

Maurice Ravel

The
Transformations in
Orchestrating

Ma Mère l'Oye

by
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20 December, 1999

“It is a great mistake to say: this composer scores well, or, that composition is well orchestrated, for orchestration is part of the *very soul of the work.*”

-Nicolas Rimski-Korsakov

“It is a great mistake to say: this composer scores well, or, that composition is well orchestrated, for orchestration is part of the *very soul of the work*.¹” Rimski-Korsakov could not have said it better. Indeed, the ballet version of *Ma Mère l’Oye* takes on a soul its very own, far different from the original piano version. This is not to say that the piano version is any less charming as a work of a great composer, but rather, it does not have the facility of resources available in an orchestra. The colorings that are possible in an orchestral setting provides for a wider possibility of text painting, which is what makes *Ma Mère l’Oye* so interesting. Ravel’s music is more or less known for its tonal color, extra-musical associations, and general impressionistic feeling. This language combined with the resources inherent in an orchestra, put in the hands of Ravel, resulted in the recreation of a fantasy world that is unparalleled in genius, simplicity, and child-like tenderness.

Born in the Basque country of Ciborne, France in 1875, Maurice Ravel is remembered as a composer of great versatility and vision. There were many factors that influenced his musical career. His mother, who spent time in Spain, used to sing him Spanish lullabies and his Father, who worked in the factories, would bring Maurice to work. There, Ravel saw fascinating machines that, to him, made amazingly new sounds and rhythms.

¹ Rimski-Korsakov, Nicolas. *Principles of Orchestration with Musical Examples Drawn from his own Works*. ed. Maximilian Steinberg. trans. Edward Agate. New York: E.F. Kalmus Orchestra Scores, Inc, 1891.

Those machines fascinated me...It was their clicking and roaring, which, with the Spanish folk songs sung to me at night-time as a berceuse by my mother, formed my first instruction in music!²

Just nearing four months old, Ravel and his family moved to Paris, which is where he would spend his childhood. Most notably, the Moulin Rouge, a dance hall in those days, was right around the corner from the Ravel household. It became a center for entertainment and music, and also the “cynical centre of the sex industry...the street life observed by Ravel in his teenage years in Montmartre must inevitably have influenced his perception of women...¹” On the contrary, Ravel also had many positive aspects concerning his environment. Aside from the scandalous sex industry, there were many prominent composers and musicians that either lived in the area or visited on a regular basis; these included Emmanuel Chabrier, Erik Satie, and Claude Debussy. Considering that there was a major concert hall and the Conservatoire in the same neighborhood, it is evident that Ravel was in the right place for an inspiring young musician.

The impetus at this point is clearly in place for his musical development. The next factor to consider is the reason for his ties with the ‘fairy-tale’ world of children, a defining characteristic in his music. Considering the negative aspect of his teenage years, it is a distinct possibility that he was driven to embrace his own fantasy world that would

² Larner, Gerald. *Maurice Ravel*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 19.

include fanciful toys and fairy-tales. Biographers such as Gerald Larner suggest that, based on some photographs, the Ravel family was very close and intimate.

If this is true and if Maurice really did not attend school, the prominently childish aspect of the adult Maurice Ravel – who so readily identified with children, who loved toys and fairy tales as much as they did, and who never quite matured emotionally – is easier to understand.³

In light of this statement, the simplicity and fantasy-like quality of *Ma Mere l'Oye* now seems to have definite roots in Ravel's child-like emotions. Speaking of *Ma Mère l'Oye*, Ravel states:

It was my intention to evoke the poetry of childhood, and this naturally led to my simplifying my manner and style of writings.⁴

The suite of five pieces is based on fairy tales from Charles Perrault, Madame d'Aulnoy and Madame Beaumont: "Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant" (Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty), "Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête" (Conversations of Beauty and the Beast), "Petit Poucet" (Tom Thumb), "Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes" (Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas), and "Le Jardin féérique" (The Fairy Garden). Ravel clearly has a programmatic theme throughout the suite. In the years between 1908-

³ Larner, *Ravel*, 26.

⁴ Perlemuter, Vlado, and H. Jourdan-Morhange. *Ravel According to Ravel*. ed. Harold Taylor. trans. Frances Tanner. (New York: Pro/Am Music Resources Inc, 1988), 62.

1910, the original piano version was composed for Mimie and Jean Godebski, children of a close friend of Ravel, Cipa Godebski. However, on playing the work or listening to it, one might have some difficulty trying to imagine the fairy tale land. However, thematic references can be drawn from the music, as Jeanne Leleu recounts to H  l  ne Jourdan-Morhange in *Ravel According to Ravel*:

He [Ravel] wanted the Petit Poucet to be very uniform in sonority. I used to wait impatiently for the cuckoo to enter! It was great fun to play the cuckoo!⁵

As this statement supports, Ravel had the ability with even just the piano to put across references in programmatic music. Although Jeanne Leleu was an acquaintance of Ravel and there is a possibility that the idea of the cuckoo was suggested by Ravel himself, it is self evident in the score that this is a reference to the cuckoo. This ability, considering the case of *Ma M  re l'Oye*, is due to that fact that Ravel really is still a child in many respects. This is the reason why he can relate so well to children and remind the 'grown-ups' how precious time is and how fast it is dissipating. After what Ravel called a "child-like and spiritual performance,"⁶ by the Godebski children, it was not long before he was asked to create an orchestrated version. In fact it was about a year later, in 1911 when Jacques Rouch   commissioned the Ballet version for the Th   tre des Arts⁷. This marked a significant transformation of the original piano piece and this is where Ravel was able to turn the piano version, into what would seem to be his original idea of text painting the

⁵ Perlemuter, *Ravel According to Ravel*, 62.

⁶ Perlemuter, *Ravel According to Ravel*, 61.

⁷ Ravel, Maurice. *L'Enfant at les Sortil  ges, Ma M  re l'Oye*. Liner Notes by Roger Nichols. (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, 1999), 14.

fair tales. The difference was that he has so much more in the way of colors, textures and contrasts at his disposal.

Ravel composed new material and altered the ordering of the movements. This somewhat small fact demonstrated how Ravel used orchestration as a compositional technique and not just a vehicle for revision. It is feasible to say that Ravel might not have had the capacity to musically fulfill the story line he had worked out unless he had the option of orchestration during the compositional stage. What did he do with the story line? In essence, Ravel had to figure out a way to tie all the pieces together in such a way that it would work on stage. Since the fairy tales are seemingly unrelated, Ravel had to rethink the entire meaning of the suite. The solution is remarkable. The story line is now based entirely on the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. The reason being is that the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty has a small section that describes Beauty having dreams for one hundred years. Now the seemingly unrelated fairytales have a place in the suite: in Beauty's dreams⁸. Ravel composes a prelude and new scene, "Danse du rouet et scène," to set up the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. The "Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant" signifies a pause in the fairy tale for now (this is where Beauty falls asleep to dream) and sets the stage for the dream sequence. The continuity of the suite shows a linear, narrative progression, and is perhaps the most striking feature of the Ballet. There is a seamless flow of music and thought. Strangely, there is an orchestral version printed that only includes the original five pieces. It would appear that the point is greatly missed in this version. Ravel didn't conceive of the Orchestral Ballet without the added music, which provides for an integral function. The transformation into the ballet dissolved all

the inadequacies inherent in the piano when dealing with color, texture and options. A defining characteristic of the piano is the aspect of decay: it naturally begins losing sound as soon as it is started. In an orchestra, the decay is easily controlled depending on the orchestration. Phrasing, dynamics and color are far more adaptable in an orchestral setting to suit the needs of the composer. It seems improbable to imagine the Ballet being conceived on the piano and not in Ravel's mind with all those orchestral colors and options at his disposal. This truly was orchestration on the level of composition.

The *Prélude*, the first movement of the ballet, is completely new material. This music paints a picture of a royal christening, which takes place at the beginning of the story. The royal theme, stated by the horns, creates a majestic scene. The fairies are given a theme signifying the bestowing of gifts on the young princess. The story unfolds and the curse is put on the princess by the evil fairy that she will prick her finger on a spindle and die from the wound. The good fairy that had been hiding quickly changed the fate of death to one of sleep. A time warp occurs and fifteen years pass. The royal theme is heard again, this time in the distance, as the King and Queen leave for the summer. The next movement, *Danse du rouet et Scène*, again new material, has a quality of childish curiosity which is characteristic of his opera, *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*. Indeed the princess is curious and finds herself up in a forbidden tower where she finds an old woman spinning, which is represented in the music by the harp. Since the king had banned all spindles due to the curse of fifteen years ago, the princess had never seen a spindle and was instantly fascinated. Near the end of the movement, a bell signifies the inevitable prick that plunges Beauty into sleep. The orchestration is entirely based on

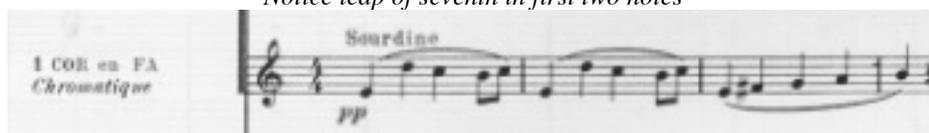
⁸ See chart 1 for reference to the story line.

descending passages signifying Beauty falling into her bed. In *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant*, the Castle is put to sleep by a fairy fearing that Beauty would have no one to wake up to after the curse is lifted. This movement, the first to be orchestrated, is a mere twenty bars long with a *rallentando* to end which creates a significant feeling of closure at the final cadence. It is important that this movement create closure, or sleep, so that Beauty can enter into the upcoming dream world. From an orchestration standpoint, the flute, in the beginning, is given the first piano part and a french horn and pizzicato violas on the second. The flute gives a haunting character to the melody that is much more legato and connected than a piano could ever be while the crying leap of a seventh in the french horn creates a languorous feeling that might have been missing in the piano version. The final four bars have the theme in muted violins creating a childish yearning. The instrumentation is an integral aspect of the character, and painting of the text.

flute given melody mm1-4



*horn given counter-melody mm1-4.
Notice leap of seventh in first two notes*



Les Entriens de la Belle et de la Bête is the next movement in the ballet.

Ravel here changed the original order of the movements, bringing forward the “Conversations of Beauty and the Beast” so that the hero of the ballet, Prince Charming, should not seem like an afterthought.⁹

Something as simple as rearranging the order of the movements might not seem so significant, but it shows how carefully Ravel thought-out the programming aspect of this work. An entrance of Prince Charming directly after Beast’s wedding to the princess (in dreamland) wouldn’t make for a smooth cohesion between movements or story lines.

Although the orchestration thus far has been more or less programmatic, specific text painting is readily addressed in the following three ‘dream-movements.’ The ‘Beauty-theme’ is immediately stated in bars 2-4.

‘beauty’s theme’



The theme is embellished and developed throughout the first section of the movement.

Along with a key change, the Beast enters in the form of a Contra-Bassoon.

‘beast’s theme’



The two themes are juxtaposed and the conversation is observed according to the story line.

⁹ Ravel, Maurice. *L’Enfant at les Sortilèges, Ma Mère l’Oye*. Liner Notes by



The beast theme often changes mood when put against Beauty's theme. The beast's theme often turns up in inversion, in an ascending passage that never climaxes. This could signify the Beast asking for her hand in marriage. Consistently she turns down the beast, "Non, la Bête!..." Beauty returns

home and promises to return. Then, after Beauty's late return, the Beast was so elated to see her that he "will die happy." The Beast's grumbling theme is then transformed into a violin solo when Beauty agrees to marry him and he finally becomes a handsome Prince. It should now be apparent why Ravel switched this movement from being next to the last. Prince Charming's entrance would seem less significant in light of the Beast becoming a prince.

He thought he would be able to find the path easily by means of the bread crumbs he had strew wherever he had walked. But he was quite surprised when he was unable to find a single crumb; the birds had come and eaten them all. (Charles Perrault)¹⁰

The French translation of *Petit Poucet* is closer to "Thumbling" as opposed to "Tom Thumb." Despite the several versions of "Tom Thumb," this story is based from Ravel's source, Charles Perrault. The breadcrumbs, which Tom Thumb spreads, are characterized by the relentless thirds in the violins. The measures get longer in time and the 'trail of breadcrumbs' becomes lost in any metric sense.

Roger Nichols. (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, 1999), 14-15.

¹⁰ Ravel, Maurice. *Four Orchestral Works in Full Score*. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1989) 94.



An oboe represents Tom's voice as he carefully gets lost in the woods. This theme is played over the relentless laying of the breadcrumbs.



A marked transformation can be seen between the original piano version and the ballet when the 'birds' come and eat the breadcrumbs. The difficult harmonic passage for the violin sounds much more like birds that does the original piano marking.



Just as this occurs, Tom's theme is heard in the Trombones representing Tom's ignorance as he continues to wander deeper into the woods. Laurence Davies claims in a BBC music guide on Ravel's Orchestral Music:

Petit Poucet has a good claim to being the most skillfully contrived. On the whole, the orchestral version is to be preferred to the piano's, partly on the account of greater variety

Ravel was able to infuse into it. The passing of Tom's querulous tune from the oboe to the cor anglais for its second episode offers convincing evidence of this.¹¹

Laideronnete, Impératrice des Pagodes offers a very unique sound compared to the others. In this movement, we can hear the influence of the World's Fair in Paris on Ravel in the form of eastern influences. The scene of the ballet has the Empress wearing a "Chinese dress in the style of the 18th-century painter Boucher.¹²" The piece is very pentatonic in nature, which gives it a distinct eastern flavor. The Pagodes, the little toy mandarins and mandarinesses, are heard playing their little instruments in the form of Xylophone, Flute and pizzicato Violins.



Laideronnete's theme is reminiscent of the royal theme in the beginning.

(First bar missing) this theme harks to the original 'royal theme' in the prelude.



This theme may possibly serve a two-fold purpose. Given the fact that this is the last 'dream' that Beauty will have, this second royal theme could signify the presence of Prince Charming making his way through the woods surrounding the castle. The four chords at the end of the piece may further reinforce this. These chords signify the end of

¹¹ Davies, Laurence. *Ravel Orchestral Music*, BBC Music Guides. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971) 19.

the dreamland and the beginning of ‘real life’ for Beauty, possibly in the form of a kiss from her Prince Charming.



This excerpt only shows harp and celeste at the end of the movement, but the entire orchestration is based around these four chords. WAKE UP!

Le Jardin Féerique is nothing short of music for a love scene. This is music unlike any of Ravel’s other works. Beauty slowly wakes up to realize everything that has happened has been the result of an enchanted Ferry that has given her magical dreams. She also comes to realize that she is in love with her Prince Charming [trumpets] and that everything is nearly just as it was when she fell asleep from the spindle. Slowly the entire castle begins to wake up and this is noted by the orchestration becoming thicker in nature. Slowly the movement becomes more and more joyous which ends in the form of a wedding. This provides for completion of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale by signifying the wedding scene with Harp in glissando along with Célesta.

¹² Ravel, *Ma Mère l’Oye*. Liner Notes by Roger Nichols, 15.

Céleste and Harp in large sweeping glissando! Clearly a wedding scene.



The last four bars add a dotted rhythm in the upper woodwinds and brass which might text paint the royal scene we are left with in the fairy tale.



At this point the story has come full circle. In the pavane, Ravel orchestrated the castle falling asleep. When the spell is broken by Prince Charming, the orchestration becomes thicker and more involved as the people wake up. When *Le Jardin Féerique* ends in all the glory Ravel assigned to it, there is a clear sense that we have been somewhere, and come back to realize where we started.

What was Ravel picturing in his mind? It is hard now to imagine the original piano version without hearing all the instruments and colors. Was Ravel imagining these colors and the programmatic nature of the ballet when he composed the original? In a sense it seems obvious that maybe the catalyst of the ballet was in writing the original suite. When it came time for Ravel to create the ballet, he had to compose a flowing stream of music that kept the story moving and effectively set the world of the fairy tale

in motion. This idea of continuity for the ballet was a huge implication in transforming of the piano version to the orchestrated version. Ravel accomplished this through using orchestration as his tool for composition. In setting the existing pieces, he gathered a language that was applicable to setting the rest of the story line that was missing. In setting the entire tale of Sleeping Beauty, Ravel composed new material specifically for orchestra that kept the theme of 'Once upon a time...' ever present throughout the ballet.

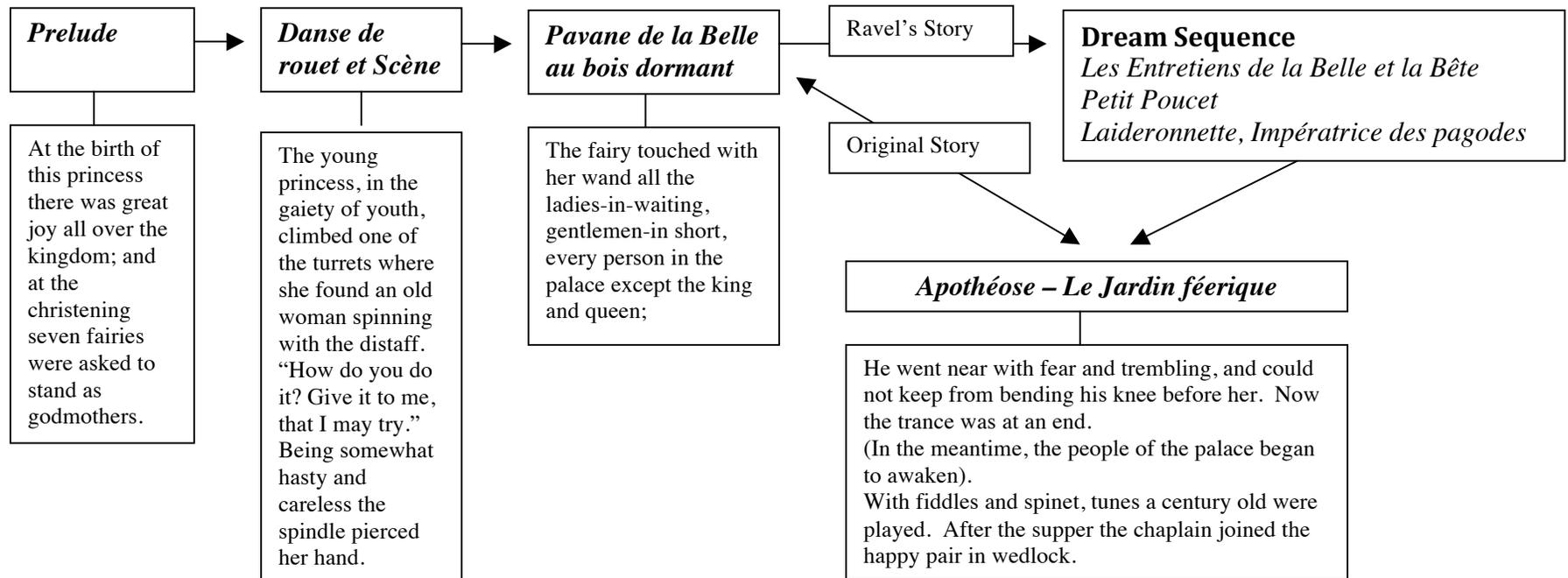
Chart 1

Ma Mère l'Oye The Story Line*

“Sleeping Beauty”

as envisioned by

Maurice Ravel



* Perrault, Charles. *The Three Princesses*. ed. Edens, Cooper. (New York: Bantam Books, 1991)

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