent and a slur connects it to the second note which implies that it should be played softer like an echo. However, one can notice a very strict settling into the tempo once the composer reaches m.4 and effect which sets the heavy atmosphere of the contrasting dark forest immediately. The triplet motions are played in a rather steady manner and sometimes Ravel even lingers on the inner voice triplets a bit more.

The faster section in mm.15-18 marked *presez* is interesting as well: Ravel plays this section in a very straightforward manner and without any freedom or *rubato* whatsoever. The triplet eighth note motion unites the entire movement in its impressive steady execution by the composer.

In the piano roll recording of *La Vallée des cloches* the way Ravel performs the opening measure poses some rhythmic inaccuracies which don't exactly correlate with the score (Mainly in mm. 1-11). The question that arises is whether it was Ravel's intention that the sixteenth note motion should be so independent from the bells underneath it so that it would be a purpose that

the two dimensions didn't always correlate. Perhaps it was part of the performance practice of the time and perhaps the effect created in real life had its positive points which didn't come through very well through the means of recordings that were presented. What is very audible in this recording is that one can hear very distinctly the different layers and different bells each with its own unique color and timbre. The bass seems to resonate quite fully through this performance. As in the *Oiseaux tristes* the steadiness of the tempo is extremely noticeable and unifying all throughout the performance.

The rolling of the chords in final bells of the piece in mm. 50 to the end is performed in a rather fast and in sharp manner. The first out of the three strikes out in a surprisingly loud manner, and it seems that Ravel himself indicated that there should be a strong accent on that bell. This creates a very vibrating and resonating effect that lasts through the measure onto the next bell which will pick up at a softer dynamics and continue so until the end. Ravel also marked this section in the autograph of this score *laisser vibrer* (let it ring).

## PART II

### a. A few words on Editions

*Miroirs* was first published in 1906 by E. Demets which later became Editions Max Eschig in Paris. In preparing this essay I have relied on two editions: the first was a reprint of the Eschig editions made by the German edition Schott and the other was the Alfred edition which was edited by Nancy Bricard in 1993. The earlier reprints contain quite a few errors in the score which can be found as: time signatures, wrong pitches and note lengths, and articulation markings; however they do contain metronome markings for all pieces of the set except *Une barque sur l'océan*. These metronome markings were designated by Ravel himself.

The Alfred edition is based on the copies of the autograph manuscripts and reprints made by the Eschig edition until 1991. It is extremely detailed and gives extensive background to the pieces, stylistic background, technique and interpretation. It further relies on suggestions made by French pianists and pedagogues Robert Casadesus and Vlado Perlemuter which were known to have had contact with the composer over the years and to have studied his pieces with him. It also relies on comments by Marcel Ciampi who was on the faculty of the Paris conservatoire. This edition contains very detailed pedal markings, fingering suggestions including some of the composer's original ones. All of the French terms that appear in the score are translated by the editor. Furthermore she suggests the time durations for each piece, some hand divisions and alternatives to the score's original, corrections of errors, and footnotes with various suggestions and justification for whatever is marked on the score. I personally found this edition to be one of the most helpful in a pedagogical perspective as well as from performance point of view. Some of the fingering suggestions or hand divisions can be adjusted according to each individual's hands I will later suggest in this essay.

## b. Performance Aspects

Some comments from a performer's perspective.

### I. *Noctuelles* – Night Moths

“Les Noctuelles des hangars partent, d’un vol gauche, Cravater d’autres poutres - The night moths launch themselves clumsily from their barns, to settle on other perches” Léon-Paul Fargue

This piece is written in ABA form.

This movement is perhaps one of the most difficult of the set to perform. It requires a very close attention to details and nuance but it also requires the ability to be able to shift from the rapid fleeting passages to more expressive motions that are intertwined in between them. Furthermore, dynamic indications in this piece move very abruptly from one extreme to another in an often very short amount of time. The performer is required to have the ability to shift very quickly between these fast movements and thus show the unpredictability of the night moths’ wings fluttering around.

As mentioned, one of the challenges in performing this piece lies in the close proximity or juxtaposition of the very expressive motions together with the fluttering night moth’s motion. This happens mostly in the A section of the piece, where the shifts are quicker. The B section has interrupting motions to the expressive somber theme but there’s also more time to execute them since it’s slower. The music in the A section is written in such a way that gives a sensation of lightly and quickly moving around and then stopping (as if the night moths are fluttering around the light source and then stopping for a second only to flutter around again). Polyrythms, together with dissonant harmonies and chromaticism contribute to this feeling of

unrest. To add to that, quick changes of dynamics occur as little movements grow rapidly from *pp* to *ff* and shifting back and forth unpredictably.

The image of the fluttering of the night moth's wings is immediately created by Ravel from the beginning of the piece by the use of the four against three figures between the two hands. It's important to adhere accurately to the rhythms in both hands. It is also recommended to practice the chromatic lower line in the right hand's thumb and second fingers in order to come to a comfortable lean on this connecting line which is the basis of most of the sixteenth note figurations of this piece. To this chromatic lower line in sixteenth notes motion the left hand has triplet motions against it. Here it is important to bring out the first note of each beat (G flat F flat and A flat) and listen to the harmonies that are created between the two hands. The final step in practicing the opening of this piece would be to add the rest of the notes using the fourth and fifth fingers. These notes should be played lightly and come off of the leaning on the thumb and second fingers as mentioned before.

In m. 14 earlier editions mistakenly mark a 5/8 time signature that is followed by a 6/8 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> time signature two measures afterwards. The actual time signature should be 6/8 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in that measure as well.

It is important to bring out the top melody which ends on two D's at the end of the section in m. 19 in the right hand and then in the left hand in the following measure. The light 'tale' that follows this passage ends on a *ppp* chord in m. 20. The grace notes should slide effortlessly into the chord in both hands and have a sensual effect. Also, the tone should have a sparkling or shimmering quality despite the soft dynamics.

The expressive melody which follows next is twice interrupted by a nervous 3/8 measure where the lines are moving in contracting motion. This measure is an example of the extreme dynamic

outburst in a very short period of time. This measure is marked to move from *pp* to *f* over the three eighth notes and ends in a staccato chord in both hands. It should sound a bit nervous and as if interrupting the expressive melody but it is important not to be tempted to accelerate the tempo but rather just follow the dynamics and articulation marking in tempo in order to produce this effect.

In the passage that starts at m. 33 and marked *poco rubato* it is important to bring out the accents that fall on different beats between the hands. The right hand has those accents on the half measure consistently but the left hand has them in varying division of three and two and only sometimes it joins the right hand. It's important to start out in a steady tempo and add to the drive of the passage as it moves along in mm. 34-35 towards the climactic tremolo. In this *ff tremolo* climax of the *poco rubato* passage it is important to relax both wrists and let them notes bounce as much as possible to be able to let the diminuendo happen naturally from the gradual release of the arms' weight rather than forcing a diminuendo.

The middle section which begins at m. 37 should be played just a little slower than the initial tempo. The octaves should be the driving force for the tempo and they are also responsible for setting the mood. Their syncopated rhythmic change from before cuts the fluttering material that came before-hand and as soon as they move to the background a somber yet expressive melody begins. This somber melody has a downwards direction usually but contradicting to that and is upwards motion which is reminiscent of the night moths. (This type of writing in two layers where the one is pulling downwards and the other upwards is similar to that of *Oiseaux tristes*) It is important to bring out this difference between the 'pulling down' materials and the one that's 'pulling upwards'. Adding to that is the fast light flight-like passages, marked *léger* in mm. 52 and 54. Just as the octaves in F set the mood in the beginning of this section the same syncopated rhythm brings us back to the opening movement on the repeated B flat *accelerando*. In this



transition the initial material slowly tries to come back as reminiscing segments of the somber melody now interrupt in between.

In Nancy Bricard's edition for the Alfred publishing company, it is mentioned that the *accelerando* to return to the tempo was written in the autograph *pen à pen* (little by little) and that the Tempo I designation was originally missing. She indicated that the assumption was that Ravel later added the Tempo I marking in proof. This perhaps could leave just a little room to wonder whether Ravel intended the return to the tempo to actually last longer than that one measure of syncopated B flats in mm. 61-62 (seeing that he marked it *pen à pen*, one measure seems too short of a time to mark such a comment). It is indeed assumed that Ravel added this marking later on in proof but perhaps one can consider this gradual return to the first tempo to span over a longer period of time and for it to actually reach its initial tempo towards mm. 81-83. One reason to consider this would be the reminiscent return to the somber material which was a little bit slower and more expressive to begin with.

In mm. 80-83 it is highly recommended to practice the right hand's figurations first only using the lower chromatic lines with the thumb and second fingers. This will allow the hand to learn and get used to the circular motion of the arm and wrist. Achieving an almost automatic movement of the hand here is necessary in order to be able to perform the left hand chords more freely and independently. Similarly, another practicing method is recommended for the closing measures of this movement: mm.126-131. In these measures one should practice the chromatic line exchanging the second finger and the thumb notes between the two hands and work on making this chromatic line as fluid and quiet as possible, and without any dynamic swells. However this line is the leading force of the passage and one should add the remaining notes of the full chords after creating a line that serves as a good foundation for the passage to work.

## II. Oiseaux Tristes

Ravel said about this piece:

“It evokes birds lost in the oppressiveness of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer” Autobiographical sketch

Ricardo Viñes was the first to perform this piece on January 6, 1906 and it was also dedicated to him. Ravel jokingly commented that he dedicated the least pianistic piece of the set to the pianist in the group (Les Apaches).

This piece is one of the most unique in the set and what sets it apart is its free structure and improvisatory nature. It was the first of the set to be written by Ravel and was perhaps inspired by a story that Viñes had told Ravel about a meeting he had with Debussy, where he heard the composer say that he wishes to write a piece in a form so free that it would feel as an improvisation. His inspiration for writing this piece must have come during a walk in the forest of Fontainebleau. There are two main layers in this piece: the first is the birds singing on higher plane, and the second is that of the heavy atmosphere of the dark forest below.

I feel it is important to try to paint the picture of the ‘birds lost in a very dark forest’ through a few practices. First, it’s important to have a clear separation of the various ‘activity’ levels that exist in this piece. The first of these activity levels is the bird’s call or bird’s song which is marked by the repeated note motive followed by the faster moving motion in triplets. I feel that this is the more dynamic or ‘motion filled’ aspect of the piece (the birds). It’s important to note that one of the very few instances where a *rubato* may be called for in this music is where Ravel had played that figure a little rushed and out of the actual tempo. I also think it’s important to let the longer notes of this figure relate to one another, for example the B flat falling on the A flat from the beginning of the piece should be played with a slight diminuendo. Finally a special

attention to the tone production should be places on the repeated echoing B flats or other notes respectively in the piece. Some editions call for using a separate finger on each, but it's more important to use a varying touch that resonates the first note in a bit more accented way and the second one coming back off of that resonance. One suggestion of a way to produce such an effect is to use the third finger on both the repeated notes. However, the strike in the first note should be made accented by the pushing and sliding into the key, from the end of the key and into the piano, whereas the second echoed note should be played on the return, and the sliding back and returning to the original position of the finger in a softer manner. This ensures a more deep and resonating accent rather than a flat or sharp one. Also mind that while marked *pp* and *très doux*, the sound of this opening should still be ringing as if hearing the birds from a distance.

Secondly, there is the static or more stagnant side to the piece (the dark forest in the hottest hours of summer): the use of the interval of a fifth in the lower 'level' of this painting, together with descending figures starting with a third, which should be brought out more expressively and felt like a sigh, and the constant eighth note motion intertwined in between. This texture contributes to the atmosphere of the 'dark forest in hottest hours of summer'. There is almost a feeling of it pulling everything down – the upper level being the birds, and lower level being the somber darkness of the forest.

Imagination is the key to a successful performance of this piece.

Some Additional notes to consider:

In m. 15 in the left hand it's important to work on bringing out the half step F natural to E to emphasize that tension together with the hurried bird call above and the following passage. In this passage it's important to work on the chromatic connectedness of the inner voice. Then, an ascending half step motion will last through the end of the piece and is very important. Regarding the fingering of the right hand's repeated notes I feel it's better to use the same finger to be able to play them in such a speed and bring out the proper effect.

In the Lent, *Persque ad lib.* It important to not to rush and in the following *presses légèrement* the left hand should bring out the harmonic changes through bringing out the bass note a little bit.

The use of the thumb to bring out certain lines is also very important in this piece. Some examples for this can be found in m. 20 in the right hand where the thumb slides from A to B flat and the left hand follows with the F sharp. Another example is m.25 where the right hand thumb should be brought out a bit more.

### III. Une arque sur l'océan

This is the only piece of the sets that uses the subject of water. It is a journey of a boat on the ocean.

Ravel made an orchestrated version of this piece in 1906, but that version didn't please him and he admitted that the piano version sounds much richer than the actual orchestral performances. When the texture is orchestrated in different instruments it loses the water effects that prove to be very suitable on a piano.

Oliver Messiaen commented on this orchestration: "There exists an orchestral kind of piano writing which is more orchestral than the orchestra itself and which, with a real orchestra it is impossible to realize".<sup>2</sup>

An important issue to note regarding this piece is the issue of pacing. This piece is the only movements out of the set which lacks a metronome mark from Ravel. The different amount of performances of this piece that are available also show a vast variety of speeds and lengths in which it can be performed. Some examples for tempo differences in performances are that of Sviatoslav Richter which lasts less than 5'40", or just a little over 7 min by André Laplante and some pianist may even perform it at the 8 min range. Ravel notes at the top of the score: D'un rythme souple – Très enveloppé de pédales (With a supple rhythm – Very much immersed in pedals), and the time signature for the opening 6/8 or 2/4.

It's important to achieve the utmost control over the left hand arpeggios and to attain the ability to play them as soft as possible and with a slight wave feeling from bottom to top and back. The most difficult fingers to control in these passages are actually the second and third

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<sup>2</sup> Orenstein *Ravel, Man and Musician*, 74

fingers in the left hand. It's recommended to first achieve control over those fingers and avoid any accentuation caused by them.

The F sharps should be brought out slightly to support the overall texture, but the entire playing of the arpeggios should feel smooth and flowing. The rhythm in the opening figure of the right hand should be very accurate – one must bring out clearly the two followed by three division of the beat. Among this painting of the sea emerge the rising fourths motives which are to be played with both the hands' thumbs and allowed to resonate expressively and with longing. At the third time it repeats and elaborates into a phrase it is important to give it direction and close it beautifully on the descending notes.

The entire piece should be played with pedal. There is no stopping point of rest in this piece from beginning to end it is saturated with arpeggios to represent the waters of the sea, and the longer the saturation of the pedal, when the harmonies allow, the better. Sometimes, a half changing of the pedal can be experimented with, especially when repeated material is present over extended period. Some examples for this appear following the climax of the piece in mm. 103-106, and mm. 133-end.

The opening seems calm and one wouldn't know how it would develop. The first interruption to this mysterious calmness happens in m. 11 when the meter changes to  $\frac{3}{4}$  with a series of sighs and echoes coming then back to the calmness.

A division of the arpeggios in between the hands in this piece is often recommended in order to facilitate their technical execution and I will show some examples further on.

The seemingly calm weather that rests upon the sea is changing at the beginning of a new section in m. 28. The *sf* that is marked on the low B flat and subsequent octaves is extremely important in shaking the listener from the previous mood. It's important to play that *sf* in the

context of a *pp* dynamics and not to exaggerate its loudness. One can imagine that if the sun was shining on the water before, this B flat *sforzando* marks the sudden motion of the clouds to cover the sun and the weather becoming darker. In the section that follows it's important to bring out the descending line with the right hand's fifth finger which starts out very softly but it should be ringing and have a sparkle to it as well. Together with this descending figure bring out the chords in the left hand and especially the thumb. The challenge of this passage is not to let the phrase be interrupted in anyway by the arpeggios that fill those two lines. If anything, one can compromise the accuracy of the positioning of the arpeggios within this line but not the direction of the phrase.

In the transition between mm. 37-38 it's important to let the low G sharp resonate, change the pedal on that note, and make sure it is placed before the downbeat where the right hand begins its tremolo. This low note should be correctly placed in every instance that it returns before the entrance of the tremolo on the downbeat that follows. Pacing is of extreme importance here as one should plan for the third instance of this massive. The difficulty here lies in the change between the right hand's ongoing tremolos to a re-positioning to hit the climatic notes each time. Perhaps to facilitate this difficulty it is better to play both these notes in the right hand because of their proximity, or to take the high note with the left hand as suggested by the editor of the Alfred edition. A variety of divisions between the hands is possible and recommended to facilitate the fluidity of the arpeggios that follow and ensure their dynamics and strength is not lost too soon.

In m. 44 the glissando on the black notes should be played as glissando and not with the fingering that is used in the repeat in m. 74. The reason for using this fingering is due to the fact that the glissando is impossible in the transposition of those notes; however, the effect of a glissando should be imitated at the second time it returns as much as possible.

In m. 46 the chords marked *tres espressif* should be played with a very warm tone and represents in my opinion a slight moment of rest or a very human sigh relief that comes in between the stormy waves and slowly leads to a calmer transition that brings us back to the initial material in C sharp minor. The transition in m. 60 should be played with special care to the color that is changing in m.61. A special attention should also be given to sliding the fingers from the last thirty-second note D sharp at m.60 in the right hand to E natural of the beginning of m. 61. One can compare this to the sliding or dripping of drops of water of the human part and which bring us back to the calmness and sunshine that comes back in between the clouds.

Another challenging part of this piece lies in creating the seamless effect in the extended right hand arpeggios in mm. 81-103. Added to this is a very sensual melody in the left hand, which is somewhat of an inversion of the opening. Bringing out the interval of a second will contribute to the right character of this melody. Achieving coordination between the hands is challenging in this section. At first, I recommend practicing the right hand arpeggio while omitting the high A (played by the fifth finger) and focusing on letting the hand become used to the circular nature of this arpeggio, using a lot of wrist flexibility and attaining as much fluidity as possible until it becomes independent and free. It is also recommended to vary dynamic levels along the practice. My recommended fingering for the F sharps would be using the fourth finger instead of the third as I find its touch to be more delicate, and also as it will later slide to the G natural in the new pattern in m.98.

Note: a division between the hands in this section while the left hand is free is not recommended. The Alfred edition suggests a facilitated version to these repeating figures however in this instance I feel it's important to achieve the control over the right hand's wrist motion and delicacy of touch rather than to facilitate it.



#### IV. Alborada del gracioso

This movement inspired by Spanish music: we hear a lot of imitations of guitar, castanet like rhythms and repetitions and a very energetic mood. The middle section incorporates a lyrical, improvised, free song, also known as the *Cante jondo*, or ‘deep song’. The *Cante jondo* originated in the Spanish gypsy Andalusian and later flamenco vocal tradition and is a serious and lamenting song that often contains rich embellishments.

Opening: It’s important to execute the accents accurately at the half measure. The opening should be played with a lot of energy, and with a biting touch. In mm. 6 and 8 it is important that the descending melodic line from A through C natural is brought out in an audible way.

Although Ravel composed on an Erard piano which didn’t have the sostenuto pedal at that time I find that the using it in one instance in this set could prove to be very helpful and effective. Therefore I recommend the use of the Sostenuto pedal instead of the damper pedal in m. 14 in order to hold the interval of the fifth G-D in the left hand while still being able to play the staccato rhythms in a way that wouldn’t lose their dry, biting nature.

In m. 30 it is common practice to play the low B flat using a striking of the fist. In the following measure it is important to bring out the descending line B flat-A-F sharp and make sure the accent in the middle of the bar is ongoing. Whenever the articulation ‘!’ marking is used it’s important to avoid the use of the damper pedal to insure a short and biting sound.

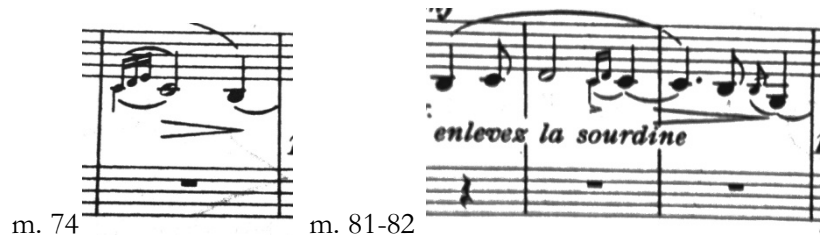
For the repeated note section I found that if it is impossible to keep the same tempo of the beginning, then slightly slowing down could be acceptable and this should gradually begin when approaching that section. This slowing down can begin at m. 39.

In general, the fingering that I found most comfortable to play the repeated notes were 132 132 etc. This allows a circular wrist motion and enough time for the repeated notes to bounce back. Whenever the left hand is free it can play the first of the three-group of the repeated notes to facilitate everything. Ravel's original fingering in m. 53 is a better choice over playing the same fingering on each repeated note. The circular motion that is created by this fingering saves any unnecessary movements.



The middle section, as mentioned before is inspired by the *cante jondo* and Ravel marks it on the score: *expressif en recit* - expressive and eloquent as a recitative. Although he didn't mark a *rubato* in this section, the following answering section in m.76 is marked *très mesuré* and should be played strictly in time, using the soft pedal and a sensual touch. The part of the recitative should be played expressively with a bigger tone and with more flexibility of time for it to evoke the style of the *cante jondo*. I feel is not quite possible to notate the rhythms of such a recitative accurately and it can be more open to personal interpretation in terms of *rubato*, however it is important to begin by executing the rhythms accurately before making plans for such an interpretation.

One very interesting notation Ravel uses to describe a type of ornament is found in the following examples in mm.74; 81 and subsequent repeats.



This is describing a vocal ornament. One must try to imitate an ornament sung by the *cante jondo* singer. It is important to let the second note after the accented beginning of the tie ring and continue the following note from the dynamic level that was achieved at that point in order to preserve the line.

Regarding the double glissandi passages in fourths and thirds in mm.175-180 it is important to lift the right hand before the highest note in order to play the accented climax. Alternative fingering to playing the glissando in fourths using fourth and second fingers is to use the fourth finger and the thumb. It is also helpful to imagine going deeper into the keys at the middle of the glissando, in a form similar to an arch, to further facilitate playing it.

The left hand should have no less attention here because it's extremely important that its rhythm is accurate and that the right hand glissandi follow the left hand's material rather the other way around. It is recommended to practice reaching the accents in both hands at the same time.

## V. La Vallée des cloches

As in the Oiseaux tristes, La Vallée des cloches is a painting made of many layers in which different bells are sounding through the valley, and each bell has its own color and register, and its own dynamic level which could indicate how near or far it is to the person who hears them.

The atmosphere in this piece is very calm and soothing and Ravel often marked the words *calme* and *doux* into the score as well. The piece opens and ends in the same material of the various sounding bells while its middle section contains a long and generous chant.

In this piece one must be sensitive not only to the gradation of dynamics of each bell but also to playing each bell or layer with its own unique register and interval appropriate tone color. The two first opening bells that appear in octaves and are marked *pp* are sounding from a far and will later move into the background as the third bell of descending fourths marked *un peu marqué* comes in at m.4 and in m.6 two additional bells are heard: a low G and a repeated E sharp which is sounding the most.

A great deal of work needs to be put into the pattern of parallel fourths sixteenth notes which are sounded in the background to all those bells in the valley. The goal of it being as smooth and even as possible, Ravel marks it *très doux et sans accentuation* (very tender/soft and without any accents). It's recommended to practice this pattern in as many variants as possible. For example: omitting one of the lines thus practicing only the notes that are played by fingers 1323, and then 1545, or to practice only the parallel fourths in varying rhythms and without adding the thumb until being comfortable with the pattern. It's also possible to practice the parallel fourths pattern using legato in one line and a detached or staccato in the second, and alternating them afterwards.

In the next section, which will lead us into the chant and begins at m. 12, the texture changes as a chordal motion is began. These start out shorter and grow longer into the chant. In between these lines sound bells in the interval of an octave but at a lower register this time.

When the chant starts (in m. 19) it is the first time that bells in the interval of a second enter at the background and the lowest bell sounds at the interval of a fifth. It is marked *largement chanté* (generously singing) and it is a very long line that should be played as legato as possible. Following the top line of the chords/octaves in this melody would be the way to ensure such a legato. It is recommended to use fingering that will ensure such a legato even without the use of the pedal.

Special attention to color changes need to be paid at m. 23, as the bass and harmony changes. In that same measure the melody is transferred to the upper register and there is a feeling that the texture opens up as the intervals expand: the interval of a harmonic second is no longer used for the background bells but now it is a chord built on fourths. It is also marked *expressif* and one should play it with a bit more generosity. Ravel uses rhythmic variation of a triplet motion in the internal part texture. This internal part will continue to vary it's rhythms along the rest of this melody, a thing which enriches it's sonority and will later be slowed down to come back to the opening material. The unifying interval motion of all of these variants is the interval of a rising major second. There are many moments of extreme beauty created by harmonic and color changes in his melody and the performer should play close attention to mm.26, 31-32, and 42.

When the opening material returns and the piece come close to its ending a final bell is introduced (m. 50). It is to be played by both hands and have a ringing quality that will last throughout the pattern of double fourths until the next stroke and gradually become more and more distant (which is executed by a diminuendo). The pedal should be minimally cleared in this section to ensure the full ringing of each bell stroke.

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## Style Manual

Turabian