Man or Mask?
Artistic Identity and the Music of Ravel

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution, and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of the thesis.

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Abstract

The notion of masks has long been associated with the life and works of Maurice Ravel. His maskedness, and the mystery that is attached to it, has to a great extent informed scholarly perceptions of the composer, figuring particularly prominently in discussions of his musical identity. Indeed, as one scholar has recently observed, one can hardly speak of Ravel without also mentioning his masks: these instruments of concealment are so bound up with the artistic identity of the composer that at one level, they are a part of who he is. And yet the assumptions that form the basis of this understanding of Ravel—as one who wears a disguise and eludes all efforts to analyse him—have largely been left unchallenged. It seems that scholars have become so accustomed to the masked Ravel that they have neglected to question the preconceptions of the composer that inform this image. This thesis, therefore, aims to critique the assumptions of Ravel’s maskedness, which can be traced to the earliest academic discourse on the composer and have informed much of the literature to date, in order to reconsider the question of his musical identity. By subjecting the notion of masks to close analysis, this thesis explores its association with the composer and ultimately exposes some of the misconceptions of his musical identity that have resulted from constructions of his maskedness. Through a re-evaluation of the nature of Ravel’s masks, their prominence in the composer’s art, and their implications for his musical identity, this thesis develops a new understanding of those aspects of his aesthetics that have contributed to his reputation for artificiality, including his eclecticism, his preoccupation with technical perfection, and his apparent stance against sincerity.
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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Jonathan and Yvonne Ng, who, by their own example, have instilled in me an appreciation for knowledge, education, and music. Their sacrificial love, unwavering support, and commitment to my growth and learning are things for which I can never hope to repay them.
Introduction

Masks and mystery

Subtitled ‘The many masks of Ravel,’ Deborah Mawer’s introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* begins with the acknowledgement that ‘[o]ur image of Maurice Ravel is still partly obscured by mystery and intangibility, and by some lingering misunderstandings.’¹ She claims, quoting a special correspondent for *De Telegraaf*, that ‘the hiding place’ of the composer is not easy to find. In the decade since the publication of this volume in 2000, there has been a substantial growth in scholarly interest in the composer’s life, his music, and his significance in the grander scheme of twentieth-century French musical development. Contributions to the literature such as Steven Huebner’s examination of Ravel’s private and public personas in “Maurice Ravel: Private Life, Public Works” from 2006, Benjamin Ivry’s controversial biography *Maurice Ravel: A Life* also from 2006, which discusses the composer’s sexuality and its expression in his music, Stephen Zank’s extensive study on the use irony in Ravel’s music published in 2009, *Irony and Sound: The Music of Maurice Ravel*, and Michael J. Puri’s *Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire* from 2011 all aim towards dissipating the cloud of uncertainty around composer. And yet it seems that for every discovery that is made, further issues demanding clarification arise—Ravel continues to puzzle those who try to understand him. As Mawer predicted in 2000 using the metaphor of masks, ‘in peeling off one mask there is invariably another beneath; furthermore, the masks are so bound up with Ravel’s identity that, at one level, they are part of him. No mask: no Ravel.’²

While it is evident that her evocative statement needs to be properly deconstructed, it appears that Mawer was not far off in her perception of the impossibility of fully understanding the composer. Indeed, eleven years after the publication of *The Cambridge Companion* and numerous studies later, the quest of unmasking continues. 2011, for example, saw the publication of Peter Kaminsky’s edited collection tellingly

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entitled *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music*. In the introduction to this multi-authored contribution, Kaminsky identifies eight ‘master tropes’ that have been and continue to be central to Ravel studies: Ravel as classicist, Ravel’s masks, Ravel as artisan, Ravel as ‘artificial,’ Ravel and the aesthetic of imposture, Ravel as ‘cold,’ Ravel as virtuoso, and finally Ravel as ‘ornamentalist.’ Many of these are, on Kaminsky’s own admission, somewhat overlapping. Moreover, by grouping similar tropes together, this list can be further reduced to reveal the most pervasive lines of inquiry in scholarship: Ravel’s artificiality and his maskedness. The first of these encompasses notions of the composer as artisan, virtuoso, and ‘ornamentalist,’ as well as his coldness, while the second addresses the composer’s association with classicism, and the discourse on his aesthetic of imposture. Given that the composer’s maskedness can be seen as a subtrope of his artificiality or vice versa—although, as we will later explore, they can also be independent from one another—more than a few of these master tropes could easily fit under either of the two categories. Fundamentally, all these issues have to do with the composer’s musical identity and each is based on an unstated premise: Ravel is not who he appears to be—he is hiding something, or perhaps hiding behind something, and the ‘real’ Ravel is yet to be found.

Is Ravel truly this elusive figure, one driven by artificiality and concealed behind his masks? And if these masks are, as Mawer states, so intricately connected to the composer that they are a part of him, what can we make of his musical identity? Does he even have one? It seems that Kaminsky’s master tropes and their underlying assumptions have guided so much of the discourse on Ravel that we can hardly speak of the composer without also mentioning his masks. While some scholars have sought deliberately to move away from the preoccupation with Ravel’s artificiality—Puri, for example, uses a markedly different set of analytical criteria in *Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire*—it is evident that these tropes continue to inform our perceptions of the composer’s life and work. As Barbara Kelly warns, we should not underestimate the influence that this line of thinking has had on Ravel studies.\(^3\)


The main objective of this thesis, then, is to contribute to the continuing efforts to de-
mystify Ravel and penetrate the obscurity that seems to cling so tightly to his legacy. It
should be noted, however, that this thesis does not join the quest to remove all of the
composer's masks. Rather, it aims to critique the preconceptions that we have of Ravel's
aesthetic, preconceptions that have informed so much of the literature to date.
Ultimately, the aim of this thesis is to reconsider the question of Ravel's musical identity
(or identities) in light of a re-evaluation of the nature of his masks. I will therefore
challenge the view that the composer's artificiality and overt donning of masks obscure
our image of the 'real' Ravel. By re-interpreting these elements of 'concealment' as
aspects of the composer's originality, we discover that they do not, in fact, detract from a
sense of his musical identity, but are an intrinsic part of who he is. In doing so, it
becomes apparent that many of the current interpretations of his aesthetic, including his
eclecticism, his preoccupation with technical perfection, and his apparent stance against
sincerity, must be radically revised.

Literature review

Given that one of the preliminary goals of this thesis is to re-evaluate the claims that
have played a major role in the formation of Ravel's legacy, we will leave most of the
critical discussion of these early sources to later chapters. For the time being, these
writings will only be considered in brief as a springboard to a review of the more recent
literature, a large portion of which is informed by these foundational studies. In light of
the recent expansion in research on Ravel and his music, the review will be limited to
the scholarship that pertains directly to the topic of the thesis as laid out above.

Michael Calvocoressi's article "Maurice Ravel" from 1913 is the first to sow seeds of
uncertainty in regards to the relationship between the composer and his music.
Calvocoressi portrays Ravel as one who is not who he seems, and thus introduces the
notion of artificiality into discussions of the composer. He claims that the artificiality of
Ravel's music is only apparent and that natural emotional expression can be found if one
diligently searches for it.\footnote{Michael Calvocoressi, "Maurice Ravel," The Musical Times 54, no. 850 (1913): 785.} Alexis Roland-Manuel's article on the composer published in
1925, "Maurice Ravel ou l'esthétique de l'imposture," continues the discussion on
Ravel's artificiality, and speculates on Ravel's nature and its relationship to his music. He
argues that Ravel’s artistic genius lies in his ability to fake emotional expression in his music,⁶ and in so doing associates the composer with imposture and deception. Furthermore, his theories on the composer’s nature and personal make-up suggest a disjuncture between Ravel’s experience and his expression. Along with his 1938 biography of the composer, which bolsters this image of Ravel as trickster, Roland-Manuel’s article from 1925 has left a lasting impact on the way we approach Ravel and his music. Indeed, due to the discourse on imposture that has resulted from these early writings, the question of how Ravel is deceiving us continues to linger in our minds.

The final major study on the composer before the relative dearth in Ravel research in the later part of the twentieth century—thirty-six years would pass before the next substantial study was published—is Vladimir Jankélévitch’s 1939 biography of the composer. Jankélévitch identifies two common threads in Ravel’s aesthetic, and critically examines Roland-Manuel’s theories on the composer’s imposture. Jankélévitch proposes that Ravel’s predilection for overcoming difficulty and his ‘obstinate search for effort,’ which he dubs the ‘aesthetics of challenge,’ more accurately describes the composer’s artistic outlook.⁷ Drawing on Roland-Manuel’s interpretation of the composer’s ability to go against natural impulses and create things from apparently nothing, Jankélévitch emphasises Ravel’s ‘tour de force’ and ‘iron will,’ his virtuosity and superior technical ability. In contradiction to the other foundational studies which promote the composer’s artificial nature, however, Jankélévitch’s biography presents the composer as one who deliberately chose not to express too much, for fear of exposing his inner being. He connects this fear of exposure to Ravel’s use of masks and begins to examine the characteristics of these disguises in musical terms. The most valuable aspect of this study, therefore, can be found in Jankélévitch’s discussions on the music itself; in contrast to previous studies, specific compositions that involve masks are referenced, even if only in passing. The brevity of the discussion, however, means that much more needs to be understood concerning these masks in the music. The beginning of Chapter Two critiques the ambiguities, contradictions, and assumptions found in the writings of Calvocoressi, Roland-Manuel, and Jankélévitch with the aim of finding new perspectives on the composer’s artificiality and maskedness.

The more recent writings on the composer that are particularly relevant to this thesis can be divided into three research areas: Ravel’s attitude towards historical and cultural Otherness, the notion of masks in the arts, and perceptions of the relationship between artistic identity and one’s nature. Barbara Kelly’s chapter in The Cambridge Companion, “History and homage” presents Ravel within the context of French cultural and musical history, and examines the composer’s attitudes towards his immediate predecessors and older contemporaries, as well as the tradition of French music more broadly. Kelly’s investigation, though only a chapter long, reveals key aspects of Ravel’s aesthetic, especially in regards to the importance of tradition in the search for innovation. A more detailed and analytically-focussed study on Ravel and the past can be found in Purí’s “Memory, pastiche, and aestheticism in Ravel and Proust” from the 2010 volume Ravel Studies. Along with his recent book Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire, this chapter represents one of the very few published studies on pastiche in the compositions of Ravel. The most extensive study to date on Ravel’s relationship with his personal past, especially his childhood, can be found in Emily Kilpatrick’s 2008 doctoral thesis “The Language of Enchantment: Childhood and Fairytale in the Music of Maurice Ravel.” In light of these studies in particular, Chapter Two continues in the quest to understand Ravel’s compositional fixation on the past, both personal and collective.

The composer was similarly captivated by the exotic Other, and his fascination has become an area of research that has produced many notable studies, including Robert Orledge’s “Evocations of exoticism,” Peter Kaminsky’s “Vocal music and the lures of exoticism and irony,” and Richard Langham Smith’s “Ravel’s operatic spectacles: L’Heure and L’Enfant,” all of which are published in The Cambridge Companion to Ravel. Particularly helpful is Orledge’s investigation into the composer’s life-long engagement with other musical cultures in which he looks at Ravel’s attitude towards authentic representation and provides a useful paradigm within which to view his widespread eclecticism. More recently, Deborah Mawer’s “Crossing borders II: Ravel’s theory and practice of jazz” in Ravel Studies begins to clarify Ravel’s theories on national consciousness and his overt assimilation of foreign jazz vernacular. Building on these studies, Chapter Three aims to construct a more comprehensive understanding of Ravel’s artistic attitude towards tradition, influence and Otherness in relation to the formation of his musical identity.
While the discourse on masks is well established in the literature on the visual and dramatic arts, scholars have largely overlooked the concept of musical masks independent from opera and music theatre. Given that the term ‘musical masks’ is necessarily metaphorical, an investigation into the masks found in the other arts has been crucial to the understanding of them in music. Studies on the masks of theatre and portraiture have been particularly relevant, including Walter Sorrell’s *The Other Face: The Masks in the Arts* (1973), *The mirror and the mask: Portraiture in the age of Picasso* (edited by Paloma Alarcó and Malcolm Warner, 2007), and Penny Francis’s *Puppetry: A reader in theatre practice* (2012). Furthermore, Peter Hall’s *Exposed by the Mask: Form and Language in Drama* (2000) presents a short but revealing exploration of the interactive relationship between character, mask, and actor in theatre. Chapter Two explores the seemingly paradoxical theories for the concealing and revelatory nature of masks developed in all these studies, and adopts them in the investigation of the musical masks evident in Ravel’s compositions.

Surprisingly little has been written on Ravel’s masks in musical terms. While the notion of masks figures prominently in the literature, it is often discussed merely in theoretical terms and often in speculation on the relationship between the composer and his art. Their assumed presence in the music is such that the concept of masks casts its shadow over much of the literature, and yet when one attempts to grasp a firm hold on the nature of these masks, they appear to be just as elusive as the composer hidden beneath them. Indeed, the section on disguises in Jankélévitch’s 1939 biography, which includes a survey of the masks found in Ravel’s music, represents the only systematic examination in English of these disguises and where they can be found in the compositions themselves. Given that his commentary is often vague and the analysis not accompanied by musical examples, Jankélévitch’s study, although broad, only begins to investigate the notion of masks. One of the goals of Chapter Two is to discuss the nature of musical masks in more general terms, before looking specifically at how they are implemented by Ravel through the detailed analysis of some of his works.

Fundamentally, however, this thesis is not concerned with the notion of masks for its own sake, but with the evaluation of Ravel’s musical identity in relation to his masks. Therefore, central to the discussion are the issues of originality and style, and their relationship with one’s artistic identity. Important studies that deal with these issues
include Leonard Meyer’s *Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture* (1967) and *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (1989), as well as Chapters Two and Three, “Innovation, tradition” and “Originality, influence, and self-renewal” respectively, of Carlo Caballero’s *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (2001). While this literature does not consider style, originality, and identity in relation to Ravel specifically, it offers numerous insights into the perceptions of these issues within Ravel’s immediate historical and cultural contexts. Chapter Three builds on knowledge of the competing perspectives on originality during the first half of the twentieth century, and draws out the implications of these perspectives on our evaluation of Ravel’s originality and artistic identity.

Newfound interest in the links between Ravel’s art and biography has sparked an encouraging increase in critical studies on the composer’s nature. Notable contributions to the literature include Huebner’s aforementioned investigation of the artist’s public and private selves, “Maurice Ravel: Private Life, Public Works,” Puri’s assessment of sublimation in Ravel’s life and works in *Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire*, and Barbara Kelly’s “Re-presenting Ravel: Artificity and the Aesthetic of Imposture” in Kaminsky’s *Unmasking Ravel*. These studies have been helpful in exposing the need for re-evaluating prevalent preconceptions of the composer in the literature, a need that has driven the research behind this thesis.

Invaluable in any attempt to understand Ravel are the sources of documentary evidence, such as Roger Nichols’s *Ravel Remembered* (1987), a compilation of the memoirs of those who intimately knew the composer or worked closely with him, and Arbie Orenstein’s *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews* (1990). Aside from those already mentioned, Orenstein’s *Ravel: Man and Musician* (1975), Gerald Larner’s *Maurice Ravel* (1996), Nichols’s *Ravel* (2011), and Kelly’s entry on Ravel in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* have each been indispensable for providing the details of the composer’s biography as well as insights into the interpretation of the music itself. Other notable resources include Mawer’s edited collections *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* and *Ravel Studies*, as well as Kaminsky’s volume *Unmasking Ravel*, individual chapters of which have already been mentioned.
Looking ahead

In summary of the objectives of the following chapters, it is perhaps important first of all to clarify what they do not aim to achieve. They do not seek to add to the already established biography of Ravel, nor do they claim to introduce new methods of analysing his music *per se*. Rather, this thesis seeks to re-interpret aspects of Ravel’s aesthetic that have contributed to the obscured image we have of the composer, in order to consider new ways of understanding his musical identity.

To this end, Part I of Chapter One explores the notion of artificiality in art, its problems, and its implications, ultimately to expose its dependence on a specifically Romantic aesthetic framework. In light of this, Part II is devoted to understanding Ravel’s departure from Romantic compositional aesthetics in his stance against sincerity. By examining closely the composer’s statements concerning sincerity and its threat to the creation of good art, statements that have fuelled speculation on his maskedness, we are forced to confront certain inconsistencies in the composer’s theories. Part III continues to track the formation of Ravel’s theories on composition, and looks at his emphasis on the importance of choice and his negative attitude towards naturalness in art. In Part IV, we discover the reasons behind Ravel’s pursuit of technical perfection, which enables us to forge a connection between his obstinate search for effort and his seeming artificiality.

Based on the clarification on Ravel’s anti-sincerity stance which results in a better informed understanding of his aesthetics, Chapter Two begins by tracing the origins of the discourse on masks in the literature and exposes the preconceptions that inform those early sources. This is followed in Part II by an examination of the general nature of masks in the arts as well as their specific implications in music—what they constitute and how they can be implemented. Part III applies these principles to the music of Ravel and analyses the composer’s use of masks in the music. Through a case study of his pastiches, we explore Ravel’s engagement with various musical Others in his imitation of and allusions to an eclectic range of styles.

Given the prevalence of masks in Ravel’s music as established in Chapter Two, the final chapter of this thesis aims to understand the composer’s ‘true’ artistic identity in light of his seemingly constant donning of disguises. Having established the underlying issue of
originality in the search for musical identity, Part I explores the conception of originality as novelty of style and how it is manifested in the uniqueness of a composer’s musical language and artistic innovations. Part II provides an alternative perspective on the understanding of originality and its essence, and focusses instead on the perceived sources of one’s originality. Here we aim to determine Ravel’s understanding of originality through an examination of his theories of national and individual consciousness. We find, by working through some of the apparent contradictions between his theory and practice, that Ravel separated the internal identity of an artist from his external choices as manifested in the analysable aspects of his art. Part III critiques the idea of a ‘real’ Ravel, one that is independent from his masks. We re-evaluate the significance of the composer’s masks in the formation of his musical identity, and are ultimately forced to re-consider whether Ravel’s masks are masks at all.
Chapter One

Ravel’s artificiality

I. Art: natural or artificial?

To speak of artificiality within the context of art is problematic on two levels. First of all, any discussion of the concept of artificiality, regardless of context, inevitably encounters the problem of how to define it. At the most basic level, artificiality is defined in opposition to what is natural; artifice derives its definition from that which nature is not. The dichotomy between nature and artifice might appear to be a distinctive one, and yet when attempting to determine whether something is one or the other, it quickly becomes apparent that the great divide between the two does not, in reality, exist. Indeed, it is almost always a matter of gradation—of how natural or how artificial—given that most objects in question are not entirely one or the other. Moreover, as Bernadette Bensuade-Vincent and William Newman observe, the shifting boundaries between the natural and the artificial are largely dependent on perspective: ‘one can reach quite opposite conclusions when starting from different standpoints.’

An object classified as natural according to its inherent properties (the qualities pertaining to the object) might equally justifiably be considered artificial in light of its origin (whether its production is initiated by nature or humans). Classification in terms of an object’s ‘mode of manufacture’—whether the process involves human intervention—would again lead to different results. For example, we would label cultured pearls as somewhat unnatural compared to wild pearls since they require human instigation. And yet, given that the rest of the process is largely left to the natural response of living shelled molluscs to the human-placed irritant, cultured pearls are not artificial in the same way that imitation pearls are artificial. Indeed, even in the world of science, in

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which one might expect clear parameters for distinguishing between artificality and naturalness, ambiguities arise.\(^4\)

The second problem, one that is specific to discussions of artificality within an artistic context, is that all art is fundamentally artificial. For centuries, artists and philosophers have debated over the relationship between art and nature. While questions regarding how art interacts with nature—for example, whether it imitates, represents, improves, counterfeits, or violates nature—have yet to be fully addressed,\(^5\) all such questions evolve around a certain premise concerning the intrinsic artificality of art: art always represents human effort and is therefore never nature itself. Theodor Adorno makes a similar assertion by highlighting the diametric relationship between nature and art in his discussion on natural beauty:

> The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound, and little is needed to prompt one to associate this wound with the violence that the artwork—a pure artifact—inflicts on nature. Wholly artificial, the artwork seems to be the opposite of what is not made, nature.\(^6\)

It would seem superfluous, then, to describe some art as specifically artificial, considering that it cannot be anything *but* artificial. By the same token, it would seem implausible to speak of art that is natural, since all art is, by definition, the opposite of nature. And yet in both cases, it is evident that this line of reasoning has not discouraged writers from engaging in the discussion of natural or artificial art. Indeed, both terms have become common adjectives in the description and evaluation of individual artworks as well as an artist’s aesthetic.

In his praise of Gabriel Fauré, for example, Alfred Bruneau, writing in June 1905, identifies ‘naturalness’ as one of the achievements of Fauré’s art:

> In [Fauré’s work], we find above all a striking and wondrous originality in melody and harmony. Hear two measures of Fauré, and you can put a signature to them immediately. His music does not resemble any other music, old or recent, and yet it is neither bizarre, nor contorted, nor pretentious, nor vague, nor hostile, nor decadent. It is beautiful, *natural*, sincere and new.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) For more examples, see Bensuade-Vincent and Newman, “Introduction,” 1-10.


The sheer number of adjectives, positive and negative, used in Bruneau's paragraph makes it particularly helpful in understanding what is meant by a 'natural art' as well as what he implies is the opposite. It is clear from the lines quoted above that naturalness in music is seen as a desirable attribute—not only is it set in contrast to qualities that, by inference, constitute 'bad' art, it is also given a privileged place among the favourable qualities of beauty, sincerity, and originality. It is apparent from Bruneau's description that this understanding of what is natural implies something quite different from the usage of the word previously discussed; that is, naturalness is not at all concerned with the source of the art—whether it is from nature or is of human construction—but with the issue of a composer's individuality. More specifically, determining the naturalness or unnaturalness of a work of art involves an evaluation of the link between the composer's nature and the expression of that nature in his art.

The association of naturalness in art with the expression of the artist through his art is intricately bound up with Romantic compositional aesthetics. Indeed, this perspective is dependant on the Romantic construction of the function and meaning of art, namely that art is first and foremost the expression of the artist's inner experience. Based on this presupposition, naturalness in art has become synonymous with unhindered—'natural'—expression of oneself. As Carlo Caballero observes, the Romantic belief in a 'privileged link between music and la vie intérieure [the inner life] made it possible for music to lay claim to sincere, transparent self-representation.' (Sincerity, as we will see, connotes an element of instinctiveness and unrestraint that is associated with naturalness.) Given that a certain degree of mediation is necessary in the process of committing one's inner workings to musical notation, it becomes quickly apparent that the idea of a 'natural art' is a purely Romantic construction. Music as a product of deliberate and skilful labour cannot be seen as natural according to its basic definition; however, as an extension of the natural expression of one's inner experience, it can indeed be seen as part of one's natural self and thus a product of nature. We leave a proper critique of the problems with such compositional aesthetics for a later part of the chapter, and turn, for now, towards an understanding of artificiality in art as implied by its polarity with this construction of naturalness.

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8 Caballero, Fauré, 4.
Due to its antipodal relationship with artistic naturalness, we can infer that artificiality in art implies a disjuncture between the artist’s personality, which is perhaps most clearly seen in his emotions, and the expression found in his art. If natural art depends on the ease with which an artist's emotions flow through his art to his audience, then art that is disconnected from the artist's inner experience is considered artificial. According to this understanding, a work of art that appears to be contrived or involving engineered emotion—emotion that was not first experienced by the artist—can then be described as artificial. Some of the negative attributes listed in Bruneau's paragraph, particularly bizarre, contorted, and pretentious—all of which imply a sense of ‘trying too hard’—seem to suggest this definition of artificiality. Similarly, these nineteenth-century standards imply that works which seem independent from the composer’s emotions, works in which no apparent expressive element can be found, would also be described as artificial. Finally, art that appears overly academic can, from this perspective, also be thus classified. By being too focussed on the formal and technical aspects of composition, the artist risks hindering or restricting the expression of emotion that is seen to be the most important function of art, producing instead works that are impersonal, or worse, formulaic and banal. Given this interpretation of artificiality as academic, mechanical, and disconnected from inner emotion, Ravel's art can indeed be seen as artificial. Of all of his works, the Boléro is perhaps the most obvious example of a composition that is intellectually motivated and conceived, as opposed to one that is driven by the desire for unfettered self-expression. It is also a work in which the composer's compositional aesthetics are most clearly influenced by his fondness for mechanical processes.

Ravel spoke frequently of his interest in the mechanical world, and reminisced about the many visits he made to factories as a young child with his engineer father. On his own admission, this exposure to the powerful sounds of machinery formed the composer's earliest musical education. In his interview with Olin Downes published in the New York Times on 7 August 1927, Ravel recalls:

[I]n my childhood I was much interested in mechanisms. Those machines fascinated me. I visited factories often, very often, as a small boy with my father. It was these machines, their clicking and roaring which, with the Spanish
folksongs sung to me at night-time as a berceuse by my mother, formed my first
instruction in music.9

Such was the impact of these early encounters with machines that Ravel would never
outgrow his childhood fascination with mechanical objects. Indeed, as if entranced by
the automations of their mechanisms, Ravel expresses on several occasions his desire to
use the distinctive sounds of powered-up machines in his music.10 In his article from
November 1933 entitled “Finding Tunes in Factories,” for example, the composer
reveals his vision of taking the sounds of machines and modern life, and transforming
them into music:

Our cities are said to ‘hum’ with traffic, machinery to ‘purr,’ and although these
sounds may seem pleasant or unpleasant, there is no reason why they should not
be interpreted into great music. [...] To set such sounds to music is true art. Of
course the music does not necessarily suggest the noises, but it can tell in music
the story of the machine and interpret the machine’s works. [...] What a musical
story there is in [the] factory! Musicians, together with historians and writers of
fiction, must carry on the tale of the mechanics of this age to our children and our
children’s children.11

This paragraph is but one of many that allude to the composer’s desire to write music
inspired by factories and machines. Yet Ravel was not merely concerned with
integrating the sounds of machinery into his music. On the contrary, he was also
fascinated by the possibility of composing music that reflects the calculated—in a sense,
artificial—processes behind the creation of his beloved machines.

In an interview with Michael Calvocoressi published on 16 October 1931, Ravel offers a
glimpse behind the scenes of the creation of the Boléro, which, as the composer
intimates, was inspired by a specific factory in Le Vésinet:

[The Boléro] constitutes an experiment in a very special and limited direction,
and should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything different from, or
anything more than, it actually does achieve. Before its first performance, I issued
a warning to the effect that what I had written was a piece lasting seventeen
minutes and consisting wholly of ‘orchestral tissue without music’—of one long,
very gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, and there is practically no
invention except the plan and the manner of the execution. The themes are
altogether impersonal—folk tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind. And the

10 See Ravel’s letters to Maurice Delage written on 24 June and 5 July 1905, and his article “Finding Tunes in Factories” published on November 28 1933, in Orenstein, A Ravel Reader, 69, 70, and 398-403.
 orchestral writing is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity.\textsuperscript{12}

It is difficult to read the above paragraph without observing the strikingly calculated nature of Ravel’s intentions for the \textit{Boléro}. Indeed, the composer’s vocabulary clearly suggests a somewhat academic approach to its composition; both ‘aim’ and ‘achieve’ imply a goal-driven methodology. Moreover, Ravel’s description of the work as an ‘experiment’ associates the work with science, as does his emphasis on its ‘plan and the manner of the execution.’ Far from reflecting the Romantic understanding of the origins of art and its relationship with the artist’s inner experience, the conception of Ravel’s \textit{Boléro} follows a set of strict rules—the controlled elements of the experiment, if you like—with the objective of relying exclusively on ‘orchestral tissue’ and the ‘adjunction of new timbres’ to create musical interest.\textsuperscript{13} Nowhere in his paragraph does Ravel mention being moved by emotions to compose the work. Not only does the assumption that music is related to the composer’s feelings not figure in his explanation of the \textit{Boléro}, the concept seems almost irrelevant to his compositional aesthetic. Moreover, considering the limitations Ravel implements in his plan for the \textit{Boléro}, it seems that he has not left much scope for emotional expression at all. The resulting composition, in terms of the music itself, is rather mechanical sounding, perhaps even artificial.

The \textit{Boléro} consists essentially of a multi-layered ‘composite ostinato.’\textsuperscript{14} Like a room full of autonomous machines, it is made up of three ostinatos (see examples 1.1a-c), each representing a different element of music: rhythm, harmony, and melody. Each of the three ostinatos ‘pursue[s] its own harmonic/rhythmic course’ as the work progresses, and seems to run almost irrespective of the others.\textsuperscript{15} The first, which opens the \textit{Boléro}, is characterised by driving triplet semiquavers punctuated by single and paired quavers. This is accompanied by the \textit{pianissimo} pizzicato of the violas and cellos (ostinato 2), which, as Deborah Mawer observes, characterises interlocking cogs that outline the straightforward dominant to tonic harmonic basis of the entire composition. (This second ostinato appears in 326 of the work’s total 339 bars.\textsuperscript{16}) Together, these two

\textsuperscript{12} Michael D. Calvocoressi, “M. Ravel Discusses His Own Work,” in \textit{A Ravel Reader}, 477-478.


\textsuperscript{15} Puffett, “Debussy’s ostinato machine,” 5. Quoted in Mawer, “Musical objects and machines,” 64.

Ostinatos serve as an obsessively driven accompaniment to the third and final ostinato, which adds a melodic layer to the orchestral texture and is first heard on solo flute after four bars of introduction.

Ravel’s ‘ostinato factory’ begins with deceptively thin textures and non-threatening pianissimo dynamics, its full capacity and monstrous power carefully concealed by its apparent simplicity. It is possible to imagine the composer’s scenario for the small beginning and systematic expansion of the Boléro: the gradual awakening of a vast factory, as individual machines are set into motion at the start of the day. Following the initial presentation of the three ostinatos, however, the expansion of sound begins as additional instruments are slowly integrated into the orchestral texture. First, the solo flute fades from the forefront, taking up the side drums’ driving rhythms as the tune is passed onto the clarinet (Fig. 1\textsuperscript{st}). A second melody is introduced on the bassoon (Fig. 2\textsuperscript{nd}), which borrows from the phrygian collection on C,\textsuperscript{17} and is repeated on E, clarinet (Fig. 3\textsuperscript{rd}). Beneath this theme, the three-note clusters on the harp create pungent clashes.

\textsuperscript{17}Mawer, “Ballet and the apotheosis of the dance,” 158.
against the simple dominant to tonic harmonies, perhaps suggestive of the untuned crashing of Ravel’s ‘terrific hammerblows.’\footnote{In his letter to Maurice Delage from 5 July, 1905, Ravel mentions the desire to incorporate the wonderful sounds of factories into his music: ‘How can I tell you about these smelting castles, these incandescent cathedrals, and the wonderful symphony of traveling belts, whistles, and terrific hammerblows [sic] which envelop you? [...] How much music there is in all of this!—and I certainly intend to use it.’ See A Ravel Reader, 70.} For the composer, ‘the alternation of these two themes [AABB...] rivet one to another,’ in a way similar to ‘the links of a chain of a factory assembly-line.’\footnote{René Chalupt and Marcelle Gerar, Ravel au miroir de ses lettres (Paris: Laffont, 1956), 237. Trans. in Mawer, “Ballet and the apotheosis of the dance,” 156.} With each repetition of the refrain, Ravel slightly alters the combination of instruments at each layer whilst maintaining all other elements, including the key. At Fig. 5, the textures thicken considerably, as the melody is doubled in octaves for the first time on flute and trumpet and the entire string section takes part in the harmonic ostinato.

By Fig. 8, at which point the third rotation of themes begins, the orchestral writing increases to encompass seventeen staves—a considerable expansion from the initial four at the start of the work. Here, Ravel experiments with bi- and polytonalities, which, as Mawer observes, are suggestive of synchronised conveyer belts travelling in parallel motion.\footnote{Mawer, “Ballet and the apotheosis of the dance,” 159.} First of all, the celeste doubles the solo horn’s refrain at two and three octaves, while the piccolos transpose the theme up a third and fifth, to E and G respectively. This ‘tri-tonal’ presentation essentially incorporates the first four overtones of the harmonic series above each note of the melody.\footnote{Orenstein, Ravel, 201.} Fig. 9 presents a bitonal colouring of the refrain, which is reinforced by five units of woodwinds, with the oboe d’amore sounding in parallel fourths below (or fifths above) the rest of the woodwind ensemble.\footnote{Orenstein, Ravel, 201.} Ravel also merges together the elements of two ostinato layers: the C to G harmonic underpinnings of the strings are integrated into the driving triplets of the side drums, resulting in large, guitar-like strums spanning two octaves (see example 1.2). As the orchestra prepares for the ‘nine-fold proliferation’ of its refrain (B),\footnote{Mawer, “Ballet and the apotheosis of the dance,” 159.} the forte dynamic is reached at last (Fig. 11): it is as if the doors to Ravel’s Boléro factory are finally opened to reveal the monstrous mechanisms within.\footnote{Mawer“Ballet and the apotheosis of the dance,” 159.}
indefatigable triplets, Ravel's machine ploughs on full steam for another thirty-six bars before the refrain (A) expands again to encompass seventeen parts, thickened with thirds and fifths moving in parallel motion (Fig. 13).  

Yet, at just *forte*, Ravel's crescendo is not complete. The energy continues to build towards breaking point over the next four repetitions (the visual density of the score itself testifies to the increased level of intensity), reaching *fortissimo* at Fig. 16 before 'the friction between melody and mechanism finally causes ignition.' Ravel's machine malfunctions as the force of the explosion propels the entire structure up a third to E major (Fig. 18). Seemingly unaware of its obvious operational glitch, the driving ostinatos insist on proceeding as before. As the 'distorted melodic variant' betrays, however, damage has been done; four bars into the last reiteration, the ostinato gets caught in a loop. After three failed attempts to restart itself, the *Boléro* melody breaks down completely, leaving the accompanimental ostinatos to continue on alone. The bass slips back down a third as the orchestra presses on for another four bars before the inevitable occurs: without any hint of slowing down, Ravel's machine collapses with a terrifying crash.

**II. The issue of sincerity**

In composing the *Boléro*, Ravel challenges Romantic compositional aesthetics. As we have seen, far from being occupied by the confessional function of music, Ravel seems instead to focus on the technical aspects of creating art. His explanation of the work, which was quoted earlier, shows that the composer himself encouraged his audience to

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25 Mawer refers to this technique as 'block harmonisation'; see “Ballet and the apotheosis of the dance,” 160.
treat the work as a compositional experiment, one that fulfils all the requirements posed by the task, nothing more and nothing less. For many writers both during and after his lifetime, this ‘artificial’ component of Ravel’s aesthetics had significant implications for his sincerity, or lack thereof, as an artist. Considering the importance of sincerity in art, which we saw briefly from Bruneau’s paragraph, Ravel’s reputation for insincerity has had a considerable impact on the reception and interpretation of his art.

Over the course of a career spanning almost forty-five years, much of which was lived under the scrutiny of critics and audiences alike, Ravel was frequently confronted with the issue of sincerity. On at least three occasions between 1924 and 1931, the composer explicitly spoke out against it. These recorded statements have no doubt helped consolidate, if not create, his widespread reputation for artificiality. It is unfortunate, however, that such assumptions have meant that Ravel’s understanding of sincerity—and, therefore, what he was so adamant in rejecting—has largely been left unexplored. It has also resulted in the turning of a blind eye to the instances in which the composer seems to undermine his anti-sincerity stance.

The composer’s articles and interviews attest that Ravel’s views on sincerity were by no means straightforward; indeed, on several occasions, Ravel seems to contradict himself. On the surface, these ambiguities pose significant problems for any attempt to analyse the composer’s stance for or against sincerity (hence the temptation to ignore problematic examples altogether). Yet, each of his recorded remarks also discloses something unique about his multi-faceted understanding of sincerity and its role in the creation of art. Taken in context, the seemingly inconvenient examples actually serve to open up new prospects for interpretation. By subjecting each of these comments on sincerity to close readings, it is perhaps possible to form a clearer, more informed, picture of the composer’s aesthetics.

Ravel’s earliest recorded statements concerning sincerity are found in an interview with André Révész published in the *ABC de Madrid* on 1 May 1924:

> Unlike politics, in art I’m a nationalist. I know that I am above all a French composer: I furthermore declare myself a classicist. I also know that I have the virtues and defects of French artists. We neither want nor do we know how to produce colossal works; we are always somewhat cerebral, but within these limits we very often reach perfection. I consider sincerity to be the greatest defect in art, because it excludes the possibility of choice. Art is meant to correct nature’s imperfections. Art is a beautiful lie. The most interesting thing in art is to
try to overcome difficulties. My teacher in composition was Edgar Allan Poe, because of his analysis of his wonderful poem The Raven. Poe taught me that true art is a perfect balance between pure intellect and emotion. My early stage was a reaction against Debussy, against the abandonment of form, of structure, and of architecture. This is, in a few words, the essence of my theories.28

While only a small portion of the above paragraph directly addresses the issue of sincerity, I have chosen to quote it in its entirety because of the unusual candour with which Ravel speaks of ‘his theories.’ These few lines represent a momentary lapse in the usual reticence of the composer who claimed ‘never [to have] felt the need to formulate, either for the benefit of others or for myself, the principles of my aesthetic.’29

Ravel’s paragraph touches briefly on a number of wide-ranging, seemingly unrelated, topics: nationalism, perfection, sincerity, difficulty, and form. The order in which he addresses each of these issues, however, is revealing; in particular, the way in which Ravel approaches and leaves the topic of sincerity discloses something of his understanding of what it represents. He begins by establishing his artistic identity as a French classicist. A connection is then drawn between French intellectualism (‘we are always somewhat cerebral’) and perfection, with the implication that the former somehow produces the latter. It is within this context that Ravel brings up the issue of sincerity, and asserts from the outset that his most serious complaint against it is its negation of conscious choice. From this, we see that for Ravel, to be sincere was synonymous with a lack of control, an ‘unconsciousness’ of one’s actions or choices—if indeed, they can be called that.30 It follows then, that art created in sincerity is not a product of the conscious intervention of one’s unreflected instincts, and can thus be diminished to happy accident. Moreover, the artist who creates in sincerity is himself degraded to the status of unwitting scribe. It is no wonder that Ravel found the whole notion of sincerity humiliating to the artist.31

Ravel’s denigration of sincerity is most clearly articulated in an article written for La Petite Gironde published on 12 July 1931, in which the composer uncompromisingly asserts that sincerity and art cannot co-exist, explicitly stating that the former has devastating effects on the latter:

30 Caballero makes a similar observation. See Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics, 34.
31 See Ravel’s statements in “Memories of a Lazy Child,” in A Ravel Reader, 395: ‘They may throw my former works back at me, but I know that a conscious artist is always right. I say conscious and not sincere, because in the latter word there is something humiliating.’
An artist cannot be sincere. Falsehood, taken as the power of illusion, is the only superiority of man over the animals; and when it can claim to be art, it is the only superiority of the artist over other men. When one allows oneself spontaneity, one babbles and that’s all. In art, everything must be thought out. Massenet, who was so gifted, squandered his talents by an excess of sincerity.32

Here, Ravel clarifies his argument further by suggesting that sincerity is opposed to ‘thinking things out.’ He associates sincerity with spontaneity, which by definition excludes the possibility of any form of premeditation. It is this connection that drives him to align sincerity with intellectual primitiveness. To rob the human being of the ability to engage intellectually with his surroundings and act against what is instinctual is to take away ‘the only superiority of man over the animals’. As George Bernard Shaw famously observes, ‘it is dangerous to be sincere unless you are also stupid.’33 Without the capacity to resist spontaneity in art, the artist is reduced to a babbling fool.

At this point, we might well ask what role, if any, inspiration plays in the process of creating art. Ravel resisted the Romantic ideology that is bound up with the notion of inspiration in the same way he rejected the idea of sincerity in art—his association of spontaneity with nonsensical babbling explicitly derides the image of the inspired artist. During a rehearsal of the Sonata for Violin and Piano with French violinist André Asselin, with the composer at the piano, Ravel was asked about the role of inspiration in the creation of the work to be performed. His somewhat mocking reply betrays a tinge of defensiveness: ‘Inspiration—what do you mean? No—I don’t know what you mean. The most difficult thing for a composer, you see, is choice—yes, choice.’34 By distancing himself from this so-called ‘inspiration,’ indeed pretending he didn’t know what it referred to, Ravel effectively claims that one can compose without it; indeed, he is an example. The ability to make choices, on the other hand, is indispensible.

In the January-February issue of The Chesterian in 1928, L. Dunton Green published the results of his enquiry into the nature of inspiration, specifically its musical implications. Green notes that the study was somewhat complicated by the fact that some of his respondents, all of whom were leading composers of his day, ‘look[ed] upon it [the enquiry] as an impertinent curiosity, as an endeavour to tear asunder the veil that

32 Ravel, “Memories of a Lazy Child,” 395 (original emphasis).
34 See A Ravel Reader, 389n3. The precise date of this remark is uncertain, although it is known that Asselin performed the sonata with Ravel on three occasions: October 15, 1926, July 7, 1927, and July 3, 1930.
shrouds the Sanctum Sanctorum of their art.’\textsuperscript{35} Alfredo Casella, for example, expressed such sentiments:

\begin{quote}
It would be easier to reply to this question by a large volume than in a few lines. Or, possibly, it would not be any easier, for musical creation has so far remained an unfathomable mystery, even for those who practice it, and it is wholly desirable that the mystery may last for ever...\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Many of those who did not express reluctance in addressing the matter remarked on the sheer difficulty of the task at hand—how is one even to attempt to analyse something so ‘elusive’ and so ‘obscure’ as inspiration?\textsuperscript{37} Ravel’s response, however, almost bypasses the nature of inspiration altogether, preferring rather to discuss the almost methodical procedure behind the composition of one of his works:

\begin{quote}
All that I am able to affirm is that in 1924, when I undertook the Sonata for violin and piano, which has just been completed, I had already determined its rather unusual form, the manner of writing for the instruments, and even the character of the themes for each of the three movements before ‘inspiration’ had begun to prompt any one of these themes.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Again, we see an emphasis on the conscious decision-making involved in writing music. His account of how he composed the sonata outlines a step-by-step process by which the primary elements of the composition are deliberately decided upon: formal structure, instrumental writing, and thematic content. By adding that the form is ‘rather unusual,’ Ravel also avoids attributing the structure of the sonata to convention—even this was the product of conscious thought and not of passive compliance with tradition. While Ravel briefly touches on the idea of inspiration, he undermines it, questioning its existence even as he mentions it, by placing the word in scare quotes. He is quick to deny its relevance and importance to him and his art. There is something curious, however, about the unease with which Ravel handles the issue of inspiration, possibly suggestive, although he would never admit to it, of an uncertainty he felt towards it. After all, if inspiration had something to do, even in part, with the creation of his works, then his claim of complete ownership of his art could be jeopardised. It is perhaps for this reason that on a separate occasion, Ravel clarifies that even if inspiration \textit{did} exist, it did not come in the form of some mystical enlightenment of the unconscious; rather, he

\textsuperscript{35} L. Dunton Green, “On Inspiration,” \textit{The Chesterian} 9, no. 68 (1928): 117.
\textsuperscript{36} Green, “On Inspiration,” 110.
\textsuperscript{37} See the responses of Arthur Bliss and Paul Dukas in Green, “On Inspiration,” 109 and 112.
\textsuperscript{38} See Ravel’s response to Green’s inquiry in \textit{A Ravel Reader}, 389.
considered it the ‘by-product of unremitting labor,’ quoting Baudelaire’s aphorism: ‘Inspiration is decidedly the sister of daily work.’

Yet, Ravel was careful not to portray art as the product of the will alone, himself despising those who approached composition as a purely intellectual exercise. In one of Ravel’s earliest surviving articles, a review published in the *Revue musicale de la S.I.M* on 15 February 1912, Ravel expresses his contempt for ‘purely intellectual workmanship’:

M. Witkowski ably uses a brilliant palette in his Second Symphony, but the colors seem artificial. This is because he appears to have been guided *by will alone* in this composition. Several brief sequential passages, treated in academic fashion (augmentation, inversion), form the basis of the melody. The harmony is almost always the result of contrapuntal encounters; the rhythm, of industrious deformations. Thus, the three elements of music, whose conception should be simultaneous and above all instinctive, are elaborated separately, and are linked one might say, by purely intellectual workmanship. The academic techniques which abound in the three movements of this symphony make it all too clear that M. Witkowski imposed upon himself the task of presenting an idea and developing it in a particular manner, come what may. *How far this repulsive intellectual logic is from sensibility*!

It is difficult to ignore the explicit contradictions between the views presented in the composer’s critique of Witkowski and the formulations of his aesthetics encountered above. Not only does Ravel condemn what seems to be a calculated working-out of the three main elements of music; he also claims that their conception should be above all *instinctive*.

In a separate paragraph, which did not make the final version of the published article, Ravel expresses his alarm at being accused of a lack of sincerity:

In fact I have just received an article written by M. Gaston Carraud concerning a short work of mine which was recently produced. The article contains the most serious accusation which can be brought against an artist: the lack of sincerity. In

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39 See *A Ravel Reader*, 389n3.
40 While this might contradict earlier discussions on the *Boléro*, and Ravel’s academic approach to its composition, it is important to note what Ravel’s experiment constituted. His aim was to produce music (orchestral tissue and one big crescendo) in spite of the self-imposed limitations of the project.
41 Maurice Ravel, “The Lamoureux Orchestra Concerts,” in *A Ravel Reader*, 341 (emphasis added). A distinction between one’s will and one’s intellect can be made in some other contexts. However, given that in this paragraph, Ravel associates the ‘will’ with ‘academic’ compositional procedures and ‘pure intellectual workmanship,’ it appears that on this occasion the composer made no such distinction.
the critic's own words, my works aim, in general, to 'wow' the public. No less a
person than a colleague dared to make such a statement.42

Ravel's next remarks, which were kept in the published version, proceed to attack
Carraud's credibility, making his resentment clear:

One must acknowledge, however, that the judgements of critics who are not
professional musicians may not always be exempt from this passion. Quite often,
a vehement ardent in the attack skilfully masks the incompetence that a more
modest opinion would lead one to suspect.

It is strange that Ravel would take such offense at Carraud's accusations when his later
sentiments are so strongly opposed to sincerity. Indeed, one could not be blamed for
thinking that Ravel's later anti-sincerity statements represent a switching of sides,
especially since here he describes a lack of sincerity as the most serious accusation to be
brought against an artist. A careful reading of Ravel's paragraph reveals, however, that
Carraud did not explicitly accuse the composer of such a crime—his complaint was that
Ravel sought, through his compositions, to “wow” the public. The association of this
unfavourable characteristic with a lack of sincerity is in fact Ravel's own, and suggests a
different meaning of sincerity to those we have so far discussed. This paragraph conveys
the idea that a lack of sincerity drives one to 'play to the gallery.' By implication, then,
sincerity demands the truthful expression of the artist, irrespective of how popular (or
unpopular) the resulting effect might be. This definition was by far the more popular
understanding of sincerity at the time when these comments were made compared with
Ravel's later alignment of sincerity with the instinctual.

In his recent study on Gabriel Fauré, Carlo Caballero provides a detailed account
of French musical aesthetics at the fin de siècle. He argues that from 1890 to 1930, the
creation, evaluation, and understanding of music in France revolved around the idea of
sincerity.43 Caballero cites Émile Littré's contemporary Dictionnaire de la langue
français, which, in turn, quotes La Rochefoucauld's maxim from Réflexion V:

Sincerity is a form of open-heartedness, and shows us as we really are; it is a love
of truth, a dislike of disguising ourselves, a desire to compensate for our faults
and even reduce them in a meritorious way by confessing them.44

42 See A Ravel Reader, 342n2.
43 Caballero, Fauré, 4.
44 See Émile Littré, Dictionnaire de la langue française (Paris: Hachette, 1882), s.v. See La Rochefoucauld,
Collected Maxims and Other Reflections by François de La Rochefoucauld, trans. A. Blackmore, E. H., and
The sarcasm of La Rochfoucauld’s final remark notwithstanding, the above definition highlights the essence of sincerity: it is the openness to show oneself, without pretence, as one truly is. Sincerity can also be applied to things; in fact, Lionel Trilling notes that the most common application of the word in its early uses was to things, and not people.\textsuperscript{45} One referred to an object as sincere, not metaphorically as we do now, but as a way to affirm its pure and untampered quality. When applied to art, it implies an absence of deception or pretence on the part of the artist; a piece of art is sincere when it truthfully expresses the composer’s thoughts or feelings. While this might seem to equate sincerity with naturalness—both involve the expression of one’s inner experience—Caballero observes that sincerity is more of a moral issue than an aesthetic one. Sincerity implies more than naturalness, since, according to the late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century understanding, it requires a great deal of self-awareness as well as the desire to express oneself truthfully. For as Trilling so aptly observes, ‘if sincerity is the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one’s own self, we can see that this state of personal existence is not to be attained without the most arduous effort.’\textsuperscript{46} The difficulty of presenting oneself ‘just as one is’ is perhaps something with which we can identify.

To be sincere, then, is no small undertaking. Furthermore, the process needed to achieve sincerity of expression is one in which spontaneity plays a minimal, if indeed any, role at all. The objective is to avoid pretence and falsification, regardless of how natural, or unnatural, it might be to do so. The opposite of sincerity, then, has little to do with how instinctively or consciously one expresses oneself. It is the intention behind the expression, rather, that determines one’s sincerity or lack of it. If the sincere person strives, above all else, to present himself as he truly is, then it follows that the insincere person tries to be what he is not.\textsuperscript{47} As Caballero notes, the French had a specific term to describe this type of despicable person: the arriviste. In short, the arriviste is someone whose ultimate goal is to ‘make his mark in the world’ and who will do anything in pursuit of that aim.\textsuperscript{48} His purposes have nothing to do with expressing who he truly is and everything to do with what he pretends to be in order to achieve his objective. The

\textsuperscript{46} Trilling, \textit{Sincerity}, 5.
\textsuperscript{47} Caballero, \textit{Fauré}, 19.
\textsuperscript{48} See Caballero’s translation of the definition found in \textit{Le grand Robert de la langue française}, in \textit{Fauré}, 19.
arriviste is not merely a person of false pretences: he is one driven to perpetual fraudulence by the desire for self-promotion.

Based on this damning picture of sincerity's negative counterpart, Ravel's offended reaction to Carraud's accusations is hardly surprising. Within that context, a lack of sincerity implied an affiliation with arrivisme, and the personality of the arriviste was completely incongruous with Ravel's lack of concern for the opinions of others. As Ravel's friend and fellow Apache, Michael Calvocoressi observes:

> He may now and then pay attention to what his fellow-composers (and especially those whose music he loves) may think of his achievements; but what critics have to say—be it praise or blame—leaves him utterly cold.49

Even Ravel's harshest critic, Pierre Lalo, makes the observation that 'you won't find him [Ravel], like so many of his contemporaries and rivals, worrying about "paying dues" to so-called advanced parties, and bringing to music the morality of politics.'50 To be accused of seeking to 'wow' the public was perhaps the greatest insult to the composer who declared of one of his works, 'I have carried out exactly what I intended, and it is for listeners to take it or leave it.'51

III. The question of choice

Having established the origin of Ravel's initial, inherited conception of sincerity, it is necessary now to consider the reasons behind the drastic change in his understanding, the factors that account for the development of his adamant stance against it. So far, we have looked at two separate occasions on which Ravel spoke out against sincerity: an interview in 1924 and an article from 1931. A third recorded instance can be found in an interview for the New York Times conducted on 7 August 1927, with noted music critic Olin Downes. Downes recalls the disdain with which the composer reacted when the issue of a composer's sincerity was mentioned in passing: 'We made some remark about a composer's sincerity. He regarded us with fatigue. "I don't particularly care about this 'sincerity.' I try to make art."'52 It is significant that on each of these three occasions, Ravel also made reference to American writer Edgar Allan Poe, citing Poe as his teacher in composition. Although we do not know precisely when Ravel came across Poe's

49 Calvocoressi, "M. Ravel," 478.
52 Downes, "Maurice Ravel," 449.
writings, it is possible to deduce a relationship between the composer’s discovery of them and the changes in Ravel’s musical thought, since the contexts in which Ravel’s pro-sincerity, pro-instinct comments were made do not mention Poe at all. In the 1924 interview with Révész, Ravel makes reference to Poe’s poem “The Raven,” the analysis of which forms part of the writer’s essay “The Philosophy of Composition.” During the interview with Downes in 1927, the composer identifies a commonality between Poe’s aesthetics and that of modern French art. He even claims that “The Raven,” along with many of Poe’s other poems, possesses a distinctly ‘French quality.’\(^53\) The third reference to Poe as teacher—this time more specifically as a teacher of technique—is found in the article from 1931, in which Ravel hails “The Philosophy of Composition” as ‘the finest treatise on composition […] and the one which in any case had the greatest influence upon me.’\(^54\)

While not all of these references to Poe were made directly in relation to his comments on sincerity (although the first example clearly was), it is important to note that Poe’s aesthetics were evidently firmly in Ravel’s mind at the time these remarks were made. Despite never having met the American writer—Ravel was born a quarter of a century after Poe’s death—the composer felt a strong affinity with Poe’s theories. One of the central ideas of Poe’s aesthetics was the insistence upon the ‘step by step’ process by which a composition progresses towards ‘its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.’\(^55\) The emphasis on conscious choice and planning is striking, and even applies to how one should go about commencing work on a composition:

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis—or one is suggested by an incident of the day—or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative—designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or authorial comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent. I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect.\(^56\)

\(^53\) Downes, “Maurice Ravel,” 450.
\(^54\) Ravel, “Memories of a Lazy Child,” 394.
\(^56\) Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” 163.
Yet Poe observes that those who share his approach to composition and are able to ‘retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained’ represent the minority.57 ‘Most writers,’ he disdainfully continues, ‘prefer having it understood that they compose by species of fine frenzy—and ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes.’58 Unwilling to relinquish credit for his own work—as he claims others did by affirming Romantic notions of composition dependent on accident and intuition—Poe takes particular care in detailing his compositional aesthetics, claiming that he did not have ‘the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions.’59 To demonstrate his fully conscious artistic mind, Poe analyses “The Raven,” and details the painstakingly methodological work ethic behind the creation of his poem.

Poe begins by considering the intention behind the project at hand; in writing “The Raven,” his was to ‘compose a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.’ He later adds that he also intended the work to be ‘universally appreciable.’60 Having established the overarching objective, the optimum length (‘extent’) of the poem was to be decided upon. According to Poe’s account, this was to be done consciously, with his intention for the poem in mind, and not without detailed consideration of the implications of his choice on the totality and unity of the end result:

> Holding in view these considerations, as well as that degree of excitement which I deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste, I reached at once what I conceived the proper length for my intended poem—a length of about one hundred lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight.61

In the same calculated manner, Poe proceeds to make decisions regarding its overall effect (or impression), its tone, its refrain, the location of its setting, and perhaps most importantly, its dénouement, towards which all above decisions should be aimed. As Steven Huebner observes, it is only after these elements are established that Poe begins to describe the actual ‘semantic content of the poem.’62

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57 Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” 163.
58 This observation mirrors closely that of Green, quoted on pages 21-22.
60 Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” 164 (original emphasis).
61 Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” 164 (original emphasis).
This meticulous, and fully conscious, approach to the compositional process, which is specially goal-orientated and emphasises intentional choices made towards achieving that goal, is one Ravel later adopts for his own. This is perhaps most clearly seen in his account of the compositional process behind his Sonata for Violin and Piano quoted earlier in this chapter. Not only does the tone of his description echo the conscious, step-by-step methodology prescribed by Poe, as Michael Duchesneau suggests in his study on the application of Poe’s theory in the music of Ravel, a detailed correlation also exists between Ravel’s and Poe’s accounts. Duchesneau presents Ravel’s decisions on the ‘unusual form,’ ‘manner of writing for the instruments,’ and ‘character of the themes’ of his sonata as akin to Poe’s establishment of the ‘extent’, ‘effect,’ and ‘tone,’ respectively, of his poem. Furthermore, Duchesneau proposes that Poe’s ‘creation of poetic meaning’ can be read as analogous to Ravel’s ‘final stage of composing the themes themselves, the moment when “inspiration” whispered them to him.’

Poe was adamant that each of these core elements of a composition was thought out, even before he commenced writing anything:

Nothing is more clear than that every plot [...] must be elaborated to its dénouement before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

Ravel expresses similar sentiments in a lecture given at the Rice Institute (now Rice University) in Houston in April 1928:

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.

From his interview with Nino Frank for Parisian magazine Candide on 5 May 1932, Ravel confirms this lengthy gestation process when disclosing details of a work-in-progress:

At the moment, I am preoccupied with the theatre: for months I have been thinking of a Joan of Arc, based on Joseph Delteil’s book, whose contents and

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63 Due to the inaccessibility of Duchesneau’s article (no electronic copy exists and the original paper version is available only in France and Switzerland), I have relied solely on Steven Huebner’s summary of Duchesneau’s description. See Huebner, “Ravel’s Poetics,” 16-17.

64 Huebner, “Ravel’s Poetics,” 17.


structure have delighted me. [...] But nothing yet exists on paper; all of my work until now has been mental: I like to know clearly where I’m going before settling down to work.67

These comments, and others, reveal that both Poe and Ravel were not merely concerned with the conscious development of a work already begun, but also regarded as deliberate the very conception of a work—as Ravel himself states, 'in art, nothing is be left to chance.'68 In writing “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe purposed ‘to render it manifest that no one point in its ["The Raven’s"] composition is referrible [sic] either to accident or intuition.’69 Ravel’s repeated comments against sincerity and the importance of inspiration can be seen as an extended delivery of the same discourse.

There are other aspects of Poe’s artistic thought that can be seen in Ravel’s aesthetics. One of these is the writer's opinion of originality:

The fact is, 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.70

Here, Poe touches on a subject Ravel frequently commented on: the issue of impulse or intuition. Poe challenges the notion that creativity is something one simply stumbles upon; although he does not dismiss this idea as entirely fanciful, Poe affirms that in most cases, originality can only be found through diligent seeking. Moreover, he adds that finding it often involves a process of negation rather than invention, implying the riddance of bad ideas until one is left only with the best. Ravel echoes a similar methodology in the comments quoted above concerning his usual lengthy period of gestation. He reveals that even after a careful period of planning, and the writing has begun, ‘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.’71

There is little reason to question the influence Poe’s theories, especially as they are articulated in “The Philosophy of Composition,” had on Ravel. The striking similarities and obvious correlations between Ravel’s musical thought and Poe’s essay testify to this.

67 Nino Frank, “Maurice Ravel Between Two Trains,” in A Ravel Reader, 497.
68 Olin Downes, “Mr. Ravel Returns,” in A Ravel Reader, 460
70 Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” 166.
By exploring the influence of Poe, we have clarified the factors surrounding what is possibly the most significant shift in Ravel ideas on composition. What seemed at first to be problematic contradictions in the composer’s thinking are, in fact, clues that reveal the process by which his own theories were developed. However, while evidently based on Poe’s theoretical foundations, Ravel’s fully-fledged ideas on sincerity were uniquely his own.

Having established the reasons that motivated Ravel’s abandonment of the traditional (Romantic) view of composition in favour of a more scientific understanding, let us now return to the composer’s developed ideas on sincerity as expressed through his verbal testimony, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Directly following his declaration that sincerity is the greatest defect in art because of the exclusion of choice, Ravel states that ‘art is meant to correct nature’s imperfections.’ By aligning choice with art and sincerity with nature, he ultimately pits the latter term of each pair—art and nature—against the other. No further explanations are given, however, and we are left wondering what the nature of these imperfections might be, to which Ravel was specifically referring. His comment borrows from the idea that nature, when left to its own devices, tends towards entropy. Nature on its own does not, and cannot, produce that which is perfect; on the contrary, imperfections are to be expected, and conscious effort is needed to counteract these imperfections, especially if art is to be produced. Ravel provides an example of this within the context of sincerity and art. He observes that even with the best intentions, the artist who seeks to express himself with complete sincerity cannot successfully do so, since sincerity is, at best, an unattainable ideal:

> The truth is, one can never have enough control. Moreover, since we cannot express ourselves without exploiting and thus transforming our emotions, isn’t it better at least to be fully aware and acknowledge that art is the supreme imposture?  

This exploitation and transformation of emotions, which must occur when one attempts to convert inner experience into external expression, is perhaps one of nature’s imperfections that Ravel had in mind when he made the above comments. If the sincere and honest expression of one’s emotions will always be tainted by the limitations imposed by nature, we must then resort to falsehood in order to rectify the resulting imperfections. Art, he concludes, relies on falsehood in that it must refine that which

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comes naturally in order to produce that which is perfect. Aristotle makes a similar observation in Book 2 of *Physics*, stating that art can, on the one hand, imitate nature, and on the other, 'lead it to a greater state of perfection.'\textsuperscript{73} This understanding of art, as something that improves on nature, closely mirrors the concept of sublimation.

In his recent book on Ravel, Michael J. Puri explores this notion of sublimation in the life and work of the composer. He observes that both musical and biographical commentary on Ravel of the past century has entertained the idea of the composer as a dandy, someone who, according to Baudelaire, 'aspires to be sublime without interruption.'\textsuperscript{74} Sublimation, as defined by Puri, is 'the transformation of some entity into a more elevated form of itself.'\textsuperscript{75} According to Freud, this ability to transform socially unacceptable, albeit natural, instincts should be seen as a sign of maturity and civilisation, and a necessity for meaningful interaction between humans within society:

Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life.\textsuperscript{76}

Indeed, most of us will at some time in our lives experience the need to sublimate our behaviour—that is, convert certain natural impulses into socially appropriate actions in order to present ourselves as acceptable within given social norms and contexts. For Ravel, however, sublimation was not merely a process he engaged in periodically: it was his constant preoccupation. Puri makes a case for self-reflected dandyism in Ravel’s compositions, focussing in particular on his ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* and the personification of the composer in the ballet’s hero, Daphnis. He argues that self-reflection plays a central role in dandyism, since it requires constant monitoring of one’s behaviour, and that 'the creators of fictional dandies and the theorists of dandyism have often been dandies themselves who have transformed their art into another reflecting surface.'\textsuperscript{77} In addition to this, I would like to suggest that in the case of Ravel the tendency to sublimate natural instincts, and live as a dandy, was projected even onto his compositional ideology and his approach to art.

\textsuperscript{73} See Bensuade-Vincent and Newman, "Introduction," 5.
\textsuperscript{74} Michael J. Puri, *Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 84.
\textsuperscript{75} Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 3.
\textsuperscript{76} Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1961), 44.
\textsuperscript{77} Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 100.
Without delving too deeply into the realm of psychoanalysis, let us consider for a moment the commonalities between sublimation and Ravel’s theories of composition. First of all, sublimation recognises that what is instinctive and what is appropriate are often two dissimilar things. Indeed, the need for sublimation is based on the assumption that without the ability to transform natural impulses, the human would revert to purely animalistic behaviour. To act against instinct, then, is a faculty unique to human beings. Ravel asserts this precisely in his declaration that ‘falsehood [...] is the only superiority of man over the animals.’ However, sublimation not only recognises the disadvantages of acting on impulse; it goes further by acknowledging the benefits of transforming instinctive behaviour. In the theory on sublimation, just like in Ravel’s aesthetic, pre-mediated actions are preferred over spontaneous ones. Knowing which impulses are in need of transformation requires a considerable level of self-awareness. One must be equally aware of how to conduct oneself in order to achieve the desired result, namely that of social acceptance. This emphasis on conscious and calculated behaviour resonates with Ravel’s (and Poe’s) insistence that the process of composition should involve fully conscious, retraceable steps towards a pre-determined effect. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the ability to sublimate unacceptable behaviour is considered a mark of maturity in psychology. Like Ravel, the theory of sublimation refuses to brand such efforts to behave against natural impulse as symptoms of fraudulent deception, choosing instead to emphasise the necessity, and benefits, of calculated behaviour and processes. To ‘correct nature’s imperfections’ within his art, then, can be seen as an attempt to regain control. Just as the capacity to choose and carry out actions against natural impulses differentiates the human from the animals, the ability to identify nature’s imperfections and correct them through art was, for Ravel, the true mark of an artist.

IV. Difficulty and effort

Stravinsky’s oft-quoted description of Ravel as ‘the most perfect of Swiss watchmakers,’ while meant as criticism, aptly captures the composer’s meticulous attention to detail. Ravel was not only aware of this characteristic trait, but was also evidently proud of it, expressing to Calvocoressi that: ‘I may confidently aver that I never release a work until I am quite certain that I have done my utmost and could not in any way improve one
single detail in it.” Stravinsky’s remark also alludes to Ravel’s obsession with technical precision, which, together with his attention to the smallest detail, drove him to pursue technical perfection. This, by the composer’s own admission, was his ultimate objective, something towards which he could ‘strive unceasingly [...] since I am certain of never being able to attain it.’\(^7\) Craftsmanship, by definition, involves the acquisition of great skill. Accordingly, it is not something one should expect to achieve without conscious effort; it is not attained instinctively, but through a great deal of hard work. In the composer’s own words, it requires one to strive unceasingly. His pursuit of technical perfection and self-initiated reputation as master craftsman can be seen as a consequence of the composer’s stance against sincerity in art.

Ravel’s association of composition with craftsmanship is subtly conveyed in a short, yet revealing, letter from 12 September 1909. The recipient, Jules Ecorcheville, had commissioned the Menuet sur le nom d’Haydn for a special issue of the Revue musicale de la S.I.M. commemorating the centenary of Haydn’s death. In the letter informing Ecorcheville of the completion of the minuet, Ravel writes: ‘The minuet is tailored. Would you like to stop by my home to try it, or shall I deliver it to yours?’\(^8\) The minuet is likened to a piece of clothing, and the material to which Ravel implicitly refers is the soggetto cavato—essentially a musical cryptogram used as the thematic subject in a polyphonic composition—on the dedicatee’s name: H-A-Y-D-N (B-A-D-D-G in musical notation).\(^9\) As Vladimir Jankélévitch observes, Ravel ‘derive[s] all the melodic material, as well as the means of progression and closure from [this] soggetto cavato.’\(^10\) Appearing a total of nine times throughout the piece, Ravel applies a variety of fugal devices on the Haydn theme, including inversion (b. 17), retrograde (b. 19), and tonal retrograde inversion (b. 25). The theme itself is relatively uncomplicated, fittingly reminiscent of eighteenth-century clarity and elegance. And yet, it is evident that Ravel saw an opportunity to exercise the skills of a craftsman within this carefully designed and precisely executed minuet.

Along with the endless pursuit of technical perfection, Ravel’s work ethic was also driven by a desire to overcome ever-increasing levels of difficulty. As the composer

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\(^7\) Roger Nichols, Ravel Remembered (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1987), 184.
\(^9\) See A Ravel Reader, 108.
\(^10\) See A Ravel Reader, 108n1.
\(^11\) Jankélévitch, Ravel, 96.
himself remarked in an interview with Georges le Fèvre on 8 October 1920, ‘I am presently finishing a piece for cello and piano [sic], which is giving me a lot of trouble, but I love difficulty.’ For Jankélévitch, Ravel’s obsession with difficulty is the result of the composer’s superior technical ability. Having ‘no natural difficulty in expressing himself,’ the composer found it necessary to create his own, albeit artificial, problems—so as to raise the bar—only to overcome them. Ravel saw composition as ‘a game in which the player voluntarily makes the rules of the game more complicated, and he sought to create an intrinsic problem in each of his musical works in order, presumably, to make things more interesting for himself. After all, as the composer openly remarked, ‘the most interesting thing in art is to try to overcome difficulties.’ Moreover, as the composer states in an article written in 1933, ‘the fear of difficulty, however, is never as keen as the pleasure of contending with it, and, if possible, of overcoming it.’ Indeed, this sort of mindset is evident even in the process of composition behind the Boléro, which, as we saw earlier, was essentially a problem-solving exercise. Intended to limit the possibilities of variation, the Boléro forced Ravel to create new orchestral combinations and timbres. For Ravel, to wrestle with difficulty, in the hope of rising above it, was in itself an end worth pursuing.

The opportunity for such an endeavour presented itself in 1929 when Paul Wittgenstein, an Austrian pianist who had lost his right arm in the war, commissioned the composer to write a concerto solely for the left hand. When approached with such a request, Ravel undoubtedly detected that the nature of the task posed a number of specific problems. Firstly, despite having only half of the physical resources normally at his disposal (and arguably the weaker hand of the two), Ravel nevertheless felt it ‘essential to give the impression of a texture no thinner than that of a part written for both hands’ and ‘maintain interest in a work of extended scope while utilizing such limited means.’ The problems he faced were not, however, only of a technical kind. In writing a composition for a one-handed pianist the composer is confronted with a second, more formidable challenge: to present his soloist as nothing less than a ‘real’ pianist. After all, as Neil

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83 Georges le Fèvre, “The Lynx”: Maurice Ravel in the Country,” in A Ravel Reader, 417 (emphasis added). Ravel was most probably referring to the Sonata for Violin and Cello, since he never composed a work for cello and piano. Orenstein notes that this was an error on the interviewer’s part.

84 Jankélévitch, Ravel, 68.

85 Jankélévitch, Ravel, 69.

86 Maurice Ravel, “Concerto for the Left Hand,” in A Ravel Reader, 396.


88 Ravel, “Concerto for the Left Hand,” 396.
Lerner writes, ‘to claim the title pianist, one must have two functioning hands. With only one functioning hand, someone who wishes to play the piano becomes not a pianist but a one-handed pianist.’ Ravel’s most challenging task, then, was to present a concerto capable of overturning music culture’s understanding, its ‘constructed normalcy,’ of the legitimate pianist. In order for his performer to be given a fair hearing, Ravel must first challenge, and if possible deconstruct, the audience’s prejudices. In view of his predilection for overcoming difficulties, it is unsurprising that Ravel readily accepted the commission—citing its challenges as his incentive—and completed the concerto in nine months.

Ravel’s concerto opens with a murky rumbling in the deep registers of the cellos and double basses. The lower strings juxtapose two tonal forces through their double pedal point on D and E, above which a lone contrabassoon hovers with the concerto’s first theme. Shortly after Fig. 1, the horns interject with an ominous minor third motif in bare octaves. Recurring persistently throughout the concerto, this descending third figure poses a continual challenge to the major third of the concerto’s D major tonality, perhaps suggestive of the presence of a dark and haunting force. This second theme is developed through inversion and rhythmic diminution before the initial theme re-enters at Fig. 2, surging upwards through the full spectrum of orchestral registers from the doubles basses to the upper winds and strings. The brass section forces its way in with the descending third motif, and the steady growth of orchestral sonority culminates in an explosive fusion of the two themes.

It is after this spectacular orchestral opening, which has been hailed ‘the most dramatic to come from the pen of Ravel,’ that the concerto presents its one-handed soloist—its

91 One-handed pianist Nicholas McCarthy’s recent graduation from the Royal College of Music in London marks the first of its kind in the institution’s 130-year history. The time it has taken for one-handed pianism to be officially accepted by the music world reflects the extent to which this preconception is embedded into society’s thinking. See Donna Bowater, “One-handed pianist Nicholas McCarthy graduates from Royal College of Music,” Music News, The Telegraph, August 28, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/9503659/One-handed-pianist-Nicholas-McCarthy-graduates-from-Royal-College-of-Music.html.
92 Ravel, “Concerto for the Left Hand,” 396.
‘maimed protagonist.’

Up to this point, nothing is done to distract the audience from the inevitable focus on the soloist’s physical disability. If anything, Ravel seems keen to advertise the fact, taking advantage of the traditional delay in the soloist’s entrance to emphasise his missing right arm; for during the orchestral introduction ‘an empty sleeve dang[es] from the performer’s right shoulder, facing the audience.’ However, just as ‘the marked ability of one hand becomes dependent on the marked absence of the other,’ Ravel’s emphasis on disability serves only to highlight his overcoming of it. The pianist launches into a cadenza-like section with a powerful pentatonic flourish cascading down five octaves (Fig. 4). The determination to overcome the restrictions posed by the soloist’s most pertinent physical limitation is made explicit: the absence of a second arm notwithstanding, Ravel exploits both upper and lower registers of the piano.

Following a grand cadential figure in D major, which confirms the tonic key, the soloist reiterates the concerto’s opening theme. Deborah Mawer observes that while it deviates slightly from the contrabassoon’s initial rendition, the subsequent orchestral repetition of the piano’s ‘version’ confirms that it is in fact the concerto’s ‘proper’ theme. This, in turn, reveals the theme’s true identity: the protagonist’s motto. Here, Ravel’s clever two-part writing, which ultimately spans over five octaves and includes increasingly dexterous leaps up and down the keyboard, enables the maimed protagonist to create the illusion of having another hand. Moreover, by placing the melodic line in the left thumb over a triadic accompaniment for the weaker fingers, Ravel plays to the natural weighting of the left hand. Finally, in order to consolidate the two-part texture, the harmonic rhythm is skilfully timed so as fully to utilise the piano’s sostenuto and sustaining pedals.

At Fig. 8, the pianist unveils the concerto’s lyrical section. The new theme is introverted yet also expressive, its melancholy melody evoking a sense of grief and loss. Significantly, the notation for this passage does not betray the protagonist’s limitations in any way. Instead, by using the grand staff usually employed in two-hand piano writing

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95 See Howe, “Paul Wittgenstein,” 142.
96 Howe, “Paul Wittgenstein,” 135.
(with both treble and bass clefs), it is as if Ravel prompts the pianist momentarily to disregard his disability, and resulting abnormality. The message is clear: to possess only one hand does not, and indeed should not, change one's identity as a legitimate pianist. Ravel's mastery of writing for the piano is once again given centre stage, with the interaction between the melody and its flowing accompaniment carefully choreographed to take advantage of the shape of the left hand.

Perhaps the most spectacular display of the protagonist's 'triumph' over his disability is found in his second solo cadenza at the end of the concerto. With the audience's attention fixed exclusively on him, the soloist 'retells' the concerto as a sequence of events. Working his way from the concerto's very opening, Ravel begins to unfold the main themes one after another. The ominous descending third motif is recalled, followed by the lyrical theme from the first solo cadenza. The expressive melody soars above a shimmering demi-semiquaver accompaniment, and once again, Ravel exploits the full capacity of the left hand. By integrating a second voice, he uses counterpoint to imitate the interaction of two separate hands, borrowing a technique employed by 'normal' pianists to create the illusion of three hands. The protagonist's theme returns and gradually the harmonic texture thickens beneath it, as Ravel sends his soloist up and down the keyboard with a brilliant display of broken chords. The orchestra re-enters at Fig. 51 with a resounding sub-dominant pedal point in the string section, while the winds take over the protagonist's theme and the persistent minor third motif occupies the protagonist himself. The bass pedal finally resolves onto a glorious D major chord, putting an end to the enduring struggle between the conflicting major and minor thirds. A celebratory coda follows, in which the victorious D major is repeatedly resounded, bringing the concerto to a dazzling close.

Although Ravel never prescribed a program for this work, the notion of struggle to victory can be readily traced throughout its course. With his disability in full view at the start, the protagonist sets out with the admirable goal of overturning society's preconceptions of himself as half a pianist. He does so by exploiting the full capacity of his remaining hand and plays to its natural strengths, ultimately equalling the ability of the two-handed pianist irrespective of his obvious physical limitations. Ravel's unwillingness to shy away from the challenges posed by disability, as well as his rejection of the 'underdog image' created by music culture's preconceptions of the
legitimate pianist, is clearly conveyed in the concerto’s unmistakeably triumphant finish. No longer can the one-handed protagonist be looked upon with disdain, or even pity. Rather, he is portrayed as a hero, one that rises above adversity and overcomes victoriously.

Our primary concern in this chapter has been to explore two prevalent concepts used in the critique of Ravel and his art: artificiality and insincerity. This has firstly involved an investigation of how art, which is inherently artificial, can be perceived as natural, and why some art, including Ravel’s, is considered specifically artificial. The discussion of artificiality brought up issues concerning the composer’s sincerity, or lack thereof, which necessitated a close analysis of Ravel’s apparent stance against sincerity. Looking at the composer’s theories, we were faced with apparent contradictions in his understanding of the concept. By returning Ravel’s statements to their proper contexts, however, we were able systematically to explain these inconsistencies and discover how Ravel’s views on sincerity developed over the course of his career. While his initial understanding of sincerity closely matched the traditional view shared by his contemporaries, a shift began to occur in conjunction with his exposure to Poe’s writings. By adopting Poe’s argument for the need to involve conscious choice within the creative process, Ravel redefined sincerity and associated it with a humiliating lack of control. Given this revised understanding, he concluded that the ultimate aim of the artist was technical perfection, not sincere self-expression.

While this chapter has clarified aspects of Ravel’s aesthetic beliefs and, in the process, exposed certain misconceptions concerning his theories, one question remains to be asked: is art, for Ravel, completely confined to the pursuit of perfect craftsmanship, or does it, indeed can it, serve other purposes? Some scholars have concluded that the former is true, that Ravel’s art was not merely driven by the desire to achieve technical perfection, but limited to that obsession. As Jankélévitch asserts, ‘every composition by Ravel represents [...] a certain problem to be solved.’ Indeed, the composer himself declares that technical perfection is his only objective: ‘[a]rt, no doubt, has other effects, but the artist, in my opinion, should have no other aim.’

While the single-mindedness of Ravel’s preoccupation seems to imply that the other aspects of art were considered by him to be secondary, his words can also be interpreted in a rather different way. It is

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98 Jankélévitch, Ravel, 69 (emphasis added).
apparent that in the composer's mind the responsibility of the artist—his only aim—and the potential of the art—its effects—were two distinct entities. Ravel's statement quoted above does not suggest that art cannot contain emotion, or that the artist cannot express himself through his art. On the contrary, he acknowledges that art has effects aside from the technical, but insists that the artist should not be so concerned with the expression of emotion that he neglects the pursuit of refined technical skill.

In light of this, it would seem that Ravel's negative views on sincerity were not motivated by a rejection of honest self-expression in art; he was not against sincerity per se. Rather, his concern was that it had become one of the primary measures of good art. Given that sincerity in art is defined by the intentions of the artist to express his inner experience in a transparent manner, the evaluation of the artwork according to these intentions does not necessarily take into account the effectiveness of such an endeavour. By arguing against the importance of sincerity, Ravel was, in fact, challenging the validity of evaluating art by this criterion. He adamantly rejected this value system and held the view that such products of the self, honest or otherwise, should earn their status as a works of art on the grounds of their technical soundness. Indeed, it would seem unreasonable to determine the value of a work of art based on the intentions of self-expression alone, since the artist ultimately requires mastery of his craft in order to express himself effectively.

Therefore, while his pursuit as an artist was to achieve technical perfection, this was not, even for Ravel, an end in itself. Rather, he saw the development of good technique as a prerequisite for self-expression, one that would equip the artist with the means to realise himself through his art. In Ravel's own words, '[s]incerity is of no value unless one's conscience helps to make it apparent. This conscience compels us to turn ourselves into good craftsmen.' It is perhaps possible that Ravel's stance against sincerity says more about his belief in the natural expressive potential of art and the importance of sound technique in manifesting that potential, than it does about his artificiality.

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Chapter Two
Ravel’s masks

I. Ravel’s defences

At the end of the previous chapter, we entertained the idea that Ravel’s obsession with good craftsmanship can be seen not as a consequence of his artificiality as a man, but as a product of his sense of responsibility as an artist. Such an understanding of the composer’s aesthetics challenges many pre-conceptions regarding Ravel’s music, including that of the apparent lack of emotional expression in his art. Other writers, however, have drawn different, even opposite, conclusions to this, speculating instead that Ravel’s pursuit of technical perfection represents a hard surface under which the composer conceals himself. This argument has fashioned an image for Ravel as one who sports an impenetrable façade, and has sparked popular discourse on the composer’s maskiness. Indeed, ever since these early accounts, the notion of masks has occupied a prominent place in Ravel scholarship.

Michael Calvocoressi first suggests the presence of masks in the music of Ravel in an article from 1913 in which he addresses contemporary opinions of its apparent lack of emotion. Whilst acknowledging the glassy exterior of the composer’s art, he nevertheless claims that the music is not completely without expression, and that one has only to look beneath the deliberate attempts of hiding genuine feeling to discover this:

Even whilst acknowledging the apparent absence of a whole category of affections, one might well be satisfied with what M. Ravel obviously gives: utmost delicacy and refinement, perfect balance and concinnity, a wealth of novel, attractive material, skilfully used and displayed in admirable light. But the absence of emotion is only apparent; and although the emotion itself is subdued, and its expression always toned down and recondite, many instances may be adduced in which genuine feeling asserts itself under the industrious show of impassivity, whilst in others the composer drops the mask altogether.¹

Here, Calvocoressi argues against those who accused the composer of an inherent lack of feeling. By implying that Ravel intentionally hides emotional expression (it is ‘always

toned down and recondite’), he asserts that the impassivity is only a show—an industrious show, at that—and interprets the apparent lack of emotion in the music as a certain wariness in the composer’s attitude towards his art. By doing so, Calvocoressi suggests that the technical mastery found in Ravel’s music, which is characterised by ‘utmost delicacy and refinement, perfect balance and concinnity,’ is but a mask that is intended to conceal the feeling beneath. It is as if Ravel, aware of the confessional potential of music, was careful to keep his emotions hidden for fear of revealing too much of himself to his audience.

Other contributors to the early literature on Ravel and his maskedness include the composer’s disciple-turned-self-appointed-spokesperson, Alexis Roland-Manuel, and French writer Vladimir Jankélévitch, arguably the two most influential advocates for the importance of masks in the understanding of Ravel and his music. Of particular relevance to the present discussion are Roland-Manuel’s 1925 article “Maurice Ravel ou l’esthétique de l’imposture” (“Maurice Ravel and the aesthetic of imposture”), and Jankélévitch’s biography of the composer from 1939. As the title of his article suggests, Roland-Manuel constructs an image of Ravel as an impostor—a composer who intentionally misguides his audience to believe that he is something he is not. While Calvocoressi, in the paragraph quoted above, implies that Ravel actively sought to conceal his emotions out of a fear of ‘being found out,’ Roland-Manuel asserts that Ravel’s emotions themselves are not genuine. His focus is not on the composer’s fear of exposure, but of his wilful deception. He portrays Ravel as one who creates and presents emotions, without having to feel them himself, stating that ‘if [Ravel’s] music pleases, you, moves you, makes you cry, know that it is made by a man who did not go on his knees, “before or afterwards” [and] who did not cry while writing it.’ Moreover, he uses the composer’s preference for composing in complete isolation to support this trickster image of Ravel in his biography of the composer from 1938:

[Ravel] composed in the greatest secret. Here again everything had to be done—or seem to be done—by a miracle. His piano and his study table bore no trace of

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his work and gave no evidence of preliminary drafts. Nothing in the hands of the pockets: the conjurer juggled away even the apparatus of his tricks.3 Roland-Manuel's use of vocabulary associated with magic and sorcery reinforces his image of the composer as one who creates music by unnatural means.4 Debussy uses similar language in his description of the composer as a trickster and conjurer, branding Ravel's music as 'somewhat like a sorcerer's house' and the composer himself as 'a fakir enchanter, who can make flowers spring out of a chair.'5 It might appear strange at first that Roland-Manuel would speak of Ravel in such a seemingly negative way, particularly since his admiration for the composer was evidently so profound that he took it upon himself to establish Ravel as a leading figure in twentieth-century French musical development. In her critique of his influence on the formation of Ravel's reputation, Barbara Kelly notes that Roland-Manuel's association of the composer with magic and deception represents his attempt to contrast Ravel from Debussy.6 Given the criticism Ravel received for being too much like Debussy—some even accused Ravel of plagiarising the work of his older French contemporary7—it is not surprising that Roland-Manuel found it necessary to emphasise the dissimilarities between the two composers, even to the point of overstating them.

In attempting to consolidate Ravel's independence from Debussy as well as his disassociation from stereotypical Romantic compositional aesthetics, however, Roland-Manuel risks constructing an overly damning image of the composer. Perhaps aware of running this risk, Roland-Manuel ultimately suggests that the reason behind Ravel's deceptive creation of emotions—the metaphor he uses is of a magician that pulls rabbits out of hats—is the composer's inability to feel natural emotions. He implies that there is something intrinsically wrong with Ravel's personal make-up,8 and in doing so downplays the composer's responsibility for his emotional defect. Indeed, he portrays the composer as a victim, one who suffers from a dysfunctional emotive faculty and is forced to resort to manufacturing emotions artificially in order to compensate for his in-born abnormality.

4 Kelly, "Re-presenting Ravel," 45.
6 Kelly, "Re-presenting Ravel," 45.
7 Pierre Lalo, for example, expresses disapproval of 'the strange resemblance of [Ravel's] music to that of M. Claude Debussy.' See A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews, ed. Arbie Orenstein (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), 80.
8 Kelly, "Re-presenting Ravel," 49.
While there are some similarities in their initial observations, Jankelévitch presents quite a different explanation to Roland-Manuel’s. Like Roland-Manuel, Jankelévitch describes Ravel as an imposter, one who ‘put people off,’ ‘purposely mislead[s] us,’ and ‘delights in sending us on the wrong track.’\(^9\) He portrays Ravel as an artist who ‘likes trompe-l’oeil, false impressions, wooden horses and booby-traps.’\(^10\) Furthermore, Jankelévitch also speculates that deception was a necessity for the composer. And yet, he does not explain the composer’s need for pretence by claiming that Ravel lacked the faculty to feel emotion. On the contrary, he presents the composer as one who was perfectly normal in terms of his emotional make-up, but felt compelled to conceal the emotions he naturally felt for a number of other reasons. For Jankelévitch, Ravel’s coldness was just a façade; he ‘merely pretends to be indifferent.’\(^11\) Jankelévitch suggests that the composer’s objective and detached attitude towards his art was a means to ‘prevent tenderness from revealing itself below the exoteric concealment of affected indifference.’\(^12\) In other words, like Calvocoressi, Jankelévitch interprets the composer’s wilful deception as a necessary defense mechanism. He further speculates that there is an inverse correlation between Ravel’s experience of emotion and the open expression of it in his music: ‘the more deeply he feels, the more he affects a colourless and politely uniform tone.’\(^13\) To avoid revealing too much of himself through his art, Ravel ‘designs for himself a disguise that is most carefully imperturbable, in the hope that nothing can be seen through it.’\(^14\) Rather than present the composer as one who suffered from an emotional abnormality, which can imply that there is something inhuman about the composer, Jankelévitch encourages us to empathise with Ravel’s fear of vulnerability.

The testimonies of those who had the chance of meeting the composer in person seem to support this interpretation of his emotional reticence. Acquaintances, fellow musicians, and critics who had interacted with the composer have consistently reported that he was, on all accounts, a particularly fastidious man, one who was excessively concerned with how he presented himself to others. Violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhangé, for

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example, remembers his ‘meticulous attention to simple elegance,’ while music critic Olin Downes recalls ‘the suavity, the politesse, [and] the glitter of Maurice Ravel’ as well as his ‘fastidious, [and] exotic’ dress from an interview with the composer in July 1927. Such was the extent of Ravel’s ‘obsession with appearance’ that on one occasion, he kept an entire audience waiting for an hour as he refused to appear on stage without ‘a favourite pair of patent leather shoes’ accidentally left at his hotel. In a second interview with the composer from February 1928, Downes draws an interesting connection between Ravel’s ‘delicate and fastidiously organised’ presentation and his art:

It is all of a piece. The man and his music are one, and they combine for the purposes of self-preservation. It is amazing to examine his scores—his defenses. They are structures of consummate logic and refinement [...] Within the subtle circle with which he surrounds himself, in a self-appointed and self-created kingdom, this man has found an invisible refuge from reality.

The above paragraph implies, first of all, that Ravel’s compositions represent a testament to his character and that by looking at his music, one can understand Ravel the man. Secondly, it suggests that the striking finesse in both character and art serves to preserve the composer; he associates Ravel’s overtly obsessive mannerisms and the ‘consummate logic and refinement of his scores’ with the composer’s desire to protect himself. Most interesting, however, is Downes’s implicit comparison of the composer’s scores to instruments of defense. According to Downes, composition provided Ravel with the means to shield himself from the real world. In a similar vein, Michael Puri, in his aforementioned book on Ravel’s dandyism, suggests that the composer’s obsessive behaviour in everyday living, as seen in his preoccupation with his outward appearance, betrays the desire to create ‘an impenetrable outer shell’ maintained for the purposes of self-defence.

This image of Ravel—as a man who was driven by fear—is one that mirrors the descriptions of the composer by his colleagues and closest circle of friends. Shortly after the composer’s death at the end of 1937, a special Ravel issue of La Revue Musicale was

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18 Olin Downes, “Mr. Ravel Returns,” in A Ravel Reader, 457.
published, featuring collective tributes by important members of the public as well as more personal reminiscences of the composer by those who interacted closely with him. In her individual contribution, pianist and friend of the composer Marguerite Long remembers Ravel as one who was ‘reserved, scared, and distant with unwelcome visitors.’ ²⁰ (It is important to note that even in this short description of Ravel, Long associates the composer’s reticence with a sense of fear.) Elsewhere, the poet, fellow member of the Apaches, and life-long friend of Ravel, Léon-Paul Fargue describes the composer as ‘ostensibly aloof [...] dry and formal.’ ²¹ According to Roland-Manuel, Ravel’s mannerisms were consistently reserved, even to his most intimate of friends:

At a first meeting Ravel was courteous and reserved. His best friends could not help feeling secretly disappointed by the feeling that they were not able to become more fully intimate with him; for the most devoted sympathy and close relationship scarcely altered the manner of his greeting. ²²

Yet, despite this ‘exterior appearance [which] has often contributed to credit[ing the myth of] “spiritual indifference,”’ Long maintains that Ravel was ‘the surest [and] most faithful of friends.’ Moreover, she asserts, like Jankélévitch and Calvocoressi, that beneath this cool and constructed exterior, the composer ‘hid a sensitive and passionate soul.’ ²³

Glimpses of this ‘sensitive and passionate soul’ can be seen in Ravel’s personal letters. We are fortunate that the composer was an avid letter writer and that much of his correspondence with family and friends have been preserved. These letters reveal that Ravel was not, as Roland-Manuel would have us believe, unable to feel emotion, nor was he incapable of expressing the emotion that he felt. While the composer may have been reserved in his expression of feeling and cautious in his selection of confidants, it is evident that he was fully capable of experiencing deep emotion. In a letter to Maurice Delage, written on 4 August 1914, for example, the composer reveals the emotional roller-coaster brought on by the war:

My dear old chap: Write to me immediately, if you receive this, so that I can feel the presence of a friend. [...] If only you knew how I am suffering! ... Since this morning, unceasingly, the same horrible, criminal idea...if I leave my poor old

²² Roland-Manuel, Maurice Ravel, 129.
mama, it would surely kill her. [...] Yes, I'm working; and with an insane certainty
and lucidity. But, during this time, the blues are at work too, and suddenly I find
myself sobbing over my sharps and flats.24

In another letter, written in April 1916 while serving France as an ambulance driver,
Ravel describes the trauma he experienced on one of his assignments:

The other day, I was assigned one of those 'interesting missions' which you have
told me you distrust. [...] I saw a hallucinatory thing: a nightmarish city, horribly
deserted and mute. [...] Undoubtedly, I will see things which will be more
frightful and repugnant; I don't believe I will ever experience a more profound
and stranger emotion that this sort of mute terror.25

While many other instances can be found in his correspondences, one final noteworthy
example appears in a letter to Madame Fernand Dreyfus shortly after the death of
Ravel's mother in which the composer explicitly describes his experience of a full
spectrum of emotions:

Spiritually, it's dreadful...it was such a short while ago that I wrote to her, and
would receive her frail letters, which saddened me...and yet, they gave me such
joy. I was still happy then, despite the inner anguish...I didn't know it would
happen so quickly. And now, this horrible despair, the same recurring thoughts.26

It is evident from these paragraphs that Ravel did not merely respond objectively to his
circumstances but was also emotionally affected by them. In light of this, how then are
we to interpret the composer's apparent maskedness? Given that Roland-Manuel's
speculation regarding Ravel's inherent lack of feeling clearly ignores obvious indications
of his fully functioning emotive faculties, should the composer's masks be seen as his
instruments of defense, as other writers suggest? And if so, is it possible to determine
what the composer was so intent on protecting himself from?

Before proceeding any further with the discussion on Ravel's masks, however, it is
perhaps necessary to clarify some of the aims in doing so, especially given the recent
additions to the scholarship that caution against attempts to understand Ravel using the
constructions of his maskedness discussed above.27 Barbara Kelly, in her article "Re-
presenting Ravel: Artificiality and the Aesthetic of Imposture," is particularly wary not
only of the impact that these early discussions have had on subsequent research on the
composer, but also on the premise on which their arguments are based. She rightly

24 See A Ravel Reader, 150.
25 See A Ravel Reader, 163.
26 See A Ravel Reader, 180.
observes that in these writings, the issue of Ravel’s nature consistently enters into the
discussion on his art. Kelly warns that by using observations of his reserved nature
and meticulous personality to inform conclusions regarding his art, these early biographers have potentially over-simplified the relationship between Ravel the man
and Ravel the artist. Particularly problematic is that while Roland-Manuel and
Jankélévitch both argue that there is a disjunction between the composer’s expression of
feeling and his true emotional experience—adding that one should not judge the latter
by perceptions of the former—their explanations as to why such a disjuncture exists
depend, ironically, on the very speculations they implicitly discourage.

In light of these warnings, it may seem counterproductive to continue the discussions on
masks in relation to Ravel. If the notions of deception, concealment, and imposture have
been revealed to be a problematic construction of early biographers, and one that risks
defining Ravel and his significance too narrowly, it would appear unwise to engage in
further investigations into the composer’s masks. And yet to dismiss these early
constructions entirely would also seem inappropriate, even unnecessary. In the
remainder of this chapter, we re-evaluate the relevance of maskedness in the
discussions of Ravel’s music and begin to examine if and how the composer made use of
‘musical masks’ as a tool for composition. We will see how the concept of masks,
carefully separated from speculation on his personality, still represents a useful trope in
the interpretation of Ravel’s art.

II. Masks in music: definitions and applications

Due to its widespread association with Ravel in scholarship, many authors no longer
define the word ‘masks’ and readers are, for the most part, expected to know what is
meant by the term. While this assumption of knowledge may at first seem reasonable
enough, scholars have often overlooked the important fact that musical masks are
necessarily metaphorical. While many of the masks found in the visual arts and in
theatre are physical objects, the masks in music are not similarly tangible objects we can
simply look at and examine. Generally speaking, the term ‘mask’ refers to a covering
worn on or held in front of the face for the purposes of physical protection,

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29 Kelly, “Re-presenting Ravel,” 49.
entertainment (including performance), ceremony, or disguise. Perhaps the first image that comes to mind when speaking of masks in entertainment is that of the twin masks of Thalia and Melpomene, symbols from ancient Greek drama that represent modern theatre to this day. In Greek theatre, the mask was a necessary tool for actors; not only did it provide an effective way for actors to take on multiple roles in the same play, it was also a particularly efficient one that took away the need for frequent, and often cumbersome, costume changes.31 Within this context, the application of a mask aids, on the most basic level, the identification of the character being portrayed. The role of the mask is two-fold: firstly, to conceal the natural face of the actor, and secondly, to give him a new face. The use of masks as the primary means by which characters were identified in Greek theatre, as well as the fact that both the mask and the character were referred to as personae, implies the notion that the identity of a person is best portrayed, or most truthfully revealed, by his face.32 To put on a mask—which is essentially a face other than your own—would then imply a great deal more than merely changing your physical, or more specifically, facial appearance. Rather, as Penny Francis observes, ‘masked players lose their own personality to assume the physical attributes of the character of their mask.’33 The mask can therefore be seen to ‘dictate’ its wearer’s new identity, his ‘figure, [...] normal bearing, voice and mannerisms.’34

Acting itself presents a similar case. By playing the role of a character other than oneself, the actor essentially assumes a false identity, one that obscures his true self; putting on this metaphorical mask initiates a transformation of identity. While this may be true when one is not given the option to choose one’s character (or mask), it is quite a different situation when the artist is at liberty not only to choose his own character, but also to fashion it according to his own preferences. Perhaps, as Peter Hall suggests, the assumed switch in identity can actually liberate the artist and cause him to ‘apprehend a whole new world,’ discovering aspects of his own identity previously unknown to him.35

In a world in which people are constantly under the scrutiny of those around them and in turn make judgements of others, the mask—metaphorical or otherwise—provides the perfect pretext for self-exploration and self-discovery. It is behind the protection of the

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32 Sorell, *The Other Face*, 51.
34 Francis, *Puppetry*, 35.
mask, in a situation which licenses one to be ‘different’ that the artist can freely experiment with a variety of personalities including those he may not have formerly associated with himself. However, the use of masks to conceal one’s personality is not limited to the stage; indeed, we all arguably wear metaphorical masks in everyday living. As T. S. Eliot puts it in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, we are constantly ‘prepar[ing] a face to meet the faces that [we] meet.”36 The theatre mask can therefore be seen to facilitate the expression of one’s identity by enabling its wearer to ‘be himself’ without the fear of being found out. As Polish theatre director Jerzy Growtowski suggests, not only does the use of masks encourage self-discovery, it can also help artists to ‘project the hidden sides of their own nature,’ thus serving to ‘remove the masks [they] wear in everyday life.’37 In the words of Oscar Wilde, ‘[m]an is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.’38

The notion of theatrical masks as instruments of revelation rather than concealment finds a parallel in the context of the visual arts, particularly in the genre of modern portraiture. A portrait, while not a mask in the strictest sense, fulfils a similar function to a mask in that it provides the artist with a face of someone other than himself. Even though the obvious purpose of a portrait is to capture the patron’s character in his physical features, it is interesting that somehow, the artist’s own personality also comes through in how he perceives the sitter and how these perceptions are represented in artistic terms. Wilde alludes to this embedding of identities in his novel The Picture of Dorian Gray, in which the fictional artist Basil Hallward explains to his friend Lord Henry his decision not to exhibit his latest portrait:

After a pause, Lord Henry pulled out his watch. ‘I am afraid I must be going, Basil,’ he murmured, ‘and before I go, I insist on your answering a question I put to you some time ago.’

‘What is that?’ said the painter, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground.

‘You know quite well.’

‘I do not, Harry.’

‘Well, I will tell you what it is. I want you to explain to me why you won’t exhibit Dorian Gray’s picture. I want the real reason.’

37 Sorell, The Other Face, 80.
'I told you the real reason.'

'No you did not. You said it was because there was too much of yourself in it. Now, that is childish.'

'Harry,' said Basil Hallward, looking him straight in the face, 'every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul.'

We know from an earlier passage of the novel that the portrait looked nothing like the artist—Hallward himself admits this: ‘Of course I am not like him. I know that perfectly well.’ And yet, regardless of the dissimilarity in outward appearances, he protests time and time again that 'there is too much of myself in the thing, Harry – too much of myself!' Hallward’s natural impulse to attach his own personality to the portrait of another is not unique. Indeed, as Irish painter Francis Bacon observes in reference to the portraits by great masters of the past, 'I think people believe that [the artists are] painting other people, but they paint out their own instincts.'

It is evident from the above review of the masks found in different contexts that whether used for concealment or revelation, masks involve some sort of engagement with the Other, be that another identity or a second personality. This observation is especially helpful when speaking of masks in music, since, as mentioned earlier, musical masks are not tangible—we cannot simply pick them up and scrutinise them in the same way that we can other masks. Identifying the presence of an assumed Other is crucial in establishing that a musical mask is really there—something scholars have often taken for granted in regards to Ravel. The mask and the masked must be two perceptibly distinct entities: the former derives its significance from its dissimilarity with the latter. Our first task, then, is to determine which elements can be considered as belonging to the Other before we can seek to understand the unmasked object hidden beneath, if indeed there is one.

We can speak of musical Otherness from a number of different perspectives. From a nationalistic standpoint, it refers to elements—folk idioms, for example—that originate

40 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, 7.
41 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, 14.
from a foreign musical culture. In relation to historical context, musical Otherness refers to the distinctive characteristics of past musical eras such as genre, form, and syntax that have been taken from their original context and re-used in new compositions. Finally, on a more individual level, musical Otherness points to elements that are associated with a composer’s general style or materials that are found in specific pre-existing compositions, which are then adopted into new works by another artist. In each of these instances, musical Otherness involves the overt borrowing of characteristics that are not normally associated with the composer, elements taken from somewhere else (another culture or vernacular), sometime else (another historical period), or even someone else (another artist). This distinction between ‘mine’ and ‘yours’—or self and other—is precisely the relationship we find between the masked and the mask, and thus provides us with a helpful paradigm with which to differentiate between the composer and his disguise. By identifying those elements of a musical work that are taken from another cultural context, historical period, or composer, we can work towards analysing the masks we find in the music and ultimately seek to discover what lies concealed underneath.

III. The pastiches: engaging with an Other

Having established what masks consist of, and how they can be identified within a musical context, we are now in a position to consider the masks found in Ravel’s compositions. In doing so, we will explore which masks he used, how he implemented them in his music, and finally why he chose to use them. To aid this investigation, I have chosen a genre of pieces by the composer to which the notion of masks is particularly relevant: the pastiches. A large number of Ravel’s pastiches have titles that make explicit reference to the specific style or styles being alluded to. This characteristic makes the genre especially useful to the task at hand not only because it confirms the presence of masks in these works, but also makes the process of identifying what masks are in place significantly more straightforward.

In choosing to focus on the pastiches of Ravel, or the works in which pastiche figures prominently, I am aware that these compositions are not generally considered representative of the composer’s style, nor testament to his aesthetics. While pastiche is a widespread phenomenon in the music of Ravel, specific works that involve the practice
have received very little attention by scholars. With the exception of Michael Purí’s analysis of the two pastiches in À la manière de..., this body of works has largely been neglected in discussions of his music and style, and when mentioned, only fleetingly discussed. Perhaps one of the reasons behind this neglect or avoidance of the pastiches is that, given their popular association with a lack of creativity, they might appear to undermine the composer’s significance and originality as an artist. Indeed, there exists a common misconception that pastiche is fundamentally superficial, mechanical, and ‘disconnected from the real and, especially, from feeling.’ As Richard Dyer observes in his recent study on literary pastiche, ‘[v]ery commonly, it is seen as, at best, fun and charming, at worst trivial.’ The negative connotations associated with pastiche have largely arisen from the assumption that the writing of pastiche does not involve creativity. Some have concluded, therefore, that pastiches should not be considered legitimate works of art. This line of thinking equates thoughtful imitation, which pastiche overtly involves, with mindless reproduction. We leave a more detailed discussion of the problems of this misunderstanding to the following chapter, and turn, for now, to the relevance of pastiche to our present discussion.

Since, by definition, pastiche is an explicit imitation of pre-existing materials that are taken from another composer or style, works of pastiche will inevitably draw on elements outside of what might be considered the composer’s own style and musical vocabulary. Indeed, as Dyer observes, for pastiche to be pastiche, it must resemble its model; and yet, it must also not be identical to it. It is precisely the combination of these two prerequisites that makes pastiche the perfect context within which artists can conceal their own style. By donning the style of another composer, or borrowing from the musical language of another cultural context or historical period, composers are able to blur the boundaries between self and Other. The resulting uncertainty surrounding what ‘belongs’ to the artist, and what does not leads to a widening of the gap between him and his audience, creating a sort of stylistic distance. To ‘slip into the skin of another artist,’ provides composers with stylistic alibi. Maud Elmann, in her study on impersonality in the poetry of Ravel’s younger contemporaries T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, identifies defensiveness as a motivation for hiding one’s true personality. As

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44 Dyer, Pastiche, 137.
45 Purí, "Memory, pastiche, and aestheticism," 60.
readers began to look for confessions of the artist within his art, poets 'grew furtive to defend themselves against their reader's scrutiny.' In the same way, a composer's imitation of the styles of others afforded him the protection of distance between himself and his prying audience. Composing pastiche, then, gives the artist firstly the licence to write in a style that was not wholly his own, and secondly a way of combatting any conclusions drawn from the music about his personality. Given the contemporary assumptions that art is intricately connected to the artist's biography, as well as Ravel's adamant stance against such speculation, it is unsurprising that the composer developed a predilection for pastiche.

Ravel's first foray into pastiche is found in one of his earliest works, the *Menuet antique* of 1895. As its title suggests, the minuet alludes to the past: its 'pseudo-antique touch,' invoked by the use of the natural minor scale, sequential phrases, and imitation between the hands, commemorates the ancient style in a general sense. While Ravel does not model his imitation on a specific work or on a particular composer's musical language, it is evident that elements of his pastiche allude to 'typical' characteristics of a past musical style. These elements, which are not normally associated with the musical era in which Ravel lived and composed, can be seen as 'foreign' and belonging to an Other. By incorporating musical clichés from a previous musical period, Ravel puts on a mask of the past. But this is not the only mask he dons. Pastiche can also be seen on a second, more precise, level, involving the imitation of a specific composer and work. In the minuet, Ravel pays explicit homage to Chabrier, and borrows elements from the latter's 'Menuet pompeux' from the *Pièces pittoresques*. Both minuets are cast in the conventional ternary form, with the framing sections in a major key on either side of a tonic minor middle section. Ravel adopts the rustic and accentuated vigour of Chabrier's outer sections for his own (see examples 2.1a and 2.1b). Similarly, he follows Chabrier in contrasting the trio with the gracefulness of the latter's inner section (see examples 2.2a and 2.2b). Furthermore, as Roger Nichols notes, the gently pulsating quavers in the accompaniment of Ravel's trio make reference to the analogous section in Chabrier's pieces.

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47 Orenstein, *Ravel*, 141.
Example 2.1  A comparison of the 'Menuet' themes in (a) Ravel's *Menuet antique*, bars 1-3 and (b) Chabrier's 'Menuet pompeux', bars 1-3.

a)

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Example 2.2  A comparison of the 'Trio' themes in (a) Ravel's *Menuet antique*, bars 47-50 and (b) Chabrier's 'Menuet pompeux,' 63-67.

a)

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In adopting the style of a previous musical period or that of a composer from the past, both of which he can be seen to do in the *Menuet antique*, Ravel, in effect, travels back in time. By doing so, he removes himself somewhat from the present and creates a distance between himself and his current historical context. It is significant that of the many musical styles and eras available for revisiting, Ravel was most frequently drawn to the classicism of the eighteenth century. He, along with many of his contemporary compatriots, held the view that classicism was intricately bound up with Frenchness. (We recall Ravel’s declaration to André Révész in 1924 from Chapter One: ‘[I]n art, I’m a nationalist. I know that I am above all a French composer: I furthermore declare myself a classicist.’) For Ravel, the classical period represented the apogee—the ‘golden era’—of French musical development. It was the era in which balance and clarity—both of which traits were considered quintessentially French—were considered by French composers to be most consistently exemplified. The admittedly idealised memory of the classical period notwithstanding, such nostalgic imaginations provided ‘the safe enclave of a previous century’ into which Ravel could retreat. Given that Ravel’s early works provoked heated discussions concerning their similarity to Debussy’s, and the accusations of plagiarism by his harshest critics, it is unsurprising that Ravel might have chosen to revert back to a style of the past in order to protect himself from the pressures of the present.

This sense of escapism is further evident in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel’s suite for piano completed in 1917 in which the composer pays homage to the French clavecinistes of the eighteenth century. Ravel had intended the work to be distinctly French in nature, writing to Roland-Manuel in October 1914, shortly after the war had broken out, that ‘I have begun [...] a French suite—no it isn’t what you think: *La Marseillaise* will not be in it, but it will have a Forlane and a gigue.’ Although the gigue

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52 Ravel’s desire to return to the past to escape the present is equally evident in his fascination with childhood. In her recent doctoral thesis on the importance of childhood and fairytale in the music of Ravel, Emily Kilpatrick suggests that *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* gave the composer the opportunity to revert to memories of the past and ‘promised [him] comfort and inspiration in a time of personal hardship.’ See Emily Kilpatrick, “The Language of Enchantment: Childhood and Fairytale in the Music of Maurice Ravel,” (PhD diss., University of Adelaide, 2008), 85.
53 Although the title suggests otherwise, Ravel himself revealed that the tribute was directed less to François Couperin, and more generally to French music of the eighteenth century. See *A Ravel Reader*, 32.
54 See *A Ravel Reader*, 192.
never materialised, the suite’s original focus on French values remained. In a similar way to the Menuet antique, Le Tombeau de Couperin is a pastiche on two levels. In one sense, the title of Ravel’s suite indicates a return to late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century practice whereby French composers wrote musical tombeaux in the style of deceased masters and teachers they wished to commemorate. By writing a tombeau in the style of eighteenth-century French keyboard writing, Ravel models his pastiche both on the historical practice and its musical language. The ‘Prélude,’ for example, imitates some of the hallmark characteristics of Ravel’s model, including its transparent textures, imitative interplay between voices, and practice of ornamentation. In particular, Ravel’s specific instruction to begin the mordent on the beat mirrors a guide to the execution of ornamentation found in Louis Diémer’s transcription of Couperin’s keyboard works in the third volume of Les Clavecinistes Français. The ‘Fugue’ second movement demonstrates another example of pastiche in a general sense. The only work in Ravel’s entire compositional output to bear this genre title, this movement showcases his familiarity and mastery of the standard academic procedures of eighteenth-century fugal writing.\(^{55}\) The exposition is a textbook example of its kind, beginning with the subject in E minor, followed by a ‘real’ answer in the dominant and a tonic entry in the bass. A countersubject is introduced above the answer, adding rhythmic variety with its descending triplet figure. In keeping with tradition, the next two sets of entries maintain the fifth relationship between subject and answer. Over the course of the piece, Ravel applies a variety of fugal devices on the subject: he inverts the subject (b. 22) and countersubject (b. 26), then treats both in stretto involving two voices (bb. 33-34 and bb. 39-40) followed by the countersubject in three voices (bb. 41-42). To close, Ravel effortlessly brings back the subject in a three-voice stretto before choosing to do the same with the countersubject. The composer’s adherence to the rules of eighteenth-century fugal writing represents a pastiche of the defining characteristics of the genre.

Pastiche involving specific modelling can be found in the suite’s third movement, the ‘Forlane,’ which, as Glenn Watkins put it, is a ‘disguised (if not transgressed) version’ of François Couperin’s ‘Forlane’ from the fourth of his Concerts Royaux.\(^{56}\) First of all, the


textures, cadences, and ornamentation of Ravel’s forlane resemble those in Couperin’s movement. Secondly, the rhythm and counterpoint of Ravel’s second episode, beginning in bar 63, make implicit reference to the opening figuration of Couperin’s work. Although Ravel fills out the harmonies in his episode, which results in thicker textures, the basic two-part writing of the outer voices resemble Couperin’s opening. Furthermore, the overall structure of Ravel’s forlane—that is, a refrain separated by a series of contrasting couplets—mirrors that of his eighteenth-century model. Last of all, Ravel reverses the tonic minor twist of the final couplet of Couperin’s forlane, by setting the final couplet of his own forlane in E major, the tonic major.

In addition to the commemorative elements of Ravel’s general pastiche of eighteenth-century keyboard music and more specific pastiche of Couperin’s Concerts Royaux, Le Tombeau de Couperin pays tribute to those whose lives were lost whilst fighting in the First World War. Each of the suite’s six movements is dedicated to the memory of a friend who had died in the war. As Roger Nichols so aptly describes it, Ravel’s suite presents a double homage, the first ‘to the civilization Ravel most admired;’ and the second ‘to the friends who had tried to preserve its standards.’

While the memorial element to the war dead was a later addition (work on the suite had begun in July 1914), we can safely assume that when Ravel returned to it in June 1917 following a temporary discharge, the horrors of the war—and ultimately the fate of his friends—were fresh on his mind. In light of the war and its impact on French civilization as well as its personal impact on Ravel, it is not surprising that the composer desired to escape the present age and its suffering. The mask of pastiche, with its ability to transport us back in time, provided Ravel with the perfect means of doing just that.

We have thus far explored how Ravel was able to return to the past in order to escape the present by writing pastiche. Distance of another sort is also achieved: pastiche facilitates emotional detachment, a concept that can be seen most clearly in the pastiches written in response to specific requests, sometimes for commemorative purposes. Works that fall under this category were composed to order. When composing to order, the artist is no longer at liberty to write whatever he wishes. Not only is he required to write according to the specifications given by the one who commissions the work, he must also have the flexibility to make modifications—large or small—if the

57 Nichols, Ravel, 192.
work does not initially please his customer. Satie captures this very consumer-driven aspect of music produced to order in a sardonic advertisement devised for Ravel: 'Harmonic repairs carried out. Remodelling of music a speciality. A symphony? There you are madam. It is not very entertaining. We can return it to you arranged as a waltz, with words.' 58 While these words were evidently said to diminish the value of Ravel's art, they also make a valid point concerning Ravel's craftsman-like attitude to art. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter One, the composer himself implies something similar in his letter to Jules Ecorcheville informing him of the completion of the commissioned minuet: 'The minuet is tailored. Would you like to stop by my home to try it, or shall I deliver it to yours?' 59 Like the bespoke tailor that adjusts his creations to his patron's forms and requests, Ravel implies his willingness to make changes if the work does not suit perfectly in its current state. By composing upon request, Ravel reinforces his belief that art should be evaluated according to its craft, and not on how 'sincerely' the artist intends to impart something of himself through his art. Indeed, it seems that the commissioned work would reveal more about the patron than the composer, given that the former not only initiates the work, but also devises the specifications for it. The pastiches composed to order, then, further complicate the often-assumed link between the artwork and the artist—the former can no longer be reliably used to draw conclusions on the latter.

Pastiche can also be seen as a convenient platform on which Ravel could showcase his fully-fledged artistic consciousness. To reiterate briefly, we saw in Chapter One that the composer's obsession with ever-increasing levels of difficulty drove him to search for and, if necessary, devise artificial challenges in composition so he could find ways of overcoming them. Ravel himself stated, in a conversation with Manuel Rosenthal, his student and close friend, that '[the artist] is obsessed by his creative work and by the problems it poses.' 60 For Ravel, composition was a game in which he could make the rules endlessly more complicated in order to increase the amount of effort needed to achieve technical success. As Roland-Manuel put it, '[Ravel's] music only interested him as something to do—to do well. Once the work was finished, and the game over, he

58 Jankéliévitch, Ravel, 113.
59 See A Ravel Reader, 108.
60 Nichols, Ravel Remembered, 35.
planned another exercise.\textsuperscript{61} We recall the commission for the \textit{Concerto for the Left Hand} which the composer readily accepted because of the challenges it posed, claiming that ‘the fear of difficulty, however, is never as keen as the pleasure of contending with it, and if possible, of overcoming it.’\textsuperscript{62} We also know, from previous discussions, that Ravel stood strongly against spontaneity in art. His most serious complaint against what he called ‘sincerity’ was motivated by a refusal to entrust his art to natural instincts or external inspiration. He insisted that artistic consciousness, with which came the ability to eliminate bad ideas, was the defining characteristic of a good composer. Choice, he maintained, was one of the most valuable assets an artist could possess.

Having established that pastiche must involve the imitation of a model or models, the composer of pastiche must first determine which elements to imitate and how those imitations can be produced. Francisco Calvo Serraller emphasises the importance of choice in his discussion on portraiture, in which he distinguishes between ‘portrayal’ and ‘imitation.’ The former is defined as ‘a mere copy of reality,’ while the latter is described as ‘a selection from what we see.’\textsuperscript{63} While too many borrowed elements will result in the pastiche sounding overly similar to the original, heading towards the other extreme may prevent the work from being recognised as a pastiche at all. The key to a good pastiche is balance. To recall Dyer’s observation, ‘a pastiche is very like that which it pastiches,’ and yet it must not be identical or indistinguishable from it.\textsuperscript{64} To maintain this balance involves a consciously methodical process of selection and negation. Writing pastiche can therefore be seen as the ultimate expression of one’s control over his natural instincts, in favour of the construction of something well thought-out. Moreover, since the title of a work of pastiche will often make explicit reference to its model—an obvious example is Ravel’s \textit{À la manière de Alexander Borodine}—writing pastiche is also an effective way of communicating these calculated intentions to the audience. In this sense, the title speaks on behalf of the composer and effectively states, ‘This is who (or what) I set out to imitate.’

Along with the composer’s predilection for creating and overcoming challenges, the process of choosing which composers or styles to imitate, a necessary step before one

\textsuperscript{61} Nichols, \textit{Ravel Remembered}, 194.
\textsuperscript{62} Maurice Ravel, “Concerto for the Left Hand,” in \textit{A Ravel Reader}, 396.
\textsuperscript{64} Dyer, \textit{Pastiche}, 54-55.
can begin writing pastiche, also fits well with Ravel’s compositional aesthetics. As we saw in the previous chapter, Ravel insisted that even the conception of a work must involve conscious choice. One must set about writing a piece and not simply wait for ideas to come. In the case of those pastiches that were initiated by the composer, and not by external commission, Ravel was free to regulate the difficulty involved in completing the task well. If, as Roland-Manuel and Jankélévitch claim, composition was a game to Ravel, one in which the rules were entirely self-determined, pastiche can be seen as the perfect field on which this game could be played. In order to increase the difficulty of creating a successful pastiche, all Ravel must do is choose a model that is more dissimilar to his own style. By so doing, he effectively invites additional technical problems, which automatically raises the bar. Ultimately, however, the imitation of a single model, regardless of how foreign its style to Ravel’s, did not pose enough of a challenge for the composer. Perhaps in a desperate attempt to make the game more interesting, Ravel voluntarily creates an extra complication in À la manière de...Emmanuel Chabrier. Subtitled ‘Paraphrase sur un air de Gounod’, this double homage to Chabrier and Gounod represents Ravel’s interpretation of how Chabrier would have paraphrased Siebel’s aria ‘Faites-lui mes aveux’ from Gounod’s Faust.

Since balance, as we discussed above, is the key to writing a good pastiche, Ravel’s most difficult task in his self-imposed challenge is to make sure that, firstly, the piece is similar enough to Gounod’s aria to be a pastiche of it, and secondly, that it bears the distinctive features of Chabrier’s style. The piece begins much in the same way as Gounod’s aria until it slows considerably from the original tempo marking of ‘Allegretto’ to ‘Meno mosso. Rubato.’ Marked with an additional ‘avec charme’, Ravel’s pastiche ‘transforms Gounod’s simple air into an introspective piano work.”

Some scholars suggest that the more subdued character is an implicit reference to Chabrier’s ‘Mélancolie’ from the Pièces pittoresques, which begins with a similar figuration to Gounod’s introduction, with pulsating quavers in the right hand over a left-hand melody. Perhaps due to its likeness to Gounod’s air, Ravel chose this piano piece as the model of Chabrier’s style. While Ravel leaves most of Gounod’s melody and bass line

Example 2.3 Octave doublings of the melody in (a) Chabrier’s ‘Mélancolie,’ bars 3-4, and (b) Ravel’s À la manière de...Emmanuel Chabrier, bars 22-25.

untouched, he draws on Chabrier’s fondness for the richness of ninth harmonies and replaces the original sevenths with ninths. Moreover, as Roy Howat observes, the falling fifth interval (from the ninth to the fifth degree) in bars 13 and 25 of Ravel’s piece is one of Chabrier’s characteristic traits. Ravel’s most obvious reference to Chabrier’s musical language, however, is the various octave doublings of the melody, a feature repeatedly used in ‘Mélancolie’ (see example 2.3a). The first instance of this in the pastiche can be found in bars 22 to 24, in which the melody is written in the soprano and tenor parts (see example 2.3b). The melody is then doubled in the right hand (soprano-alto) in bars 30 to 34, followed by a final example of melodic doubling in bars 35 to 37 between the soprano and bass parts. By using the initial material presented in Gounod’s aria and re-writing it in a way that showcases Chabrier’s most distinctive features, Ravel

68 Kelly, “History and homage,” 12.
juggles two very individual styles of composition. The result, in effect, is a pastiche of a pastiche—a reflection of a reflection. For the composer who possessed such artistic consciousness, as well as consummate technical skill, the possibilities, it seems, were endless.
Chapter Three
Ravel’s originality

Perhaps paradoxically, the presence of a mask in both art and in real life seems almost always to arouse curiosity as to what lies hidden beneath it. Indeed, regardless of what the masked object actually is, the mere fact that it is intentionally obscured from view creates a mystery surrounding the object that often draws more attention to it than if it were left uncovered. This consequence is evident in the case of Ravel, in which the composer’s prominent use of musical masks has led to persistent efforts by scholars to apply old methods, and even to seek out new ones, in order to gain access to whatever is beyond these masks. The goal has been to unmask Ravel in order to gain a clearer perspective on the composer and his works.¹ It seems, however, that these repeated attempts have largely resulted in frustration, as scholars come to terms with the impossibility of the task: Deborah Mawer, for example, is left to admit that ‘in peeling off one mask there is invariably another beneath,’² while Steven Huebner seems to throw his hands up in exasperation as he pleads, effectively on behalf of all his colleagues, ‘Would the real Ravel please stand up?’³ Huebner’s rhetorical plea is particularly revealing of the assumptions behind the quest to unmask the composer. Firstly, it implies that Ravel’s musical masks represent something of a ‘false’ him. It suggests that Ravel is lost beneath the masks, and therefore that they hinder us from understanding the composer more fully; in other words, the real Ravel is there—we just need to find him. The more fundamental question, surely, is whether Ravel’s masks, as numerous as they might be, really obscure his musical identity. Furthermore, are these masks merely foreign accessories that the composer has superficially attached to his music? Or do they represent more than just theatrical props that the composer has implemented to portray a false identity, perhaps in order to conceal the true one? Indeed, do his compositions,

¹ The title of Peter Kaminsky’s 2011 volume Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music is evidence of the fact.
even those that are explicitly imitations of existing works or those which borrow heavily from other musical styles, bear no distinctive Ravelian hallmarks?

In seeking answers to these questions and by peeling away mask after mask in order to find his ‘true’ identity, however, scholars have assumed that there is in fact another Ravel to be discovered, one that is independent from the masks and more truly representative of the composer—a ‘real’ Ravel. Given that so much of Ravel’s music involves the use of masks, is it possible that he was so pre-occupied with imitating the styles of other composers and musical eras that a distinctive musical identity has failed to develop? Put simply, do these masks represent all that the composer has to offer? It is worth considering that perhaps the reason we cannot seem to find the ‘real’ Ravel is that there is none to be discovered.

On the most fundamental level, each of these questions is concerned with the broader issues surrounding Ravel’s originality. While originality generally refers to ‘those qualities of works or composers that make them distinct from forebears and contemporaries,’ a closer analysis of how originality is used and understood in different contexts reveals that it can have rather diverse implications. As Carlo Caballero observes, priorities have shifted somewhat from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, resulting in a redefining of the essence of originality from a ‘novelty of spirit’ to a ‘novelty of style’. This observation is particularly crucial to the understanding of originality in relation to Ravel, given that the historical context within which the composer lived and worked can be seen as a transitional stage in which both understandings of originality were equally prevalent. This chapter aims to answer those questions posed in the previous paragraph concerning Ravel’s musical identity by examining his works in light of these two competing ideologies. In the first part of the chapter, we begin to explore how originality in terms of material novelty can be found in Ravel’s music. Our focus in this section will be on Ravel’s novelty of style as we look at the external aspects of Ravel’s style, aspects that can be musically analysed, such as syntax and form. By returning to the pastiches in search of the composer’s originality, we will see that Ravel’s musical identity is not lost beneath his many masks and that on many occasions distinctive Ravelian traits can be

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4 Caballero, Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 76.
5 Caballero, Fauré, 85. For a detailed account of this process see Caballero, “Chapter Three: Originality, influences, and self-renewal” in Fauré, 76-85.
seen to come through. The second part of this chapter looks at the source of these external manifestations of originality—Ravel’s novelty of spirit—and involves a greater emphasis on the more elusive aspects of originality. While an examination of these aspects is perhaps counterintuitive, even counterproductive—the composer himself believed them to ‘defy classification and analysis’—we can at least return to Ravel’s theories on the artist’s national consciousness and individual consciousness with the goal of understanding what originality meant to the composer and how he sought to realise it in his music. The final part of the chapter re-evaluates the significance of masks in Ravel’s aesthetics, which will lead us to discover that perhaps Ravel’s musical identity is, as Deborah Mawer suggests, so bound up with his masks that, fundamentally, his musical identity collapses into the very masks he used.

I. Originality and style

A composer’s originality, as stated above, refers to those characteristics that help to distinguish his music from other music. On the surface, originality and style seem to be very similar concepts, since both point to the properties of an artistic work that associate it with a particular composer—those elements that make it ‘his.’ It is important to note, however, that style and originality are not necessarily interchangeable terms, and therefore some clarification on their difference in meaning, at least within the context of this chapter, is needed. Style is arguably something that every artist has; yet this point of fact does not evaluate the uniqueness of the style itself. Indeed, when we speak about the style of an era, we focus on those characteristics held in common by contemporary artists. Originality, on the other hand, is what makes an artist’s style distinguishable from another’s, and places greater emphasis on artistic independence. Originality is what makes a style not merely ‘his’ but more importantly, ‘not theirs.’ It is, as Caballero puts it, ‘a novelty of style.’

This understanding of originality is implied in a letter from Fauré to Hugues Imbert from August 1887, in which the composer comments on the challenges of being a ‘late-comer’ into the musical world, namely the difficulty of achieving originality in his generation:

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8 Caballero, Fauré, 85.
'The composers who really interest me the most are my peers, d'Indy, Chabrier, Chausson, Duparc, etc. [...] those, in short, who arrived at a moment when it is more difficult than ever to be an original composer.' 9 Seventeen years later, when writing to his wife in August 1904, Fauré reiterates these sentiments and openly expresses frustration at his disadvantaged position in light of all the artists that have come before him, especially his most immediate predecessors:

Yesterday I worked well again. But how hard it is to write good music that doesn’t owe anything to anyone and that might interest a few people. [...] It’s true that this rogue of a man [Wagner] seems to have used up all the formulas. 10

These remarks are particularly revealing of how Fauré understood the concept of originality, and are indicative of the view many of his contemporaries also had. First of all, the composer’s implied understanding of an original artwork as something that ‘doesn’t owe anything to anyone,’ while evidently overstated and unrealistic, clearly indicates the importance of overt stylistic individuality to the evaluation of musical achievement. This implies that original music must not have the appearance of another composer’s style—it cannot sound as if it has borrowed from pre-existing works. For Fauré, to ‘owe anything to anyone’ was to compromise one’s stylistic individuality and artistic significance.

This understanding of originality, which Harold Bloom dubs ‘the anxiety of influence,’ ultimately drove composers to strive towards achieving a novelty of style, 11 which emphasises the technical aspects of composition. This can be seen in Fauré’s allusion to the ‘formulas’ of writing music, which seems to refer to the objective and analysable aspects of composition such as genre, formal structure, harmony, and rhythm, all of which can be mechanically reproduced. It may seem strange at first that one would associate originality with the use, or even creation of, formulas at all; the reference to science seems almost incongruous with the notion of creative, artistic individuality. Indeed, when Paul Dukas mentions the formulas of composition in his article “La musique et l’originalité” from 1895 (which incidentally also refers to Wagner), the term carries specifically negative undertones. Dukas associates these formulas with mechanical reproduction rather than artistic creation: ‘The imitation of Wagner, limited

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9 See Caballero, Fauré, 78 (emphasis added).
10 See Caballero, Fauré, 97 and 87.
to the more or less servile reproduction of the exterior methods of his music [...] seems to me equivalent to the mere borrowing of a formula." Whilst acknowledging these negative connotations, it is nevertheless important not to dismiss these external characteristics of music altogether, especially in discussions of the originality of a specific composition. At the very least, it is evident that for composers like Fauré, these aspects affected perceptions of the originality of a work of art—they constituted the external manifestations of originality, if only that.

While this conception of originality, its prerequisites, and its evaluation was still held by artists and critics up until the middle of the twentieth century, a new, drastically different understanding of the concept was also beginning to emerge in artistic circles. New theories claimed that the influence of tradition, which was considered by some to be a hindrance to the development of originality, could actually facilitate the creation of original art. T. S. Eliot, in his aforementioned essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" from 1919 for example, argues that one should not assume that the engagement with tradition necessarily results in artistic dependence and unoriginality. On the contrary, he claims that often, the very opposite is true. Although Eliot’s paragraph was written some fifteen years after Fauré’s letter from 1904, it specifically targets the evidently still prevalent view that individuality depends on a separation from tradition:

[There is a] tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity.  

It is evident that for Eliot, originality did not require a rejection of tradition and its standards, but that the most original works involved the conscientious assimilation of the past with the present. Later on in his essay, Eliot clearly dismisses the

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12 Caballero, Fauré, 80.
understanding of originality as absolute artistic independence as a myth: ‘No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.’

Roland-Manuel conveys a similar idea in his 1925 article "Maurice Ravel ou l’esthétique de l’imposture," in which he argues that the best originality results from a dialogue between tradition and novelty. Like Eliot, Roland-Manuel flatly rejects the view that tradition poses a threat to the creation of original art and highlights the importance of the old in the making of the new:

It is in his attachment to the most clearly defined objects that [Ravel] perceives new connections between things. The more familiar they are, the more significant will the discovery be. The really original work of art will retain this association with the familiar.

We see from this paragraph on Ravel that originality can result from the ability to perceive and create new possibilities for pre-existing ideas. According to Roland-Manuel, originality is not only achieved by creating new materials to put in new configurations. Rather, one can be original by arranging old materials into new configurations as well as filling old configurations with new materials. Caballero expands on this argument in his list of questions concerning originality and its value. It is clear that originality can be a commixture of the old with the new and comes in various forms and manifestations:

Is it deemed better to be original by creating new forms and genres, or by reworking traditional ones? Is it better to explore a new syntax within familiar forms, or to discover new forms for a familiar syntax? Or is it most significant that all new aspects – form, syntax, and medium – seem to give rise to one another and proceed in parallel?

Given that the presence of old materials is not necessarily an indication of unoriginality, to dismiss works involving imitation without further investigation merely because of their ‘re-use’ of existing materials or forms is a careless thing to do. It is evident that this line of thinking is informed by the idea that artists borrow because they lack creativity—they have no ideas of their own, so therefore must resort to recycling the ideas of others. While Dukas is right to criticise the ‘reproduction of the exterior methods’ of

17 Caballero, Fauré, 77.
music—it is, indeed, the same as mindlessly replicating a formula—one can also imitate old styles and methods in a way that still leaves room for individuality.

Pastiche, which, as we saw in Chapter Two, is a widespread phenomenon in the music of Ravel, is one genre in which artists can borrow explicitly from the past whilst also achieving originality. To demonstrate this, we must firstly clarify the popular misconception that imitation and reproduction—both of which terms are used to describe pastiche—involves the same, or at least similar, processes. Richard Dyer, in his recent study on literary pastiche provides a useful model of distinction between the two. Reproduction, as Dyer defines it, involves a mindless, mechanical process in which copies of an original are made, a process that requires no conscious thought and can be carried out by lifeless machines. Imitation, on the other hand, involves a process of mediation wherein there is scope for the artist to exercise individuality. While imitations will inevitably bear the likeness of their models, so-called ‘imitations’ that are exactly the same as the original—that is, free from slight modifications to the original that occur as a natural result of the artist’s unique perception of it—should really be called reproductions. Therefore, while pastiche is rightly associated with imitation—the nature of the practice determines that all forms of pastiche involve a model to be followed—it cannot be confused with reproduction. As Dyer states, for a pastiche to be a pastiche, it must be like its model, but not indistinguishable from it. To conclude that pastiche lacks creativity and individuality, then, is unjustified.

In Chapter Two, we looked at those elements of Ravel’s pastiches that are explicitly borrowed from individual composers and works, as well as previous musical styles more generally. In the Menuet Antique, for example, we saw Ravel’s incorporation of ‘old’ material on a specific level: he models the formal and key structures of the minuet on Chabrier’s ‘Menuet pompeux,’ and references Chabrier’s arrangement of melody and accompaniment in his own minuet. In a more general sense, Ravel’s minuet also mimics the generic characteristics of the ancient style: its use of natural minor, sequential phrases, and imitation between the hands all evoke a style of the past. While it is evident that the Menuet Antique bears the likeness of Chabrier’s minuet, it is equally obvious that the two are also distinctly individual. One obvious example of innovation is Ravel’s

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Example 3.1  ‘Almost-octave’ sonorities in the opening of the *Menuet Antique*, bars 1–2.

Majestueusement $\frac{1}{8} = 76$

très marqué

synthesis of characteristics from the ancient style with Chabrier’s nineteenth-century piano writing. As we shall see, Ravel’s minuet, like many of his other pastiches, showcases the composer’s ability to integrate elements that are characteristic of his own style into pre-existing forms, to ‘put new wine into old skins’;\(^{20}\) In the words of Roland-Manuel, ‘[Ravel] went back to the old to discover the new.’\(^{21}\)

One such distinctive hallmark is the minor second crunch in the right hand cluster that opens the minuet (B, D, E♭, F♯). As Roy Howat’s study on the composer’s works for piano reveals, a large percentage—almost three quarters—of his piano pieces begin or end (or both) with distinctly audible minor second or major seventh clashes.\(^{22}\) This signature characteristic also occurs within other pastiches including the *Menuet sur le nom d’Haydn* and *À la manière de... Alexander Borodine*, both of which begin with a major seventh in the right hand. Returning to the *Menuet Antique*, we also find a substantial number of seventh and ninth (that is, compound second) intervals throughout the piece. In the first full bar alone, there are five sevenths and two ninths (see example 3.1). The dissonance created by these clashing intervals results in the ‘almost-octave’ sonorities\(^{23}\) Ravel was so fond of and used so frequently. The finale of the *Sonatine*, for example, ends with a page-long coda that repeatedly pits A♭ against A in an F♯ major context. The resulting tonal ambiguity is maintained up to the final bar, in which the A♭ is disguised by its enharmonic spelling, G♯, and is not stabilised until the very last chord. One final example can be found in *À la manière de... Emmanuel Chabrier*, whose closing bars present another instance of extended semitonal juxtapositions (see example 3.2).


Example 3.2 Extended semitonal juxtapositions in the final bars of À la manière...de Emmanuel Chabrier, bars 43-45.

As the pedal marking indicates, Ravel intends the F♭s and the Gs in the last three bars to reverberate together, concluding the piece with a characteristically dissonant twist. This example is particularly significant in that it demonstrates Ravel’s ability to assert his own musical personality in this pastiche of a pastiche, even though the double homage to Chabrier and Gounod already requires the composer to juggle two very individual styles of composition in addition to his own.

Harmonies coloured with the composer’s favoured minor seconds and majors sevenths are not the only Ravelian hallmark to be found in the pastiches. Ravel’s predilection for machine-inspired sounds and mechanisms is also evident in these works. As we saw in Chapter One, the mechanical world captivated Ravel from a very early age. From the composer’s own writings, we read of his fascination with powered-up machines and the distinctive sounds of their mechanisms. We also learned of his desire to incorporate these characteristics into his music, and explored the sounds of machinery in the Boléro as well as the composer’s allusion to a machine’s extra-human ability to maintain virtuosity without tiring in the Concerto for the Left Hand.

A number of movements from Le tombeau de Couperin similarly represent this endeavour. While the suite as a whole is a pastiche of eighteenth-century keyboard music and indicates a return to the clarity, counterpoint, and ornamentation of this past style, movements such as the ‘Forlane’ and ‘Toccata’ also allude to the automations of machines. (It is interesting to note that while Ravel looks back to the eighteenth century in Le tombeau, he also looks forward to the technological advancements of the modern world.) From the very first bar, the ‘Forlane’ is driven forward by pervasive dotted rhythms that evoke the lifeless, mechanical turning of cogwheels. Pianist Vlado Perlemuter, who studied this suite with the composer, recalls Ravel’s adam
instruction that all the repeats had to be observed.24 Given the already repetitive nature of the forlane’s formal structure (ABACADA), compounded with the rhythmic fixation of the dotted figuration that drives the movement forward, Ravel’s forlane evidently alludes to the untiring repetitiveness of his beloved mechanisms. Furthermore, Carolyn Abbate notes that as the movement nears its close, Ravel does not allow it to slow to a gradual halt.25 Rather, he specifically indicates that slowing down is not permitted and writes a cautionary sans ralentir above the final bars to counter any natural inclination to let the tempo slacken at the end of the piece. As Jankélévitch suggests, ‘any rallentando shows the over-human weakness of a being incapable of maintaining its original speed.’26 In place of a rallentando, which would appear to draw the forlane to a natural close, Ravel ends the movement with a mechanical failure. As the refrain appears for the final time, the dotted figure of the right hand enters on the wrong part of the bar. Ravel’s machine attempts to restart itself several times, but ultimately fails to re-adjust following the malfunction (see example 3.3). Unable to continue any further, the refrain breaks down completely, thus ending the movement.

The dazzling virtuosity of the suite’s ‘Toccata’ is similarly representative of Ravel’s fascination with machines. The indefatigable moto perpetuo style of the movement, which is driven by unremitting semiquavers and obsessive ostinato rhythms, seems to defy the human limitations in speed and endurance, and evokes images of automata. For Glenn Watkins, the reference is specific. Ravel’s ‘Toccata’ is a musical depiction of the latest developments of modern technology: flight.27 From the Un peu moins vif which

Example 3.3  The final bars of the ‘Forlane’ from Le Tombeau de Couperin, 156-162.

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Example 3.4  A comparison of the opening bars of (a) À la manière de...Alexander Borodine, bars 1-4 and (b) 'Waltz IV' of the Valses nobles et sentimentales, bars 1-4.

a)  

Allegro giusto

![Allegro giusto music notation]

b)

Assez animé  \( \begin{array}{c} \text{(5)} \end{array} \) \( \begin{array}{c} \text{p} \end{array} \)

![Assez animé music notation]

'seems to glide momentarily in a gradual descent' and 'hurts itself into a series of spirals and loops,' to the single fermata in the entire movement (found in bar 216) which represents 'a momentary but deliberate killing of the engine,' the 'Toccata' testifies to Ravel's desire to tell the story of the modern world through music. The 'victorious “hurrah”' at the end of the movement as the 'enemy aircraft plummet[s] to earth suggests a wartime context for Ravel's airplane depiction. The composer's aforementioned article, "Finding Tunes in Factories" from 1933 seems to suggest that the toccata can indeed be read in this way: 'Great flights showing the epic courage of our aviators, the perils of the earth, sea, and sky, could all be interpreted into music which would be a monument to our heroes of the air.'²⁸ Given the suite's specific association with the war, it is highly probable that Ravel's finale represents something of a tribute to those who served France as pilots in the First World War.

Some of Ravel's pastiches also present instances of self-quotation, which demonstrate the composer's ability to re-work old materials into new compositions. À la manière de...Alexander Borodine begins with an oscillating figure in the right hand, driven by a

²⁸ Maurice Ravel, "Finding Tunes in Factories," in A Ravel Reader, 399-400.
Example 3.5  The ‘Trio’ theme’s counterpoint to reprise of (a) the ‘Minuet’ in the Menuet Antique, bars 72-73 and (b) the ‘Minuet’ of Le Tombeau de Couperin, bars 73-76.

a)

b)

duple pulse within the work’s triple metre. A comparison of this opening with the main thematic material of the fourth waltz of the Valses nobles et sentimentales from two years earlier (which itself, though not a pastiche in the strictest sense, pays tribute to Schubert’s waltz collections), shows that the waltz’s hemiola rhythm and yodelling figure is reversed and re-used in the Borodin pastiche (see examples 3.4a and 3.4b). As the opening section of the pastiche is repeated an octave higher from bars 17 to 31, the left hand ostinato pattern is modified to resemble the waltz’s ascending left hand figuration more closely. A second instance of self-quotiation can be found in Ravel’s clever polyphonic treatment of the ‘Minuet’ and ‘Trio’ themes of the Menuet Antique. As examples 3.5a and b show, the delicate ‘Trio’ theme serves as a right-hand counterpoint to the ‘Minuet’ theme at the latter’s reprise. This same technique is reapplied to the corresponding themes of the ‘Minuet’ in the piano suite Le Tombeau de Couperin, which, as we saw earlier, pays homage to the French clavecinistes of the eighteenth century. In this second example, the parts are swapped between the hands and the ‘Trio’ theme continues on in the left hand while the ‘Minuet’ theme returns in the right.

These examples although evidently not exhaustive, indicate that despite openly adopting elements of the styles of other composers or musical eras, Ravel was still able to achieve
originality. Indeed, even in the pastiches, in which the imitation of predecessors and allusion to the past is expected, Ravel’s explicit borrowing did not hinder him for exploring new materials and exemplifying characteristics that are associated with his individual style.

II. The source of originality

So far, we have explored the meaning of originality in terms of material novelty. We have focussed our attention on the external aspects of a composition that distinguish it from the works of other composers. Using Ravel’s pastiches as a case study, we examined how artists could display originality when mixing old materials with new ones, by filling old forms with new syntax or using new configurations to re-arrange old ideas. To view originality in these objective terms alone, however, risks ascribing value to novelty for its own sake, and equates originality with an artist’s ‘capacity [...] for breaking with tradition and making his or her own rules.’ In other words, it elevates these objective aspects of music from being merely the external manifestations of originality to originality itself. While this view of originality represents one of the popular perceptions of originality during the time of Ravel—one that ultimately led to a re-defining of originality to mean artistic boldness or rebellion—there was also a second, competing ideology that was significantly less pre-occupied with the purely technical aspects of music. Setting aside the obvious complications that arise from trying to analyse originality independent from material newness, it is apparent that this alternative perspective was far more concerned with the essence of originality than its external manifestations. Indeed, although originality is often perceived in material novelty, its source originates far beneath the surface aspects of a work and cannot be as easily detected. As Caballero illustrates, true originality—the novelty of spirit that ‘gives life’ to the novelty of style—is often hidden from view:

A rooted plant, partly visible to the eye, offers us its palpable greenery, its novelty. But its leaves and flowers feed from roots hidden beneath the ground, a

31 Caballero, Fauré, 110. See also Meyer, Music, the Arts, and Ideas, 217-218.
32 Caballero, Fauré, 77.
whole organism born from an obscure, originating kernel. This hidden realm is originality.\textsuperscript{33}

This hidden source from which true originality springs is an artist’s uniqueness as a person. The emphasis of this understanding of originality is not on the ideas themselves—the formulas of composition, for example—but on the in-built and individual personality that each human being possesses.\textsuperscript{34}

To view originality on these terms takes the attention away from the originality of individual compositions and focuses it on the originality of the artist himself. On the most fundamental level, then, originality refers to the artist’s innate personality. Adorno conveys this association of originality with personality in his article on Ravel from 1930, in which he states that ‘no category could be more inappropriate to Ravel’s intentions than that of originality. He does not wish to express his personality, to begin from inwardness.’\textsuperscript{35} While we might not agree with this analysis of the composer, it is evident that for Adorno, an artist’s originality was related to his personality. (Notice that Adorno makes no reference to Ravel’s style.) This understanding of originality may seem at first to lessen its value; for, if, as Édouard Schuré states, ‘[e]very person possesses an original soul, an original mind, like no other,’\textsuperscript{36} then it would certainly seem strange to esteem it so highly—it is no longer a rarity to be prized. It is important to clarify, then, that for nineteenth-century writers such as Paul Dukas and Gustave Larroumet, originality \textit{per se} was not valuable in itself; rather, its value lay in an artist’s ability firstly to recognise it within himself, and secondly to express it in his art.\textsuperscript{37} To develop the sensitivity to do both these things, moreover, should be the artist’s top priority: ‘An artist’s first duty is to be himself, in other words to realize that bit or originality nature dealt out to him.’\textsuperscript{38} Larroumet’s statement is particularly helpful for two reasons. First of all, by associating originality with ‘being oneself,’ Larroumet confirms our earlier observations that to be original is not necessarily synonymous with being novel; rather, it simply means being you. He also clarifies, however, that although originality is ‘a fact of nature,’ the artist is responsible for how it is made manifest through his art. Like a latent force waiting to be

\textsuperscript{33} Caballero, \textit{Fauré}, 57.
\textsuperscript{34} Caballero, \textit{Fauré}, 81.
\textsuperscript{36} Édouard Schuré, Preface to \textit{Profils de musiciens} by Hugues Imbert (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher et Librairie Sagot, 1888), xv. Trans. in Caballero, 85.
\textsuperscript{37} See Caballero, \textit{Fauré}, 81-82.
\textsuperscript{38} See Caballero, \textit{Fauré}, 82.
disclosed, originality requires patience and conscious effort on the part of the artist to be realised in artistic terms.\textsuperscript{39} Therefore, while originality is natural, its expression is not. In the words of Edgar Allan Poe, '[t]he fact is, originality [...] is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition. In general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought.'\textsuperscript{40}

This emphasis on the relationship between originality and responsibility corresponds closely to Ravel's declaration that achieving good craftsmanship is the most important duty of the artist, one that is a prerequisite for the expression of the self. He states: 'Sincerity is of no value unless one's conscience helps to make it apparent. This conscience compels us to turn ourselves into good craftsmen. My objective, therefore, is technical perfection.'\textsuperscript{41} While Ravel uses the words 'sincerity' and 'conscience' in place of 'originality' and 'responsibility' respectively, we can assume that they refer to similar concepts in his theory. As we saw at the end of Chapter One, simply 'being you,' which the composer associates with spontaneity in self-expression, does not represent a valid indicator of good art. On the contrary, Ravel argues that technical soundness is required in order for an artist's individuality to be realised, to be made apparent. Spontaneity plays no part in this process.

Compared to the boldness with which he spoke out against sincerity, Ravel seems significantly less willing to discuss his theories on the more personal aspects of composition—those aspects to do with a composer's sense of self. Even on the two occasions on which Ravel does disclose his views on the artist's inner source of originality, he does so with deliberate vagueness. The first of these is found in Ravel's one and only public lecture, given at the Rice Institute in Houston on 7 April 1928, in which the composer was presumably asked to address contemporary developments in the music scene and give his audience insight into the interpretation of his own music. He begins by offering something of a disclaimer which anticipates Jankélévitch's later theories of the ineffability of music:

\begin{quote}
It is of course impossible to offer any adequate survey of contemporary music or even of one of its phases within the space of a single lecture; moreover, I hasten to admit that there is only one thing which I should find still more difficult, and that would be to explain my own music or comment upon it; indeed, were I in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{39} Caballero, Fauré, 82.
\textsuperscript{40} Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," \textit{Graham's Magazine} 28, no. 4 (1846): 166.
\textsuperscript{41} Maurice Ravel, "Some Reflections on Music," in \textit{A Ravel Reader}, 38.
position fully to explain my music, I should then be inclined to doubt its worth and value.\textsuperscript{42}

Ravel goes on to say that although many have tried to explain music by measuring its sounds, analysing its structures, and understanding its ‘laws,’ all such attempts are futile in that they ‘are dealing only with the obvious and superficial part of the work of art without ever reaching those infinitely minute roots of the artist's sensitiveness and personal reaction’—those aspects that give art its worth and value.\textsuperscript{43} While these comments seem to contradict his Poe-derived belief that the stages of composition should be all explicable, it is apparent that here, Ravel is not discussing the process of composition, but the essence of the music itself. The ‘infinitely minute roots’ of which Ravel speaks seem to refer to the composer’s inner source of originality (notice how it pre-empts Caballero's association of material newness with the foliage of a plant and originality with its roots). Ravel then identifies two sources of an artist's originality: his national consciousness and individual consciousness. Ravel is cautious not to define these roots too narrowly, saying only that the ‘territory’ of the former is ‘rather extensive’ and that the latter ‘seems to be the product of an egocentric process.’ He highlights the fact that ‘both defy classification and analysis,’ which explains his preference for speaking of them only in general terms. Further on in his lecture, Ravel firmly discourages his audience from attempting to evaluate these roots at all, even according to their external manifestations, and reiterates the superficiality of anything that can be understood purely through analysis:

\begin{quote}
I insist that no stated law can be given whereby to judge the degree of perfection attained in this process on the part of the individual, inasmuch as what we are attempting to discover is only sensed and as yet unknown. So were I able to explain and demonstrate the value of my own works, it would then prove, at least from my personal point of view, that they are constructed altogether of obvious, superficial, tangible elements within easy reach of formal analysis, and, therefore, that these works of mine are not perfect works of art. [...] Indeed, from this point of view, any attempt to arrive at a definite judgment with respect to a work of art seems to me to be folly.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

We can see from Ravel’s paragraph, that the originality of a composer is not something that can be assessed by analysing the external characteristics of a piece of music. (The composer's emphasis on the importance of these ‘elusive roots’ is such that he implies

\textsuperscript{42} Ravel, “Contemporary Music,” 40.
\textsuperscript{43} Ravel, “Contemporary Music,” 41.
\textsuperscript{44} Ravel, “Contemporary Music,” 42.
that any work that can be fully understood or explained by analysis is not a ‘perfect work of art.’ Towards the end of the lecture, Ravel reiterates this point: ‘Real art, I repeat, is not to be recognized by definitions, or revealed by analysis: we sense its manifestations and we feel its presence: it is apprehended in no other way.’ Moreover, Ravel argues that the realisation of one’s personality has little to do with one’s rebellion against tradition, and warns against confusing individuality with eccentricity.

According to the composer, such external stylistic independence is almost irrelevant: ‘the manifestation of these two types of consciousness in music may break or satisfy all the academic rules, but such circumstance is of insignificant importance.’

It is apparent that material newness in and of itself was of little value to the composer. While he acknowledges that upon hearing a new composition for the first time, one is easily pre-occupied with the external aspects of a work, he dismisses even the most innovative of these elements as ‘unimportant peculiarities,’ the ‘garb concealing or adorning their emotional sensitiveness.’ Despite the attractiveness of material novelty, Ravel nevertheless regards it as ‘only the means and not the end in itself; the ‘medium of expression’ through which the real inner content of a work can be carried:

The listener is impressed by some unimportant peculiarity in the medium of expression, and yet the idiom of expression, even if considered in its completeness, is only the means and not the end in itself, and often it is not until years after, when the means of expression have finally surrendered all their secrets, that the real inner emotion of the music becomes apparent to the listener.

Here, Ravel explicitly associates the ‘inner content’ of a composition—the component which is truly valuable—with the ‘inner emotion of the music.’ This is particularly significant in light of his theories concerning the importance of good craftsmanship and technical perfection examined in previous chapters. It is clear that while Ravel insisted upon the development of one’s technical skill, ultimately, the attainment of technical perfection was to enable the effective expression of one’s inner self.

As Ravel explains in an interview with Olin Downes published on 26 February 1928, in which the composer criticises American composers for failing to realise themselves in

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terms of their innate national identity, the expression of an artist's personality has much to do with his national consciousness:

But in the field of composition I have found my earlier impressions of American music confirmed. I think you have too little realization of yourselves and that you still look too far away over the water. An artist should be international in his judgments and esthetic appreciations and incorrigibly national when it comes to the province of art. I think you know that I greatly admire and value—more, I think than many American composers—American jazz. I have used jazz idioms in my last violin and piano sonata, but from what point of view? That, of course, of a Frenchman. Fascinated as I am by this idiom, I cannot possibly feel it as I would if I were an American [...] my musical thinking is entirely national—unmistakably so, I fancy, to the most casual listener.⁴⁹

Ravel’s association of an artist’s originality with his national consciousness, or identity, is made explicit in this paragraph. He implies that for an artist to realise himself through his art, he must remain ‘incorrigibly national,’ and should not overlook, nor neglect his distinctive national heritage. Ravel’s attitude towards his own art certainly reflects this belief; this can be seen in his declaration from May 1924 to André Révész that '[u]nlike politics, in art I’m a nationalist. I know that I am above all a French composer.'⁵⁰ And yet, this conviction did not in any way discourage the composer from experimenting with materials from foreign musical cultures. On the contrary, Ravel openly discusses his fascination with foreign idioms and, citing American jazz vernacular as an example, acknowledges his use of them in his own compositions. Here we are faced with something of a disjunction between Ravel’s theory and his practice. Indeed, his frequent adoption of distinctly American jazz idioms seems to clash with his repeated claims that his music was ‘unequivocally French.’⁵¹ Furthermore, his candid acknowledgement of the incorporation of jazz into his own music seems to indicate that this apparent contradiction did not concern the composer. From the above paragraph, we can see that in the composer’s mind the musical idioms of a composition, which can be sourced from any musical culture, and an artist’s musical thinking, which must remain ‘entirely national,’ were two distinct entities. By distinguishing between the two, Ravel claims that while he incorporates jazz idioms into his compositional practice, he does so from the point of view of a Frenchman, and not an American. Ravel implies, therefore, that an artist can make use of materials that are obviously not a part of his inherited national

identity and still express his innate self with these foreign materials. He claims, moreover, that it is not possible for an artist to use those materials in any other way, and that any attempt to express oneself otherwise would bring undesirable results.\textsuperscript{52} It is evident that for the composer, the expression of self—the artist's originality—was something that was intricately bound up with his inner roots, and therefore independent from whatever materials he chose to employ.

To illustrate his theory on national consciousness, Ravel compares the elements of jazz to mere 'materials of construction,' adding that 'the work of art appears only on mature conception where no detail has been left to chance.'\textsuperscript{53} Here, jazz idioms are likened to raw building materials, which must be consciously manipulated and 'stylised' before they can be incorporated into a piece of music. Just as the basic building materials used in the construction of the world's most impressive structures might differ little from those used for the most commonplace ones, Ravel argues that the defining characteristics of an artwork result not from the initial material, but from the composer's unique manipulation of such materials. This, in turn, is largely influenced by the composer's in-built national consciousness. So while the raw materials Ravel appropriates in some of his jazz-inspired works are of American—and therefore, foreign—origin, they can be built up in a way that is recognisably Ravelian, even recognisably French. He claims that if a number of composers from different national backgrounds were to use the same 'blues' as their 'creative point[s] of departure,' the results would bear the national characteristics of each composer that would ultimately override the 'unique nationality of their initial material.'\textsuperscript{54} Without denying the distinctly American origin of jazz idioms, Ravel nevertheless argues that 'the individualities of [the] composers are stronger than the material appropriated.' He hypothesises, moreover, that the end results would be 'as numerous as the composers themselves.'

In her study of the composer's jazz theory, Deborah Mawer suggests that jazz can also be seen as a language, one that sounds noticeably different when spoken by a foreigner than when spoken by a native. She describes the composer's jazz as a 'translation' of an American jazz into his own vernacular, 'creating a French-accented and personalized

\textsuperscript{52} Ravel, "Contemporary Music," 44.
\textsuperscript{53} Ravel, "Contemporary Music," 46.
\textsuperscript{54} Ravel, "Contemporary Music," 46.
practice." Just as the language one learns to speak in addition to his mother tongue does not necessarily have anything to do with his nationality, the national identity of a composer is not necessarily dependent on the musical language he chooses to use. To draw from American jazz vernacular as a Frenchman, was a perfectly acceptable thing for Ravel to do, even in light of his theory.

Ravel is much less detailed in his explanation of an artist's individual consciousness. It seems that aside from the lecture at the Rice Institute, the composer remained completely tight-lipped in his writings and interviews in regards to this particular 'elusive root.' The fact that he distinguishes between an artist's national and individual consciousness, however, is rather significant. According to Ravel's theory, national consciousness manifests itself naturally—it is an inherited consciousness—while individual consciousness must be deliberately sought and developed. Moreover, the relationship between the two sources of originality is such that the former influences the development of the latter. This distinction between the two separate, albeit interrelated, components of originality and the order in which they developed mirrors something of the relationship between nature and nurture; the former of which corresponds to Ravel's 'national consciousness' and the latter of which refers to 'individual consciousness.' Rather than assume that one's originality is pre-determined at birth, as it seems writers such as Larroumet have, Ravel observes that even what is considered to be innate can evolve and develop as one experiences new things. As Steven Pinker states, in his 2004 article "Why nature and nurture won't go away," 'what is innate is not a set of rigid instructions for behavior but rather programs that take in information from the senses and give rise to new thoughts and actions.' Furthermore, Pinker asserts that 'all behavior is the product of an inextricable interaction between heredity and environment during development, so the answer to all nature-nurture questions is "some of each."' National consciousness, then, can be seen as the in-born 'program' with which an artist naturally perceives the musical elements around him. Ravel's assertion that 'I cannot possibly feel [American jazz] as I would if I were an American' supports this association. The way in which this initial perception is

manipulated to form 'new thoughts and actions,' however, results in the artist's individual consciousness. Ultimately, therefore, originality involves a process of active assimilation as the artist comes in contact with new influences and ideas, and is required to choose between and manipulate them.

III. The ‘real’ Ravel

Let us now return to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter concerning the ‘real’ Ravel. Up to this point, we have viewed Ravel's masks as compositional tools that allowed him to borrow freely from various musical cultures as well as the styles of previous composers. In relation to Ravel's theory on national consciousness examined earlier, the metaphor of masks can help to resolve the seeming contradiction between the composer's claimed national identity and his overtly internationally sourced musical language. It is perhaps important before we resume the search for the ‘real’ Ravel, however, to ask whether removing all of the composer's masks would lead us to find a ‘real’ Ravel hidden beneath—one that is untouched and unchanged by his frequent wearing of these masks. In light of our recent conclusions concerning originality and its evolution, it would seem simplistic to speak of a ‘real’ Ravel that is completely distinct from the styles and influences around him. Indeed, given that the development of an artist's originality is a lifelong process that involves the continual assimilation of foreign elements, we can assume that at some point, these so-called ‘external’ elements will cease to be external, as they eventually become part of the composer's style. Perhaps, then, Ravel's masks can be seen as more than just superficial ‘extras,’ elements that the composer used in conjunction with his own style. It is possible that over time, these masks have become an essential part of the true representation of the composer, such that if we were to remove them, the Ravel we would discover would be incomplete, or even non-existent.

The composition that perhaps best illustrates this perspective on Ravel and his masks is the Piano Concerto in G Major, in which the aspects of the composer's developed style and the elements of his masks can be seen to be fused together. Work on the concerto began in 1929, the year following the composer's return from his North American tour. While the composer's profound admiration for jazz can be seen in works that predate his time abroad (the 'Blues' second movement of the Sonata for violin and piano,
completed in 1927, is an example), it is evident that Ravel's encounter with jazz on its home soil did much to fuel his enthusiasm for it. It is no surprise, then, that many of the compositions completed shortly after his return make explicit reference to jazz idioms. Both piano concertos, for instance, borrow heavily from American jazz vernacular. The Concerto in G Major, in particular, showcases Ravel's adoption of jazz-influenced instrumentation as well as the incorporation of 'blue' notes and harmonies, foxtrot rhythms, and other signature jazz gestures. In many instances, however, Ravel's adoption of jazz elements coincides with the expression of his inherited national consciousness and individual style. The composer's assimilation of foreign elements into his own style in the concerto is such that in many cases, it is almost impossible to distinguish between 'him' and 'his masks.'

One example of Ravel’s masterful amalgamation of a number of different musical styles can be found at the very opening of the concerto. Earlier in the chapter we identified 'almost-octave' sonorities as one of Ravel's distinctive hallmarks. This same signature ingredient signals the opening of this work, with the pianist launching into the festive first movement off a semitonal clash between the hands. As example 3.6 shows, the bitonal bite of the next fifteen bars presents an instance of extended semitonal juxtapositions as C#s are repeatedly pitted against Ds, Ds against D#s, and A#s against Bs. The piccolo enters over the top of the pianist's scintillating triplets with a melody that bears the likeness of a Basque folk tune. Given that Ravel often spoke of his inherited connection with Spain, and even credits his earliest encounters with music to the folk melodies sung to him by his Basque mother, the composer's allusion to this folk heritage represents something of a personal reference. But Ravel's assimilation of styles does not stop here. At Fig. 2, this Basque-like melody is reiterated on the trumpet, with the

Example 3.6  The bitonal opening of the Piano Concerto in G Major, bars 1-3.
support of jazz-inspired instrumentation, namely the trombone, horns, percussion, and
pizzicato strings, thus combining exotic Spanish idioms with distinctly American jazz
sonorities.\textsuperscript{58}

The second subject of the first movement similarly demonstrates Ravel’s ability to
create new sounds by combining the various styles of music. Here, the distinctly exotic
flavour of the descending triplet figure of the right hand and the emotive melody which
is based on the Phrygian collection on F\textsubscript{b}, both make reference to Ravel’s Basque
heritage. As Roland-Manuel observes in his survey of the composer’s melodic style,
Ravel’s fondness for the Phrygian mode derives from its association with Spanish
provincial songs, which, as mentioned earlier, were of personal significance to the
composer. As example 3.7 shows, however, Ravel also juxtaposes elements of jazz onto
this Spanish-influenced melody: the A\textsubscript{as} of the accompaniment are pitted against the A-
naturals of the right-hand melody, and make reference to the major/minor third
inflections characteristic of the ‘blues’ scale.\textsuperscript{59} It is at this point that we realise that while
the juxtaposing of major and minor third degrees may appear to be an example of
Ravel’s incorporation of the ‘blues’ scale, the resulting semitones and major seventh
intervals are in fact instances of Ravel’s hallmark almost-octave sonorities, which
predate his discovery of jazz. Also, as Michael Russ notes, Ravel’s incorporation of the
‘blues’ scale can equally be seen as ‘the result of phrygian, Andalusian, and dorian
alternations to second, third and sixth degrees of the natural minor, already common in
Ravel,’ indicating that ‘many of the harmonic preoccupations which we call ‘jazzy’ follow
on from Ravel’s own innovations.’\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Example 3.7}  Solo piano entry in the Piano Concerto in G Major, I, Fig. 4\textsuperscript{1-5}.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example37.png}
\caption{Solo piano entry in the Piano Concerto in G Major, I, Fig. 4\textsuperscript{1-5}.}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{58} Mawer, “Crossing borders II,” 126.
\item\textsuperscript{59} Mawer, “Crossing borders II,” 130.
\item\textsuperscript{60} Michael Russ, “Ravel and the orchestra,” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Ravel}, ed. Deborah Mawer
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
By the end of the pianist's solo episode (Fig. 4+7), the Phrygian mode of the melody is completely transformed into the chromatic variant of the major 'Blues' scale: F₅, G₅, A, A₅, B, C₅, D₅, E, E₅, F₅. From here, jazz elements seem to dominate, as melodic fragments that are similarly based on the chromatic 'blues' collection enter on the E₅ clarinet and trombone at Fig. 5, whilst the syncopated quaver ostinato of the foxtrot is introduced on E₅ clarinet, muted trombone, piano, and percussion— instruments typically found playing together in a jazz ensemble.⁵¹ Even in the finer details, such as the rising chromatic semiquaver figure of the right hand that signals the pianist's resumption of centre-stage (Fig. 5+3), Ravel evidently mimics the hallmark gestures of jazz practice.

The solo piano entry at Fig. 7 presents an implicit reference to a specific section in George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue (Fig. 5+8). Given Ravel's predilection for incorporating specific references to the music of other composers, even in works that are not explicitly pastiches of their works, it is almost expected that this concerto, which presents an amalgamation of different styles, would include at least one such reference. Here, Ravel's tonic and dominant drone imitates the open fifths in Gershwin's bass, while the rising appoggiaturas of Ravel's right hand closely resemble Gershwin's melody (see examples 3.8a and 3.8b). Likewise, as example 3.6b shows, the foxtrot rhythms that rudely interrupt Ravel's melody recall Gershwin's accented interjections. Furthermore, if we fast-forward to Fig. 10 of Ravel's first movement, it is evident that the moto perpetuo piano writing of the development section makes reference to the virtuosic semiquaver figuration, which is similarly split between the hands, that takes off in Gershwin's rhapsody (see examples 3.8c and 3.8d). Here, Ravel's 'toccata' reminds us of the composer's fascination with machines: the unrelenting drive of rapid quavers (which proceed at 116 minims per minute) alludes to the indefatigability of their mechanisms, while its increasingly virtuosic leaps seem to test the limits of the pianist's spatial dexterity as Ravel sends his soloist up and down the keyboard.

The influence of American jazz can be seen in Ravel's treatment of the movement's formal structure. This is particularly evident at Fig. 22, which marks the beginning of the harp cadenza. Here, the composer's unusual inclusion of two additional cadenzas before the cadenza proper on piano (the second is orchestrated for the woodwind section),

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⁵¹ Mawer, "Crossing borders II," 126.
imitates the multiple solo 'breaks' commonly associated with the performance of jazz. Although each of these quasi-cadenzas is fully written out, both are marked 'a piacere' ('at your pleasure') which indicates Ravel's reference to the improvisatory nature of his jazz model.

As we can clearly see, even the first movement alone testifies to the composer's exceptional capacity to create 'new wholes' by bringing together materials from seemingly unrelated idioms and making them a part of his own musical language. However, further examples can be drawn from the remainder of the concerto, the second movement of which particularly demonstrates Ravel's expression of his innate national consciousness through the 'translation' of foreign jazz elements. Not only does the concerto bear distinctly Ravelian hallmarks, it is also, in some ways, characteristically French, which, according to his public address at the Rice Institute, implies a certain reservation in its expression. In an interview for the Neue Freie Presse, published on 3 February 1932, Ravel describes the characteristic restraint of the French:

The Frenchman never opens up without constraint [...] he is communicative, but never wears his heart upon his sleeve. He never lets a stranger approach him too closely, he doesn't want to be understood at any cost, and he never bites off more than he can chew. [...] Still, surely he is always clear and precise, like the clear landscape of 'la douce France,' with its perpetually clear blue sky.

Later in his lecture, Ravel comments on Debussy's music, and describes his 'refined precision of design' as 'characteristically French.' As we saw in Chapter Two, this association of French music with reserve, refinement and precision is in keeping with the widespread contemporary understanding that these classical qualities were an inherent part of the French musical language.

The expression of these very qualities can be seen in the 'Adagio assai' second movement of the concerto, whose inspiration was not jazz, as the composer himself reveals, but Mozart's Piano Concerto in C minor (K491). In a general sense, Ravel sought to pay homage to the 'Scholasticism' of the classical period by 'writ[ing] as well as

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62 Mawer, "Crossing borders II," 126.
63 Kelly, "Re-presenting Ravel," 46.
64 Ravel, "Contemporary Music," 44.
Example 3.8  A comparison of the piano writing in (a) Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G Major, I, Fig. 71-4 and (b) Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, Fig 5*8-11, and (c) the concerto’s Fig. 71-4 and (d) the *Rhapsody’s* Fig. 5*17.

a)

b)


c)

d)

I could.’68 His pursuit of melodic perfection in the exquisite melody that opens the movement is aptly captured by the composer in a remark to pianist and dedicatee of the concerto, Marguerite Long: ‘That flowing phrase! How I worked over it bar by bar! It

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nearly killed me!' The seemingly simple homophonic fashion with which the solo piano begins the second movement is also suggestive of transparent classical textures. On a more specific level, Ravel’s melody makes reference to Mozart’s Quintet for Clarinet and Strings, which Ravel describes in an interview from 1932, ‘the most beautiful piece [Mozart] wrote.’ Russ observes that Ravel’s melody resembles Mozart ‘more in spirit than in thematic shapes’; the manner in which its opening phrase expands into a thirty-four bar melody, of which no two bars are the same, nevertheless recalls the ‘remarkable outpouring of some twenty bars [in which] no bar is repeated exactly’ of the ‘Larghetto’ of Mozart’s Quintet. Moreover, the throbbing quavers over which Ravel’s melody floats resembles those of the ‘Larghetto’ of Mozart’s Quintet.

Yet, this movement is not without its jazz-inspired elements. Upon looking at the opening more closely, it becomes apparent that beneath the melody of the right hand, Ravel’s pulsating quavers juxtapose a waltzing bass in 3/8 against the 3/4 metre of the melody. The resulting syncopation, which is maintained right up to the penultimate bar of the movement, gently drives the melodic content forward. Floating weightlessly above the left-hand ostinato, the melody also consists of syncopated rhythms. Like those of the left hand, however, these too are unaccented. These references to jazz, while subtle, demonstrate Ravel’s manipulation of elements from a foreign vernacular to portray French qualities. Though evidently jazz-inspired, these syncopations are ‘stylized’ and ‘refined’—in the composer’s words, ‘more French than American in character.’

The above analysis clearly demonstrates that Ravel’s developed musical language was formed through an assimilation of elements from an eclectic range of musical cultures. In particular, the skillful blending of idioms from a diverse range of musical styles of the first movement, as well as the subtle translation of jazz elements into a distinctly French vernacular in the second movement testify to the composer’s capacity to absorb a wide range of materials and make them his own. It is true, as we evidently saw in the piano concerto, that in his compositions, Ravel alludes to elements that are normally associated with other composers, cultural contexts, and historical periods. Yet, in all of

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69 See Russ, “Ravel and the orchestra,” 133.
70 Unsigned interview, “Ten Opinions of Mr. Ravel on Compositions and Composers,” in *A Ravel Reader*, 494.
71 Russ, “Ravel and the orchestra,” 133.
72 Maurice Ravel, “Take Jazz Seriously!” in *A Ravel Reader*, 390.
this Ravel did not fail to develop his individual style, neither did he compromise his national consciousness. Indeed, it is through the perception of these foreign idioms through his inherited national consciousness and the assimilation of these styles throughout the evolution of his artistic identity, that Ravel has developed a style that is uniquely his own. To attempt removing these so-called ‘masks,’ then, would essentially require taking away significant parts of his musical identity. In light of all this, we have every reason to agree with the composer as he confidently declares, ‘I venture to say that nevertheless it is French music, Ravel’s music, that I have written.’

Conclusion

Our inherited image of Ravel is one of an elusive figure whose refined exterior thwarts all attempts to access the artist hidden beneath. For decades, scholars have tried using various methods to remove the masks that seem to obscure him from view in order to gain further insight not only into his music, but also into his biography. Underpinning these persistent efforts is the unstated presupposition that there is more to Ravel than his masks, a Ravel that exists independently from them. This assumption implies that certain aspects of his musical language, while prevalent in his music, are fundamentally ‘superficial’ and do not accurately represent the composer’s ‘true’ musical identity. While the mystery surrounding Ravel and his legacy has aroused the curiosity of many scholars and resulted in an expansion in research on the composer’s musical language, it has perhaps also hindered us from seeing the significance of these ‘masks’ and their importance in the formation of the composer's artistic identity. Indeed, in the zealous search for the ‘real’ Ravel, it appears that we have inadvertently overlooked the very characteristics that help to define him.

Central to the discussions of the composer that pit the ‘real’ him against his masks is the association of identity with naturalness, and, by implication, the association of masks with what is artificial. One of the preliminary aims of this thesis, then, has been to clarify how art, which is necessarily man-made and therefore artificial according to the typical, non-artistic standards of evaluation, can be considered natural. To this end, we returned to nineteenth-century assessments of naturalness in art and re-defined the terms ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ to reflect the Romantic understanding of these qualities. We found that naturalness in art referred, in fact, to the naturalness of self-expression through art, which implied an association of artificiality with artworks that seem inexpressive and impersonal, or worse, contrived and mechanical. Based on these Romantic constructions of artistic ‘naturalness’ and ‘artificiality,’ we saw how Ravel’s compositions might have been considered specifically artificial. An investigation into the composer’s intentions for the Boléro, for example, demonstrated the influence of machines—the calculated and mechanical nature of their movements in particular—on Ravel’s compositional work ethic. Moreover, his pre-occupation with the technical
aspects of composition in this piece seemed to preclude the expression of any emotion at all. Indeed, Ravel's methodical, almost academic, approach to composition appeared to confirm that the expression of emotion was of little relevance to the composer. According to Ravel's explanation of the *Boléro*, the piece represents a compositional experiment which he had devised and proceeded methodically to execute without, it seems, the least bit of concern for emotional expression.

Many of Ravel's statements on sincerity have further contributed to his reputation for artificiality and fuelled speculation on his unnaturalness both as a man and as an artist. The seeming inconsistencies in Ravel's comments on sincerity warranted a close examination of what it meant to the composer and, consequently, why he was so opposed to it. By returning each of his recorded remarks on the issue to its proper context, we traced the development of Ravel's ideas on sincerity and the reasons why he stood so firmly against it. For Ravel, the problem with sincerity lay in its negation of choice. Sincerity was synonymous with spontaneity and was, according to Ravel's understanding, the mark of one who lacked the awareness and ability to override his natural instincts. The sincere artist, then, is one who writes whatever comes to mind, regardless of the quality of the ideas. Thus, Ravel equated the sincerity of an artist with his lack of artistic consciousness, and concluded that sincerity and art cannot co-exist. Our analysis of his statements on sincerity showed that Ravel's rejection of it was not based on a preference for artificiality as such. Neither was it motivated by a rejection of transparent self-expression. Rather, it was the result of his idiosyncratic association of sincerity with intellectual primitiveness. The image of Ravel as one who favoured unnaturalness of expression in art is therefore a misconstrued one, informed by a misinterpretation of the composer's emphasis on the importance of an artist's consciousness.

Ravel’s ideas on sincerity were drawn explicitly from Edgar Allan Poe’s theories on the creative process as laid out in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition.” Ravel’s insistence upon the importance of conscious choice in composition as well as his belief in a thoroughly methodical approach towards the creation of art both testify to Poe’s influence on the formation of Ravel’s views. And yet, the composer also developed ideas that were specifically his own. Of particular significance is the composer’s association of nature with imperfection, and art with correcting those imperfections. Not only did he
view the adherence to natural instincts as a threat to the creation of art, he also saw art as a means of correcting these natural impulses. His understanding that the reflection (art) should improve on the unconscious (nature) closely mirrors Freud's theory of sublimation, which emphasises the need to actively transform natural instincts that might be inappropriate, into constructive, pre-meditated actions. According to this theory, the ability to act against instinct is seen as a sign of maturity, and not as a symptom of artificiality. In the same way, Ravel saw the ability to make conscious artistic choices, which might go against ‘natural’ artistic instincts, as the mark of a good artist. Furthermore, he developed the conviction that an artist's chief responsibility was to strive continually for complete technical control in order to surpass the limitations of nature and thus perfect it. While the resulting obsession with technical perfection has been interpreted as an indication of the composer's artificiality, it is evident that even in light of this pursuit, Ravel did not dismiss the expressive potential of music. He carefully distinguished between the responsibility of the artist (the perfecting of his craft) and the effects of art (its potential for self-expression), and saw the former as a means of achieving the latter. Unlike those who assumed that honest self-expression was something that occurred naturally and spontaneously, Ravel observed that the effective expression of emotion required both conscious thought and sound technical skill. Therefore, while the perfecting of one's craft was to be the aim of every responsible artist, Ravel acknowledged that its attainment was not an end in itself. Rather, he saw complete technical control as the means to convey one's inner experience, and ultimately a prerequisite for true self-expression.

These clarifications of Ravel's compositional aesthetics indicated that the widespread perceptions of the composer's maskedness needed to be revised. Such a revision necessitated a return to the origins of the discourse on masks in the literature. This exposed some of the presuppositions on which early writers such as Michael Calvocoressi, Alexis Roland-Manuel, and Vladimir Jankélévitch based their interpretations of the composer. Each of these writers sought to explain the apparent emotionlessness in Ravel's music by looking to aspects of his nature; Roland-Manuel's speculations led him to conclude that the composer lacked a functional emotive faculty and was forced to resort to imposture, while Calvocoressi and Jankélévitch constructed an image of a timid and scared Ravel, one who feigned indifference as a means of self-defence. While an investigation into the underlying assumptions of these theories
exposed certain aspects of the early discourse on masks and Ravel’s personality to be misleading and restrictive, a re-evaluation of the relevance of masks in the study of the music itself demonstrated their usefulness in understanding the composer’s overt eclecticism. Indeed, despite the problems that have resulted from the association of Ravel’s nature with these instruments of concealment, the metaphor of masks is nevertheless a helpful one in capturing Ravel’s predilection for imitating a range of different styles. Through a case study of the composer’s pastiches, which arguably best demonstrate his incorporation of these masks, we analysed Ravel’s widespread allusion to a range of different styles as an engagement with various forms of musical Otherness. By writing pastiche, Ravel was able not only to don the mask of past composers, or borrow idioms from exotic musical cultures, but also to travel back in time to revisit the styles of previous musical eras. The pastiches allowed Ravel to distance himself stylistically, emotionally, and even historically; ultimately, however, they provided a platform on which Ravel could exercise his fully conscious artistic mind and supreme technical skill. As we saw in À la manière de...Emmanuel Chabrier, Ravel’s double pastiche of Gounod and Chabrier showcased his ability to perceive characteristic traits of both composers and to imitate these elements in a way that reflects both composers’ distinctive styles, producing something original through a combination of old and new materials.

Ravel’s extensive use of masks, as demonstrated by the analysis of his pastiches, raises certain questions regarding the composer’s musical identity. What is the nature of the Ravel that hides behind them? Or more fundamentally, is there a Ravel that hides behind them? In search of his ‘true’ identity, we looked the subject of originality—the ways in which an artist could distinguish himself from his predecessors and contemporaries. Returning to the term’s implications during Ravel’s lifetime revealed two competing ideologies concerning the essence of originality: a novelty of spirit, which refers to the more elusive, inner source of originality, and a novelty of style, which points to its more demonstrative, external manifestations. An exploration of Ravel’s expressed views on originality showed that both these perspectives are implied in his theories of national and individual consciousness. According to Ravel’s understanding, every artist is made up of two components: a national consciousness which is inherited, and an individual consciousness which is developed over time as one’s national consciousness directs and shapes the perception and assimilation of
external influences. His theories of national consciousness led the composer to
distinguish between the musical idioms of a composition, which can be adopted from
any musical culture, and an artist's music thinking, which is necessarily national. Given
this distinction, Ravel could therefore assimilate various foreign elements into his own
style without fundamentally compromising his identity as a French composer. While
this helped to clarify some of the apparent contradictions between Ravel's theory and
practice, it also bolstered the separation of the composer's 'natural style' from the
masks he used. For while Ravel claimed that his musical identity was unaffected by his
frequent donning of masks—admittedly, something that is difficult to prove in
practice—he still, by inference, acknowledged the presence of these masks. As our
analysis of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major demonstrated, however, his masks
became such an integrated part of the composer's style that in the end, no such
distinction can be made. In our attempt to differentiate between Ravel and his masks, it
became clear that the composer's style was in fact made up of his masks: Ravel was his
love for clever imitations, exotic colours, and fascination of machines. Indeed, the
composer's consummate skill in assimilating these previously foreign elements has
meant that they can no longer be called his masks—they are, in fact, the real Ravel.

In many ways, this thesis is a revisionist study: it challenges long-standing
preconceptions of Ravel's theories on composition, exposes the limitations that these
assumptions have placed on our approach to his music, and offers new perspectives
with which to understand some of the key concepts associated with the composer's
musical identity. The radical discovery that Ravel and his masks are one and the same
ultimately means there is no Ravel to be found apart from these masks. In light of this
realisation, some crucial adjustments to our approach to Ravel's music need to be made.
Most fundamentally, our attitude towards those aspects of his musical language
formerly labelled 'masks' must be revised. These 'masks' should, strictly speaking, no
longer be considered elements that obscure our view of the composer—hence, they
should not be called masks at all—but should be acknowledged as aspects of the rich
diversity of his individual style. Consequently, the decades-long quest to unmask Ravel
should be redirected towards a fuller investigation of the very elements that have been
unduly dismissed as superficial, inessential components of his artistic identity. One
specific area of research that remains to be explored more comprehensively is the
distinctive way in which the composer manipulated all of these elements to create a
uniquely Ravelian sound. Moreover, given the widespread influence of foreign vernaculars on Ravel’s musical language, there is still much to be understood in regards to how Ravel assimilated these foreign idioms in a way that reflects his French musical identity. Further investigation along these lines of research may lead to new perspectives on the multi-faceted nature of Ravel’s musical language, and contribute to the de-mystification of our formally obscured image of the composer. For in the quest to solve the mystery of Ravel, scholars seem to have constructed an elaborate hiding place for the composer that does not in reality exist. By re-evaluating those elements that were previously thought to shroud our view of the composer, we will perhaps discover that he is not so difficult to find, after all. Indeed, it is possible that all this time, Ravel has been hidden from us in plain sight.
Bibliography


