

Ravel's "Une barque sur l'océan"
Performance Analysis

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I. Introduction

Too often it seems that many theories on Ravel, or vital elements thereof, are in some measure substantiated through a reference to Debussy or some other external benchmark. For the performer on stage playing *Miroirs*, the concentration must be centered on issues related to Ravel and *his* musical language. While a comparison to Debussy may shed some theoretical insight to particular inner-workings or crossbreeding of ideas between the two composers, it fails to address the more pressing and basic issue for the performer; how to perform the music. When the score of *Miroirs* is unfolded before the pianist, the challenge is to understand Ravel's intentions with this particular set of pieces without forcing an external reference. The performer has a musical responsibility to analyze the music in order to fully understand what to look for. Certainly, it may be prudent to have some understanding of certain significant facts pertaining to *Miroirs*, including when the work was composed, Ravel's environment, and the work's chronological and historical place in the composer's oeuvre; these areas, to varying extents, can and should be incorporated into an analysis. To be useful to the performer, however, these facts must be applied in such a way that they provide insight on the basis of performance and interpretation, and not purely on intellect. An analysis, while drawing on supporting background facts, must be grounded in a tangible realm, from the score, if it is to be practical. The score poses a myriad of questions but also holds the answers. A detailed score analysis of Ravel's *Miroirs* can arm the performer with valuable information about the composer's musical language. If, through analysis, some of Ravel's musical language can be 'decoded,' then it can provide a basis for a

sound interpretation true to the music. While the interpretation will vary between performers, there is an underlying truth and coherence present. Insight is gained through analysis.

Let us take a chronological step back in Ravel's piano music to the *Sonatine*, which was completed in 1905, an interesting date since *Miroirs* was finished in 1906. The *Sonatine* is especially important in Ravel's music because it marks the final chapter of Ravel's truly neo-classicist era. Burnett James writes in his book that the *Sonatine* "is unusually successful in translating classical aesthetics into contemporary terms."¹ Certainly there is an underlying classical structure and phrasing present in the *Sonatine*, which, combined with Ravel's harmony, creates a unique blend of old and new. That 'unusual success' had to be translated to something new. Ravel had to evolve musically in order to develop a new voice. Stephen Kostka comments on form in the twentieth-century music by saying,

"All of the forms of the tonal era survived into the twentieth-century, in spite of problems relating to the function of tonality in those forms. Not only was there a decline in the influence of tonality upon form, but in many twentieth-century compositions the "theme" also ceased to be an important element of form."²

To continue along those lines, we shall see that while Ravel may adhere to forms of the tonal era, his implementation of tonality will disguise those very elements. If we liken the advancement of music to a genetic evolution, then contained in the 'musical DNA' of each composer would be found 'genetic' links to the past. The *Sonatine* was the culminating work in Ravel's first compositional stage for the piano. As would be

¹ Ravel his life and times, Burnett James 43

² Kostka 153

expected, this stage drew heavily on earlier influences, to include the classical aesthetic. However, as Stephen Kostka pointed out, tonality began to challenge the parameters of the traditional musical structure. Thus, from the point in time after his *Sonatine*, Ravel's style had 'mutated' in such a way that he widened the parameters of his musical boundaries, which allowed him to explore a more complex musical language. Moreover, with *Miroirs*, the thematic elements play out in an especially ingenious manner. Whilst not being limited to the rigid classical strictures, Ravel economically employs material derived from one theme, or a few basic motives. Furthermore, that same material is the basis of specific tonal collections that, in turn, provide structural integrity.

The *Miroirs* truly marked a turn in Ravel's compositional language. For starters, his harmonic language had become more venturous, and maybe even 'jazzy.' Roy Howat comments on the "jazzier bite evident in 'Noctuelles' and 'Oiseaux tristes'" in his article in the *Cambridge Companion to Ravel*³. Were a pianist to have any jazz background, it would surely be to his or her benefit since much of Ravel's music is laced with the chordal qualities found in jazz. This is especially manifest in the way the chords are voiced and extended (eg., $\#^b$ 9, $\#$ 11, etc). Inevitably, another allusion arises; Ravel – Liszt. The reference to Liszt is due possibly to Ravel's emphatic use of arpeggios and a technically demanding musical language which some would say 'mirrors' Liszt's style. This reference would seem to merely apply to the technical demands of playing such music, not to any essential musical similarities. In order not to ascribe this historical change in Ravel's style to Liszt's influence, consider a more fundamental reason. Ravel

³ Howat, 78, *Ravel Companion*

had deliberately set out to undo his reputation as the composer of *Jeux d'eau*. He was a composer who was finding a new voice, a new language, and a new style. However, Ravel's style change would not obscure his established voice and its characteristic gestures, but rather add to it. Ravel stated 'My *Miroirs* marked such a considerable change in my harmonic development that it disconcerted those musicians who were most familiar with my style up to that point.' Gerald Larner continues, "In fact, not even the Apaches, including the especially favored five of them associated with *Miroirs* as dedicatees, understood them immediately."⁴

At this point in his life, Ravel had been dealt several debilitating blows. The 'official' or exclusive musical society, otherwise known as the 'Conservatoire,' had essentially dismissed Ravel. Basically on his own, he had developed a distinctive voice as a composer. However, without a community willing to embrace his ideas, a composer would have no conduit for performances or experimentation. Having failed to win the Prix de Rome several times, it seemed Ravel was unappreciated. He therefore looked for an alternative social venue in which to present his music. Sometime in 1900 Ravel began to spend time with a group of artists who called themselves *Les Apaches*.⁵ Clearly Ravel's association with *Les Apaches* influenced, even altered, the course of his musical career. This group was comprised of poets, a conductor, composers and musicians including Ricardo Viñes who, as an acclaimed pianist of that day, often premiered Ravel's piano works. It was in this environment that Ravel found the artistic influences and outlet for ideas that a composer inevitably requires. *Miroirs*, as a piano work, was

⁴ Larner, 90

⁵ Benjamin Irvy, p26-27

the first tangible result of Ravel's association with *Les Apaches*. Supporting this notion is the fact that Ravel dedicated each of the Five *Miroirs* individually to a member of *Les Apaches*: "Noctuelles," Léon Paul Fargue; "Oiseaux triste," Ricardo Viñes; "Une barque sur l'océan," Paul Sordes; "Alborada del gracioso," M. D. Calvocoressi; "La Vallée des cloches," Maurice Delage.

The title '*Miroirs*' inevitably conjures up impressionistic associations. Indeed, the titles of the individual movements themselves suggest the same associations. Burnett James quotes Marguerite Long in reference to this point of imagery.

The title in itself is an aesthetic proposition. It underlies what the Impressionists have amply proved – the pre-eminence of reflected light from the direct image in the appeal to our sensibility and in the creation of an illusion. These pieces are intensely descriptive and pictorial. They banish all sentiment in expression but offer to the listener a number of refined sensory elements which can be appreciated according to his imagination.⁶

To achieve such a vast scope of imagery, it should be evident that Ravel had to move beyond the restrictions of his past compositional language, and absorb the environment that *Les Apaches* provided for him.

II. Analysis of "Une barque sur l'océan"

While Ravel is not a minimalist in the true sense of the word, he *is* an economist in that there exists a strong continuity and coherence in his thematic material. It is not just the flavor and style of his themes, but also the way in which he employs them. Specifically, in the *Miroirs*, there is a relatively small amount of thematic material, which is derived from a condensed collection of motives.

⁶ James 44

Measures 1-27

Since the thematic material is inter-related, it is helpful to realize what the similarities are. Extending beyond *Miroirs*, a favorite trait of Ravel is a falling motive, usually by a fourth or third. Specifically in “Une barque sur l’ocean,” it is possible to derive nearly all of the motivic material from the opening motive in bar 1.

The image shows a musical score for measures 1-27 of "Une barque sur l'ocean" in G major and 2/4 time. The top staff shows the original melody with segments 'a', 'b', 'c', and 'd' bracketed. A bracket labeled "Theme 1" spans the first four notes. Below this, the melody is split into an "Upper Voice" and a "Lower Voice".

Staff	Measure	Pitch Class	Interval
Upper Voice	1	4	
	2	1	m3
	3	8	P4
	4	6	M2
Lower Voice	1	9	
	2	8	m2
	3	1	P5
	4	4	m3

Example 1.1

Theme 1 and corresponding motives separated into 2 voices (in bracket) with Pitch Class Identification and Interval differences.

Example 1 shows several of Ravel’s melodic traits. All of the intervals listed will play out in the rest of the movement. Indeed, the very first measure serves as the genesis of the core melodic material contained in the movement. In the upper voice, motive ‘a’ opens the movement with a descending minor 3rd, followed by ‘b’ and the trademark falling 4th, and completed with a descending major 2nd. The lower voice has a reordered, and partially inverted version of the same interval sequence (compare the lower voice

intervals to the upper voice: the 3rds and 2^{nds} switch places, the P4 in the upper voice relates by inversion to the P5 in the lower voice). The vertical sonorities are worth observing as well. In order, theme 1 produces the following vertical interval sequence: P5 – P4 – P5 – M2. Theme 2, as seen in example 1.2, is completely derived from theme 1. The trademark 4th makes its presence known “*en dehors*” in measure 4 and is expanded upon by using intervals ‘a’ – ‘d’ to form theme 2.

Example 1.2
Theme 2 as derived from Theme 1. m4 / m8

The accompaniment in the left hand is constructed around an F# minor-seventh chord. While it may seem that there is no association with the thematic material, a closer look, using some set-theory, can reveal an ingenious example of a Ravelian economy. If we take all the pitch-classes given thus far in the examples, we are left with a pentachord consisting of the pitches F#, G#, A, C# and E. If this is re-ordered with the G# on the top, as shown in example 2, it reveals a stacked 3rds relationship – which is the opening melodic interval (motive ‘a’). As shown in examples 1.3 and 1.4, all of the material presented thus far is derived from this set of pitches. So, both the melodic material and the harmonic palette are derived from a core thematic base. Although example 1.4 shows the set-class {0259}, it is a sub-set of the set-class {01358}.

Pitch-class set [6 8 9 1 4]
Set-class {0 1 3 5 8}

Example 1.3
Themes 1 and 2 condensed into a pitch-class set.

Pitch-class set [4 6 9 1]
Set-class {0 2 5 9}

Example 1.4
Left hand arpeggios (harmony) condensed into pitch-class set in normal form.

The very same relationship of thematic material to a tonal area appears under transposition in the following section. Using set-class {0 1 3 5 8} as the tonal basis, Ravel takes fragments of theme 1 (motives a, and c) and creates a secondary section (measures 11-13) that contrasts with the harmonically static opening (measures 1-10). This secondary section serves as a consequent phrase-group to the opening.

m. 11
[4 6 7 E 2] --> {0 1 3 5 8}
pitch-class set-class
[2 4 5 9 E 0] --> {0 1 3 5 6 8}
pitch-class set-class

Example 1.5
Measure 11 condensed into pitch-class set and its corresponding set-class.

The first part of measure 11 holds to the original set-class by way of transposition. The E minor-ninth chord comes as a refreshing shift from the previous tonal center of an F# minor-ninth chord. The second-half of the measure introduces the first change in set-

class thus far. From a chordal perspective, the change is noticed only by the addition of a 6th (or 13th) to the chord. That change can also be noticed in the set-class. Not only has the pentachord become a hexachord, but there are now two half-steps in the collection (between { 0 1 3 5 6 8 }). The harmony returns to familiarity of the original tonal placement of set-class {01358} in measure 14. A compressed version of the antecedent opening leads to a varied consequent section. This time the added chromatic element will dissolve the tonal ‘stability’ of the opening.

not in normal form - to show bass movement

m 21

[9 1 4 6 8] --> {0 1 3 5 8}
pitch-class set-class

[7 E 1 2 6] --> {0 1 3 7 8}
pitch-class set-class

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The staff contains eight notes: A4, B4, C#5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, and A5. A vertical bar line is placed between the fifth and sixth notes. Below the staff, two sets of labels are provided. The first set, corresponding to the first half of the measure, shows a pitch-class collection [9 1 4 6 8] in brackets and a set-class {0 1 3 5 8} in braces. The second set, corresponding to the second half of the measure, shows a pitch-class collection [7 E 1 2 6] in brackets and a set-class {0 1 3 7 8} in braces. Above the staff, the text 'not in normal form - to show bass movement' is written.

Example 1.6

Measure 21 condensed into pitch-class set and set-class.

Example 1.6 shows the collection of pitches in such a way that the tonal center, or chordal root is shown first. The first half of measure 21 has the same pitch-class collection as the opening, as if to hark back to something familiar, before embarking on the next part of the journey. The second-half of measure 21 alters the pentachord, as seen before in measure 11, in order to release the anchor of static harmony. Unlike the last consequent section, this one launches the piece into a veritable storm of discordant harmony. The set-class {01378} constitutes, in this case, a G maj7 #11, which contrasts with the previous harmonies, while keeping something familiar (specifically, in this case, the core minor-seventh sonority). This should be evident by comparing the differences between the set-classes. The key difference between the two pitch collections is that the

second one, established in measure 21, contains two half steps, or semi-tone clashes. These clashes soften the arrival of intensely chromatic material beginning in measure 28.

The unifying aspect of this section is certainly the tonal cohesion. Therefore, the harmony plays the central role in defining the structure. This first section, while difficult to describe in a conventional sense, serves as a quasi 'A' section. However, rather than thinking in terms of a functional 'A' section, the delineation simply organizes this section into a logical packet. While the 'A' section materializes later, it only appears through the means of sonic quality, rather than a strict reappearance of motivic and harmonic material (excepting the final measures). In short, the atmosphere, which is defined by the set-class, is the defining structural element⁷.

Measures 28-37

Measures 28 through 37 serve as a transition from the previous section. The contrast is a sudden and deliberate graced-note A and accented Bb in the lowest register of the piano. Immediately Ravel employs the use of a chromatic figure. In this section, Ravel starts and ends in the same place, in a mirror-like manner. The sonorities in each hand are centered on triadic, dominant, diminished and half-diminished harmonies. The vertical combination of those sonorities between the hands results in a complex harmonic pallet. While these sonorities imply the presence of octatonic collections (all three as a matter of fact), the chordal movement and collections change very quickly and would prove

⁷ This approach in analyzing the core melodic material does not focus on the aspect of Ravel's rigid voice-leading. For instance, in the opening ten measures Ravel continuously creates suspension with the G#. In Measure 1, he resolves the G# to F# in typical voice-leading fashion. In a larger context including theme 2, Ravel expands this resolution to the very last beat on measure 10. A common end-product of Ravel's voice-leading is that a pitch of resolution ends up becoming the pitch of dissonance or suspension.

difficult to track, especially in the midst of a performance. Therefore, instead of thinking about the fast-changing octatonic collections, a performer would do better to keep track of the top voice of each hand and the repeating pattern as seen in example 2.1. The pattern in the right hand is mostly based on the whole-step motion of motive 'c' while the pattern in the left hand is largely based on the semi-tone motive 'a' (see example 1). The whole-tone motive is concluded with a semi-tone, while the chromatic motive is concluded with a minor 3rd. The same pattern is followed in the 2nd repetition even through the cross-staff movement, which results in the motives switching hands part way through.

Example 2.1
Measures 29 –37. Tracking of 2 voices in contrary motion.

On a larger scale, the initial Bb in measure 28 is linked to the last Bb in measure 37 through its constant repetition throughout the section. As seen in example 3, the Bb can also be traced from the outset of the right hand in measure 29 through each repetition of

As seen in example 3.1 (above), each part of the first two wave sets, ascending and descending, are part of the same set-class and adhere to the same outlines as follows: The ascending part of the wave is characterized by a G#-minor arpeggio in the left hand, and a right-hand tremolo which adds an E# to the mix, while the descending segment consists of a half-diminished arpeggio based on G#. Ravel slightly alters the descent of the third wave through a small set-class deviation. This descent is categorized by an F# added 6th, or set-class {0259} which is the very same set-class found in the opening, in the left hand (see example 1.3). Measure 44 adds a G# to the F# added 6th harmony creating a G# pentatonic collection, mode 're.'

Certainly this section is an integral part of the structure of the piece. Since the movement is supported by its implied imagery, the 'waves' are an important element in defining its structure. Again, the harmonic collection remains a fundamental component in defining the structure of the section. The function of this section may feel like a second theme group, or a 'B' section of sorts. It is preceded by a transitional section, and outlined by a strict harmonic field. Each time this section returns, it is tagged with a 'cadential transition,' which departs from the harmonic stability preceding it, but recalls familiar melodic material.

The image shows a musical score for Example 3.2, consisting of three staves. The top staff is labeled 'm. 46 melody simplified' and contains a melodic line with a dashed line above it labeled 'theme 1 / lower voice' spanning measures 46-49. The middle staff is labeled 'reduction' and shows chordal textures. The bottom staff is labeled 'G# pentatonic mode 're' continued' and shows a single melodic line. The right side of the score is labeled 'octatonic'.

Example 3.2
Cadential Transition, m.46-49. Melody extracted.

Measure 46 keeps the pentatonic collection intact while eliding with an expanding harmony in measure 47. This ‘cadential transition’ also re-introduces elements of theme 1, so as not to wander too far from the movement’s musical nucleus. This relatively short section, which appears twice more, provides an important structural element in that it sounds the close of a section while providing a transition to the next. In some way, this section serves as a channel marker, which helps the performer navigate the form. For instance, the cadential motion of G# to C# in the left hand foreshadows of the following section (measures 55- 60) which is anchored in C# pentatonic. These five measures provide a respite from turbulence of the waves, and provide a transition to a C# minor restatement of the opening in measure 61. In short, the function of measures 46-54 is to provide cadential movement from G# as dominant, to C# as tonic. The relative calm of this section coincides with the arrival of C# pentatonic (mode ‘do’). The ‘d’ motive is employed, harking back to theme 2. This section functions as a ‘mode shifter’ to C# minor, which coincides with the opening melodic material. The transfer between the pentatonic collection and theme 1 occurs by the changing of one note (E# to E). The set-

class of the pentatonic collection {02479} is closely related to the opening set-class {01358}. With all this structural work in place, it seems superfluous that the next section, measures 61-67, serves merely as a false ‘recapitulation.’

2nd Waves (68-80)

The first wave starts where the last one ends, on set-class {0259} and abruptly interrupts the relative calm and familiarity of the opening material. This section mirrors the previous wave section, but is wider in scope and harmonically elevated.

Example 4.1

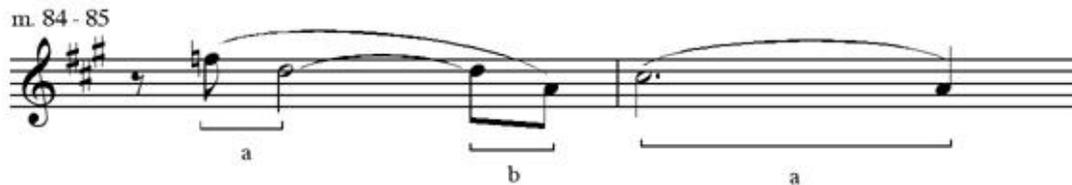
Second Wave section. First measure is a reduction of the ascent of each wave arpeggio. Each corresponding descent is shown in the following measures.

Compared to the last wave section, the similarity between the set-classes should be evident. The primary difference is the focus on set-class {0259} on the ascending arpeggios rather than set-class {0258}. Significantly, the last wave descends on set-class {0259}. Example 4.1 shows how, as before, Ravel converts the last wave into a pentatonic collection, set-class {02479}. Having a tonal center around Bb, this collection would be classified as Bb pentatonic, mode ‘re.’ As should be expected, this section is capped with the very same ‘cadential transition’ as seen before. However this time, instead of leading to something familiar, the ‘cadential transition’ leads to a new section. It is a shortened transition that, unlike the previous one, resolves the bass up a semi-tone (see measures 78 & 79). Theme 1 appears in the ‘cadential transition’ just as before, but

this time motif 'a' (the minor-third) will be transformed into the accompanimental material of the next section.

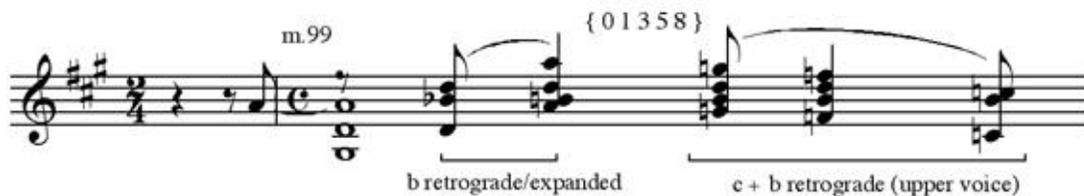
Final Development (81-111)

In this section, the final development of the melodic material takes place in the largest section of the piece. Theme 1, slightly reordered and fragmented, appears under transposition.



Example 5.1
Cloaked appearance of theme 1. Individual motives shown.

While this thematic material is a distant reference to the opening, the right-hand figure is anchored in the opening harmony, which is grounded in a tertian relationship based on F#. There are two 'tidal' interjections in measures 86-89, and 93-95 in the left hand. The initial 'wave' begins and ends on B, while a G# frames the second forming a tertian relationship between the two. Measure 99 recalls the tonality of the opening, specifically set-class {01358}, while keeping the pitch 'A' as the common tone. Example 5.2 (below) maps the components of theme 1 and shows the set-class structure.



Example 5.2
Final development of theme 1.

The familiarity of this tonal landscape is short-lived, however. While keeping the melodic contour and intervallic relationships intact, the tonality shifts to an extended chordal sound as seen in Example 5.3. The two chords outlined, Eb 9 #11 and C13 are related by third (the ‘A’ of the C13 is present in the right hand – not shown).

Example 5.3
Harmonic shift of m.99. Tertian relationship between chords.

The harmonic shift in measure 101 effectively destabilizes the piece, leading to relatively unfamiliar territory. The end-point of this instability can be seen in measure 103 where the bass moves from the ‘G’ down to ‘Bb,’ similarly shown in example 5.3. This sequence is repeated which leads to the culminating whirlwind in measure 104. The harmony is based on the same chord from measure 101, Eb 9 #11. The right hand melody suggests a whole-tone collection (these notes create the 9th and #11th), and the left hand contains the basic chord-tones of the chord, Eb7. The inversion of this chord becomes important in moving to the next section, the last set of waves. The ‘Bb’ in the bass resolves by semi-tone to the ‘A’ resulting in the chordal cadence by tritone (see measures 111-112).

3rd Waves & Closing (112-140)

The final set of waves is harmonically anchored around ‘A’. A similar sequence of set-class exchanges occurs just as in the other wave sets. The performer should pay

particular attention to the bass movement in the next section, which is the last ‘cadential transition’ (measure 120). Again, the same melodic material can be found here as before. The area that is the result of this transition is of particular interest. There is an intensification of the ‘a’ motif starting in measure 125 over an undulating bass movement, which is centered on ‘G’. The same ‘tidal’ interjection seen in measures 86 and 93, makes an appearance in measures 126 and 128. The centricity around ‘G’ is somewhat camouflaged by the chromaticism surrounding it. However, this chromatic undulating links the bass movement by half step to measure 104. The final chromatic movement is to ‘F#’ on the arrival of the original melodic material, in the original key of F# minor. While this is a shortened version of the ‘A’ section, it refers to the interval of the ‘a’ motif, or minor third, on which the piece closes.

In formal terms, Ravel manages to create a revamped type of sonata form. The effect is achieved through returning to familiar material and familiar tonal centers. Just as a performer navigates a sonata by Haydn by recognizing the implicit tonal markers of the form (eg., 2nd theme group returns in tonic in the recapitulation), the same can be said for navigating Ravel’s music. Although these markers do not follow the formal guidelines that can be seen in a classical form, they can be found in an analysis. And while these structural guides may not function the same way, they serve as an aid to benefit the performer, in delineating Ravel’s language. One has to formulate and interpret an analysis uniquely to his/her understanding in order to find a way into this language. Understanding structure is a vital element in performance, and it must be explored in some manner for a successful and fulfilling performance.

Performance Considerations and Imagery

Armed with an analysis, there is another layer to add to the complexity of this music: the imagery – Ravel’s imagination. While the musical structure and content is remarkable, one of the most wonderful elements, which adds to the formal structure, is the imagery. It can provide the performer with performance considerations, and a means to navigate the piece. It also puts the piece into a perspective that can be easier to digest than an analysis alone. Marguerite Long defines the title *Miroirs* in the context of reflected reality.

This title in itself is an aesthetic proposition. It underlies what the Impressionists have amply proved – the pre-eminence of reflected light from the direct image in the appeal to our sensibility and in the creation of an illusion. These pieces are intensely descriptive and pictorial. They banish all sentiment in expression but offer the listener a number of refined sensory elements which can be appreciated according to his imagination.⁸

In playing the left hand arpeggios in “Une barque sur l’océan,” consider the image of a boat gently rocking in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. It is documented that Ravel vacationed on the Yacht *Animée*, and, while on this cruise, visited many places and saw things that sparked his imagination.

⁸ James, Burnett, p 44.

...So I need hardly tell you that I am not concentrating on anything, but am storing it all away and I think many things will come from this cruise.

...What music there is in all this! I mean to make good use of it.⁹

In particular, his time spent on a boat on the ocean likely planted the seed that later blossomed into “Une barque sur l’océan.” The realistic unevenness of the seas is realized in the mixed-meter. Theme 2 might represent buoy bells that aid the skipper in navigating the channel. Referred to as consequent sections earlier, measures 11-13 and 21-13 serve as a transition that moves the boat into different waters, effectively moving away from the harbor. Measure 28 provides a great shock value in the form of a loud thunderclap. The ensuing section effectively depicts a windy storm on the ocean, and a boat negotiating enormous waves. There is a calm section in measure 55 followed by the opening sailing motive in a different key. The calmness and stability is cut short by another round of waves in measure 68. The middle section, measures 81-102, could be considered as a depiction of a boat being lost at sea amidst a steady rain. The melody in measure 98 represents the ‘skipper’s’ resignation of hope. The narrative climaxes in measure 103 in a swirling whirlwind, the final push of the storm. The overall intensity diminishes with a ‘smaller’ set of waves and the return of the opening material signals the familiar waters of the harbor.

Even with a compressed summary, the performer can have a narrative to follow along with the analytical considerations. There would be a missing element if the role of

⁹ James, Burnett, p 41. This quote is taken from a letter Ravel sent to Maurice Delage while on a holiday cruise on the *Animée*. Ravel returned to Paris from this excursion in the summer of 1905. This cruise must have had an impact on Ravel’s imagination while composing *Miroirs*, in particular “Une barque sur l’océan.”

the imagery were not brought to bear on the interpretation. While this aspect of analysis is highly subjective, there is an indisputable reference to a boat in the ocean.

“Une barque sur l’océan” is the central work in *Miroirs*, in that it is placed third in a set of five movements, and is thematically connected to the other movements (or visa versa). Furthermore, as the titles of the other four movements might suggest, there is implicit imagery that must be addressed as well.

“Noctuelles,” or Night-moths, is the first in the set and opens with a depiction of their erratic flights. Subsequently, the timing of phrases is the essence of this piece. Familiar thematic material is introduced within the first few measures: the falling fourth Eb – Bb in the right hand, parallel dominant-seventh chords in the left. While there is not a particularly extensive narrative present, the imagery and its accuracy provides an angle from which to interpret the movement.

“Oiseaux tristes,” or “Sad birds”, was composed first but placed second in the set. The biting dissonances and languid tempo create the landscape of a humid forest filled with calls of birds. A contrasting flailing section invokes the image of flapping wings amongst the trees. By and large, the imagery suggests a sorrowful, uncomfortable atmosphere. The falling third is a central motive in this piece, and assumes the role of a birdcall. While there are other thematic similarities between the movements, the falling third, or ‘a’ motive from example 1.1, is particularly important in this instance since the adjacent “Une barque sur l’océan” opens with this interval.

“Alborada del gracioso” brings us to Spain through rhythmic flavor and flamenco-guitar-like figures. The title translates crudely as “The Fool’s Dawn Song.” The movement is basically organized into a ternary form where the A sections contain the

overtly Spanish material through rhythm and semi-tone clashes, and the ‘B’ section is a recitative that calms the intensity for a short while. It is in this ‘B’ section that the thematic connection to other movements can be blatantly heard, thanks in part to the thin texture of the recitative. Again, as in the other movements, thematic connections can be made to most, if not all of the material. However, the contrast of this movement to the previous, “Une barque sur l’océan,” conceals the motivic economy present in the clashing opening. The movement ends in dramatic fashion and high intensity. The last section of the coda makes explicit use of the falling-fourth motive, which is a crucial interval of the following movement, “La vallée des cloches.”

“The Valley of the Bells,” while not the most technically demanding of the set, could well be the most successful. The imagery is open to imagination: Paris at 3 in the afternoon? There are several ‘bells’ that each has a distinct characteristic, for instance: the ‘octave bell’ which opens the movement, the faster-paced carillon in measure 3, and the bell in measure 4 that recalls the falling-third. There are big bells and small bells, bells of every kind. In the middle of it all is a chant section that coincides similarly with the chant section in “Alborada del gracioso.” The main thematic focus is the falling-fourth. “Alborada del gracioso” closed with a repetition of the falling-fourths, which connects it to the *tres calme* section of this movement (eg., measure 12). In short, this movement recalls the salient themes contained in *Miroirs*. It eloquently closes the set through reminiscent statements of thematic material that has been present all the way through.

Another interesting aspect of the *Miroirs* is the connection of one movement to the next. “Noctuelles” ends with an Ab (part of a Db major triad) in the top voice, which

leads to the opening Bb in “Oiseaux tristes.” The final Eb in that movement resolves up a semi-tone to E, the opening pitch (soprano, top voice) in “Une barque sur l’océan.” The ending pitches of “Une barque sur l’océan” are C# and E which surround the opening pitch D of “Alborada del gracioso.” The final pitch A of that movement, in context of D major resolves down a semi-tone to G# while the chordal resolution is by tritone (D-G#). This is an example of voice leading on a large-scale, but it is analogous to the voice leading found in measure-sized units. The performer should hear and feel the connection between flanking movements, and the associations throughout *all* the movements. Just as each movement is uniquely connected through its own tonality, thematic characteristics, and voice leading, so too do thematic and tonal parallels unite all five *Miroirs*.

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