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Ravel's Timeliness and his
Many Late Styles*Barbara L. Kelly*

Ravel's late style is an interesting case. First of all, unlike other composers considered to have had a distinct 'late style', he is not regarded as unequivocally 'great', having composed under the shadow of Claude Debussy's more striking and extrovert genius. Furthermore, in periodizing Ravel's musical career, it is impossible to ignore the First World War, which occurred as Ravel was reaching middle age. Rather than dividing his musical career into the usual early, middle, and late categories, there is a tendency to contrast the productive and innovative pre-war phase with the struggle, trauma, and illness he experienced after the war. The final period from 1919 to 1937—in which Ravel produced the work critics regard as expressing his late style, such as *La Valse* (1919–20), the opera, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1925), *Bohème* (1920), and the two Piano Concerti (1929–30 and 1929–31)—is not considered to be one of untroubled productivity, in the manner of some late-style figures; rather it is characterized as aesthetically inconsistent, eclectic, and in certain instances psychologically revealing. For a composer who adopted a dandified persona and sought to keep his biography separate from his art, Ravel's late works reveal an emerging subjectivity in his compositions, which seems to run counter to the orthodox rigours of lateness expressed in Adorno's well-known reading of Beethoven. With the exception of the Concerto for the Left Hand, very few of Ravel's late works are regarded as his best achievements. In line with discourses of late style, however, his works show nostalgic tendencies and undeniably reveal a change in his relationship to his own time. Ravel's case is further complicated by his apparent complicity in embracing lateness; composing at a time when it was possible to be aware of the construction of late style, Ravel, as a forward-looking composer, gives a fascinating insight into the role the individual artist can play in shaping our ideas about its identity. The work of Ravel's latter years, then, offers a complex and in some ways puzzling test case for the idea of late style.

WAR AND PREMATURE AGING

Ravel arguably had two late styles. Rather than simply being a question of the artistic fruits of old age, as in many of Said's examples, the first late style of Ravel

was motivated by a major world event, and exacerbated by personal loss, that of his mother; the other by actual illness, and physical and artistic decline. Intriguingly, in contrast to many of the other writers and composers discussed in this volume, lateness is not a quality conferred on Ravel by scholars long after the event;¹ rather, Ravel's late style was perceived, even provoked, by his contemporaries. The critic Emile Vuillermoz, who was a partisan defender of Debussy and *debussysme*, wrote about the premature aging of his and Ravel's generation. Vuillermoz's apparent bitterness on this subject is motivated by his view that the Great War cut short the normal period over which a generation could expect to establish themselves and make their impact:

War has deprived them of the normal period of success, which they were right to expect. The generation which understood them and defended them has disappeared. Today the page has turned. A brutal youth has presented us with another ideal and has employed all the means to be successful. A savage struggle is taking place just now around Akela's rock of council. We can't say anything about it because it is the law of the jungle.²

Vuillermoz appears to acknowledge defeat and a sense of disorientation; the rules of musical politics as he had known them had changed and he was determined to resist the new 'laws of the jungle'. As a result, Vuillermoz, the defender of Debussy and Ravel's generation, appears as a reactionary figure in 1920s Paris because he refused to accept the consensus that the arts needed to respond to the social and political change brought about by what Adorno would call a catastrophe, in this case, the Great War.³ This perception that Ravel's generation had had its day has persisted.⁴

Ravel's apologist and disciple, Roland-Manuel, responded to Vuillermoz's point about war and the generational divide in an unpublished article, 'Les Six devant Ravel'. He, too, blamed the war for the radically contradictory accounts of contemporary French music given by Vuillermoz and the young Darius Milhaud in their writings in the press:

It is the war which is at the heart of this debate: it has created a profound crevasse between the two generations, which is always gaping and which nothing can bridge. It is so deep that one hesitates to erect ladders.⁵

¹ See, for example, chapters in this volume by McMullan and Tunbridge.

² 'La guerre les a privés de la période normale de succès qu'ils étaient en droit d'attendre. La génération qui devait les comprendre et les défendre a disparu. Aujourd'hui, la page est tournée. Une jeunesse brutale nous propose un autre idéal et emploie tous les moyens pour le faire triompher. Une lutte sauvage se livre actuellement autour d'Akela sur le rocher du conseil... il n'y a rien à dire, car telle est la loi de la jungle', Emile Vuillermoz, *Musiques d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Crès, 1923), 94.

³ See Robert Spencer, 'Lateness and Modernity in Theodor Adorno', in this volume.

⁴ For a fuller discussion of Vuillermoz's sense of a lost generation, see Barbara L. Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), 179–81, and Barbara L. Kelly, 'Enjeux de mémoire après la mort de Debussy', in Myriam Chimènes and Alexandra Laederich (eds), *Regards sur Debussy* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 401–7.

⁵ C'est la guerre qui est à l'origine de ce débat: elle a creusé entre deux générations une profonde crevasse, toujours béante, que rien ne saurait combler, et sur les profondeurs de laquelle on hésite à tender des échelles (p. 1). For a fuller discussion, see Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 180–2.

He concurs with Vuillermoz that ‘a new generation had appeared who were twice as impatient to live and take action’⁶ but he differs in describing their attempted coup as ‘spontaneous, beyond contention and necessary’.⁷ Whereas Vuillermoz expressed outrage at the rejection of his deceased Maître, Debussy, Roland-Manuel focused understandably on his own teacher, Ravel, who was very much alive.⁸ His aim was to argue that despite pressures to cast Ravel aside, he was still the best figurehead for the new generation to follow.⁹

Ravel was pushed into premature old age by a number of key figures in his musical circle, notably by the slightly older and enigmatic Erik Satie. The two men had been close in 1911, when Ravel had helped to launch Satie into modernist circles. Ravel acknowledged his debt to Satie, ‘the precursor’, whom he credited with having anticipated so-called musical ‘Impressionism’. However, Satie was not content to remain the precursor and sought new ways to experiment with music as a means of provocation, using a brand of humour he developed in his café-concert activities to make his mark. From 1914 he started to direct his humour against Ravel, writing a parody of Ravel’s *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911) entitled *Trois Valses distinguées du précieux dégouté* (1914). Although the musical connections are fairly superficial, Satie’s paratexts make the object of his distaste clear; Satie’s score becomes a multifaceted text of private reading as well as for public performance.¹⁰ While Satie’s increasing hostility towards Ravel was initially private, it became a public campaign after the war. In response to Ravel’s refusal to accept the Legion of Honour in 1920, Satie famously replied: ‘Ravel refuses the Legion of Honour but all his music accepts it’.¹¹ Although he intended this as an attack, Satie may have had a point, as we shall see.

Edward Said and other critics have observed that a late-style artist is often out of place in his own time.¹² Robert Spencer, in this volume, identifies a tension in Adorno between the logic of artistic form and timeliness, ‘the age in which the artist lives’.¹³ This is a central issue for Ravel scholars because it is problematic. Satie led the charge that Ravel was out of date; he was joined by some members of the group, Les Six, notably Georges Auric and Darius Milhaud. They made their antipathy to Ravel a central theme of their group identity, even though other

⁶ ‘une nouvelle génération était apparue, deux fois impatiente de vivre et d’agir,’ Les Six devant Ravel’, 1.

⁷ ‘avant toute chose, avant même d’avoir créé quelque chose’; ‘spontané, inéluctable et nécessaire’, 1.

⁸ Son rival désigné devait être nécessairement un musicien qui touchait à la gloire, jeune encore et capable de nouveaux tours de force. Maurice Ravel était précisément ce musicien-là’, 1.

⁹ Roland-Manuel’s article was a direct response to an article by the critic Paul Landormy, which was published in the same journal just a few months earlier. Here he consigned Ravel to the past and directed his attention instead towards the emerging generation of Les Six. See Paul Landormy, ‘Le Déclin de l’Impressionnisme’, *La Revue musicale*, 2/4 (February 1921), 97–113. For a fuller discussion of Landormy’s role in promoting Milhaud and his colleagues, see Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 83–6, 167–9.

¹⁰ They were performed by Satie at a concert entitled ‘Instant musical’ as part of the Lyre et Palette series on 19 November 1916. See Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 44–5.

¹¹ Erik Satie, *Le Coq* (1 May, 1920), 1.

¹² Edward Said, ‘Timeliness and Lateness’ and ‘A Lingering Old Order’ in *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 6–7, 91–3.

¹³ Spencer, ‘Lateness and Modernity in Theodore Adorno’, 7.

members of Les Six were much more sympathetic. Not only did the question of Ravel divide the group, it led to Durey's early resignation in 1921.¹⁴ While Satie was motivated by personal grudges and resentments, he was not alone. Milhaud and Henri Sauguet admitted visceral distaste for Ravel's music, finding it old-fashioned and in bad taste.¹⁵

Most damaging for Ravel, however, was the loss of support of the arbiter of artistic taste and fashion, the impresario of the Ballets Russes, Serge Diaghilev.¹⁶ Poulenc gives an insight into Diaghilev's rejection of Ravel in the post-war period. Like Satie, 'Diaghilev pushed the youth to reject their ancestors, their elders'.¹⁷ He recounts how Diaghilev taunted Poulenc at a post-war performance of *Daphnis et Chloé* in Monte Carlo: 'Ah, are you going to listen to this old music?'¹⁸ More revealing is Poulenc's famous account of Diaghilev's rejection of the ballet *La Valse* at a private audition at the home of the influential patron of the arts, Misia Sert, which was attended by Stravinsky and Poulenc among others in 1920. Poulenc recalled his shock when he witnessed Ravel's humiliation, Stravinsky's silence, and Ravel's dignified exit on receiving Diaghilev's verdict: 'Ravel, it's a masterpiece... but this is not a ballet... It is the portrait of a ballet.'¹⁹ The issue of it being a copy or imitation of a ballet, rather than something living and present, is relevant to an assessment of the problem with *La Valse*.

Intriguingly, Ravel was complicit in questioning his relationship to his time. Poulenc described his first meeting with Ravel as 'Une déception "effroyable"'; instead of encouraging the young Poulenc, Ravel delighted in singing the merits of the two particularly old-fashioned composers, Schumann and Mendelssohn.²⁰ Indeed, rather than resenting the young generation their outspoken rejection of him, he appeared to admire and encourage it.²¹ Poulenc confirms that 'Ravel thanked us for having been anti-Ravelians, because there were quite enough people who were copying him'.²² It seems clear that Ravel was unwilling to resume his position as a leading figure of the avant-garde, a position he held as the principal founder of the Société musicale indépendante. The pressure and expectations on him were all the greater with the death of Debussy in 1918. The retreat from musical leadership was matched on a practical level by his decision to move out of Paris

¹⁴ See Francis Poulenc, *Correspondance, 1910–1963*, ed. Myriam Chimènes (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 121.

¹⁵ Darius Milhaud, *Ma Vie heureuse* (Paris: Belfond, 1987), 28–9; Henri Sauguet in Poulenc, *Correspondance*, 241. See also Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 56–8.

¹⁶ Diaghilev's influence on the aesthetic direction of the arts in France should not be underestimated. He played an important role in steering ballet away from Russian exoticism to a closer engagement with European musical traditions.

¹⁷ 'Diaghilev poussait les jeunes renier leur ancêtres, leurs aînés', Poulenc, *Moi et mes amis*, in *J'écris ce qui me chante*, ed. Nicolas Southon (Paris: Fayard, 2011), 917.

¹⁸ 'Ah! Est-ce que vous allez entendre cette vieille musique?', Poulenc in Southon, 917.

¹⁹ 'Ravel, c'est un chef-d'oeuvre... mais ce n'est pas un ballet... C'est le portrait d'un ballet', Southon, p. 918.

²⁰ Poulenc, *Moi et mes amis*, Southon, 916.

²¹ Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous* (Geneva: Editions du Milieu du monde, 1945), 99; see also Roger Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered* (London: Faber, 1987), 104.

²² 'Ravel nous a remerciés d'avoir été des antiravéliens, car il en avait assez des gens qui le copiaient'. Poulenc, *Moi et mes amis*, in Southon, 917.

to Montfort L'Amaury. According to Orenstein his desire for the 'isolation' of his new home, Le Belvédère and the 'tranquillity' of St Jean de Luz, which he visited regularly, offset the increasing artistic and social demands of Paris.²³ This compulsion to retreat appears to have been Ravel's response to the collective trauma of war and the personal tragedy of his mother's death. Spencer considers Adorno's notion that lateness comes 'after something of which one is a survivor';²⁴ this relates well to Ravel's case, since these events marked the beginning of his decline on both personal and artistic levels. Yet Ravel's withdrawal gave him a new freedom to be less concerned with artistic fashion of the present and to draw on traditions both past and present as it suited him.²⁵ Embracing lateness, therefore, may have started as a way of opting out but arguably becomes a new way of publicly shaping and projecting his career.²⁶

LA VALSE, TIMELINESS, AND CATASTROPHE

La Valse is the first work to display signs of late style because it reveals a problematic relationship between the composer and the time in which he was creating. I could go further to suggest that *La Valse* was his first miscalculation. Completed in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, its treatment of the Viennese waltz in the tradition of Johann Strauss was puzzling, causing many to read it as a commentary on the recent European conflict. Many authoritative readings of Ravel's *La Valse* have tried to grapple with its musical structure and semantic significance.²⁷ Many take Ravel's own comments as a starting point. Ravel gives brief clues, which were published in the orchestral score (1921) about the setting of his choreographic poem and the musical techniques he employs:

Through breaks in the swirling clouds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed. Little by little they disperse: an immense hall filled with a whirling crowd can be made out (A). The stage is illuminated gradually. The light of the chandeliers peaks at the fortissimo (B).

An Imperial Court, about 1855.²⁸

²³ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel, Man and Musician* (New York: Dover Publishing, 1975), 83. See Said on self-imposed artistic exile in 'Timeliness and Lateness', *On Late Style*, 16.

²⁴ Spencer, 'Lateness and Modernity in Theodore Adorno', this volume.

²⁵ For comparisons with late Richard Strauss, see Said, 'Return to the Eighteenth Century', *On Late Style*, 40–1.

²⁶ See Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 110–74 for a discussion of the artist's wilful complicity in establishing his own 'late period'.

²⁷ See, among others, George Benjamin, 'Last Dance', *The Musical Times*, vol. 135, no. 1817 (July 1994), 432–5; Michael J. Puri, *Ravel the Decadent, Memory, Sublimation, and Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 168–84; Deborah Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel, Creation and Interpretation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 149–82; Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 209–55; and Volker Helbing, 'Spiral and Self-Destruction in Ravel's *La Valse*', in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 180–210.

²⁸ 'Des nuées tourbillonnantes laissent entrevoir, par éclaircies, des couples de valseurs. Elles se dissipent peu à peu : on distingue (A) une immense salle peuplée d'une foule tournoyante. La scène s'éclaire progressivement. La lumière des lustres éclate au ff (B). Une Cour impériale, vers 1855,' Ravel, *La Valse* (Paris: Durand, 1921), ii.

The description places the work in a time that is irretrievably lost, particularly so after the post-war dismantling of the Hapsburg Empire, which was formalized by the Treaty of St Germain in 1919. His words also offer more abstract notions of 'whirling' and light (colour). He went further in his *Autobiographical Sketch* of 1928 (shortly before the first ballet performance): 'I conceived this work as a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, mixed, in my mind, with the impression of a fantastic and fatal whirling'.²⁹ The key words of 'apotheosis' and 'fantastic and fatal whirling' have stimulated a number of recent analyses (Mawer and Helbing), which have traced the whirling motion and spiral forms in the structure of the music.³⁰ Helbing writes about the teleological propulsion towards a frenetic conclusion, which is evident in other works by Ravel, notably his populist *Boléro*.³¹ This wilful loss of control has encouraged readings of the work that reflect not 1855 but the much more recent war. The musical whirling comes to represent both the destructive power of war and also the disorientation and trauma of Ravel.³² While such interpretations still abound, they began at the time of the first (orchestral) performance in 1920.³³ Ravel commentated on this tension over meaning as early as 1922:

One is forced to believe that this work needs to be illuminated by footlights, so much has it provoked strange comments. While some people detect an intended parody—or even caricature—others definitely see a tragic allusion—the end of the Second Empire, the state of Vienna after the war . . .

Tragic this dance may seem, as with all feeling—desire, joy—pushed to the extreme. One should see in it only what the music expresses: an ascending progression of sonority, to which the stage will add those of light and movement.³⁴

Ravel mocks the extravagant interpretations (which he had helped to initiate) by offering a more abstract reading in which the preoccupations are more musical and up to date. Not only was the focus on sonority a current and enduring preoccupation for Ravel and his circle but also, in articulating a connection to the scenario and dance that is based on movement and light rather than narrative, he sounds very much like Stravinsky, who was actively redefining the relationship between music and dramatic action, as his reinterpretation of the relationship between music and action in *The Rite of Spring* exemplifies.³⁵

²⁹ Ravel, 'An Autobiographical Sketch', in Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 32. See Said on the artist escaping his own time in 'Glimpses of Late Style', *On Late Style*, 144–5.

³⁰ Helbing, 'Spiral and Self-Destruction', 180–1; Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 149–62.

³¹ Helbing cites *Sonatine* (1905), 'Feria' (*Rapsodie espagnole*, 1907), 'Scarbo' (*Gaspard de la nuit*, 1908), *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912), and the 'Toccatà' from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1917), 180.

³² Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 3.

³³ *La Valse* received its first orchestral performance on 12 December by the Lamoureux Orchestra conducted by Camille Chevillard.

³⁴ Ravel to Maurice Emmanuel, 14 October 1922, in Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 230.

³⁵ See Louis Handler, 'Le Livret du *Sacre du Printemps*: Une entrevue avec Igor Strawinsky', *Comoedia*, 27 December, 1920; see also Ernest Ansermet, 'L'Oeuvre d'Igor Strawinsky', *La Revue Musicale* 2/9 (July 1921), 1–27.

Contemporary, too, are the readings that see the ballet as an enactment of the life cycle. H. Danuser and G. Benjamin's interpretations derive from the ballet's opening, where the music emerges as if from nothing, building up from fragments to more sustained statements of a series of waltzes (figures 18–50). The final section's excess (figures 76–101) is generally seen as destructive and indicative of the death of the musical subject. Not only can it be likened to the ritualistic dance to the death in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, there were other more recent ballets concerned with human origins and the life cycle, notably, Honegger's *Le Dit des jeux du monde* (1918), and Milhaud's *L'Homme et son désir* (1921) and *La Création du monde* (1923).³⁶ While such preoccupations point to the work's modernity and currency, there are other qualities that made (and continue to make) the ballet appear anachronistic.

Michael Puri's recent study of *La Valse* gives a further insight into the problem with the ballet. Ravel's own claim that the turbulent ending of the ballet represents not destruction but desire and joy pushed to the extreme leads Puri to describe the ballet's ending as a Dionysian Bacchanale, a 'primitive revelry' in the manner of *Daphnis et Chloe* (1909–12).³⁷ First conceived as early as 1906, Puri argues that Ravel wrote *La Valse* with the Ballets Russes in mind. It was certainly in his mind when Diaghilev sent Ravel back to revise the Bacchanale ending of *Daphnis* between 1910 and 1912 because the impresario required a more extended and orgiastic conclusion to the ballet.³⁸ For Puri, the ending of *Daphnis* served as a model for *La Valse*, enabling Ravel to complete it. In the light of this, Diaghilev's rejection of *La Valse* must have been a particularly personal blow; it signalled a serious miscalculation on Ravel's part because he had failed to keep pace with Diaghilev's sense of artistic currency.

Many writers have commented on the anachronistic nature of the waltz. Why would Ravel choose to focus on the Viennese waltz? To Milhaud and many others since, it seemed in horribly bad taste. But the waltz as a dance form was not necessarily old-fashioned; Satie and Stravinsky used it regularly in their most recent works in this period. Indeed, Stravinsky places it alongside the fashionable tango and the ragtime in his *L'Histoire du soldat* (1918–20). The problem was not with the waltz but with Ravel's treatment of it. Rather than emphasizing the waltz's currency in *La Valse*, the explicit homage to the easy and voluptuous romanticism of Johann Strauss revealed Ravel's increasing nostalgia for the recent past. Puri emphasizes the role of memory in his discussion of *La Valse*. The first section (figures 1–17) is constructed organically out of waltz fragments that appear to be 'recalled from the past' before finding greater certainty in a waltz suite that follows.³⁹ Ravel seems not to have been sufficiently aware of the problem of paying tribute to Johann Strauss. In an interview he gave on a visit to Vienna in 1920, where he gave the première of *La Valse*, in the version for two pianos, Ravel declared: 'Of the Viennese composers, Johann Strauss is and still remains the most popular in France. I admire and love his

³⁶ Whereas Stravinsky, Honegger, and Milhaud take us back to an archaic, ritualistic primitivism, Ravel focuses in on what became the archetypal leisure activity of the middle-class (the waltz) under capitalist modernity.

³⁷ Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*, 179–80.

³⁸ Puri, 129.

³⁹ Puri, 168.

waltzes, which everybody in our country knows'.⁴⁰ His statement reveals his awareness of issues of popularity and appeal beyond the expectations of the elite. Alongside *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, his act of homage to French traditions and fallen friends, *La Valse* signalled an inconsistent conformity to elitist fashions and a new awareness of popular taste. Yet, unlike the ubiquitous *Boléro*, Ravel's treatment of the ballet is far from populist. In terms of late style, *La Valse* comes closest to Adorno's case about Beethoven's late style. The waltz in *La Valse* is grotesque; it is one of Adorno's catastrophes. Rather than the work representing the post-war destruction of Europe, the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire, or indeed Ravel's psychological state, here it is the form itself that dominates, spirals out of control, and self-destructs.⁴¹

AESTHETIC AND STYLISTIC INCONSISTENCY

Adorno and Said identify stylistic and artistic inconsistency as a recognizable trait of late style. Indeed, it is the most striking and puzzling aspect of Ravel's post-war works; he appeared to engage very inconsistently with his own time, as though it no longer mattered. For Said the ageing artist displays a 'vigilant refusal to settle down or be of the same mind with the dominant view'.⁴² In complete contrast to *La Valse*, the Sonata for Violin and Cello (1920–22) constitutes the best example of Ravel's engagement with the dominant musical consensus at this time. Conceived as a duo for violin and cello in homage to Debussy for a special issue of Henry Prunières' new journal, *La Revue musicale*, Ravel developed it into a full sonata that displays many of the principal musical priorities of the post-war avant-garde. The work's bareness of sonority conforms to the 'style dépouillé', which was the latest preoccupation of the musical avant-garde; Ravel plays with sonority and texture in what is a technically challenging work. In exploring the sonorous capabilities of the strings, he plays with contrapuntal textures and bitonal passages that are clearly defined in terms of distinct key signatures. His choice of the sonata and use of cyclic form signals a contemporary commitment to pure forms devoid of extra-musical association; it also builds on and extends Debussy's subtly experimental late sonatas, which although framed as homages to the past, are more prospective than commentators often think.⁴³ If we believe (as I believe we should) in Ravel's awareness of his own aging, viewing Ravel's Sonata in terms of late style adds an additional level of meaning and poignancy to his homage to Debussy. It could be read as a challenge to the new trendsetters: not only does Ravel provide a link to the supposedly defunct late work of Debussy, he demonstrates that he is perfectly able to absorb the new style, only more brilliantly than either Satie or the young members

⁴⁰ Ravel, 'Viennese Impressions of a French Artist', *Neue Freie Presse*, 29 October 1920, in Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 420.

⁴¹ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Night Music: Essays on Music, 1928–1962*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Wieland Hoban (London and New York: Seagull Books, 2009), 15–18.

⁴² See Spencer, this volume; see also Said, 'Glimpses of Late Style', *On Late Style*, 134–6.

⁴³ For a discussion of multiple interpretations of Debussy's late sonatas see Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 139–42. See also Marianne Wheeldon, *Debussy's Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 1–19.

of Les Six, who were often berated for their technique. In this sense, it constitutes a riposte to his contemporaries; while he may have been complicit in embracing the idea of late style, it did not prevent his engagement with and mastery of the very latest musical developments when he chose.

EMERGING SUBJECTIVITY

Adorno writes of the destructive force of subjectivity and lack of synthesis in Beethoven's late works between form and individual expression.⁴⁴ While he argues that form is mastered and controlled by Beethoven's subjectivity in works such as his Fifth Symphony, this unity and control is shattered in his late work, leading to fragmentation, eruption, and ultimately to 'catastrophe'.⁴⁵ There is a very different relationship between Ravel the composer and his work. While Adorno is valuable in pinpointing particular traits in the late work of certain composers of 'genius' and in identifying significant changes in the relationship between the artist, his work, and the time in which he is creating, there is a danger of trying to apply Beethoven's distinctive case to all artists or of imposing excessively restrictive categories for identifying lateness. We have already seen how Ravel both conforms to and resists Adorno's definitions. Ravel fashioned for himself a public image as a dandy figure for whom life and creativity were kept deliberately separate. In adopting the image of the craftsman, whose task it was to create beautiful objects, he resisted the heroic image of the great artist, which commentators including E. T. A. Hoffmann and much later, Adorno, cultivated for Beethoven. Detractors such as Pierre Lalo and Ravel's supporters were quick to point out the gap between Ravel's creative work and the creator; Ravel was portrayed as a conjurer, a trickster, and a 'fantaisiste' who could play with the emotions of his listeners but remain detached from them. This was in stark contrast to the image created for his rival and near contemporary, Debussy, whose work was linked to nature and spontaneity. In 1913, Calvocoressi famously put words into Ravel's mouth when he said 'but has no-one realized that I might be artificial by nature?'⁴⁶ The labels of 'artificiality' and 'imposter' have stuck to Ravel ever since, aided by Roland-Manuel's articles and biographies, which developed an arguably stereotyped understanding of Ravel's musical aesthetics.⁴⁷ Recent scholarship, notably by Lawrence Kramer and Michael Puri, has built on this foundation and has sought to explore and theorize Ravel as a dandy figure who substituted art for life through musical sublimation.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Adorno, 14–18. ⁴⁵ Adorno, 18.

⁴⁶ Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, *Musician's Gallery* (London: Faber, 1933), quoted in Nichols, *Ravel Remembered*, 180. Calvocoressi first wrote about artificiality in Ravel as early as 1913: see 'Maurice Ravel', *Musical Times* (1 December 1913), 785.

⁴⁷ See Roland-Manuel, 'Maurice Ravel et l'esthétique de l'imposture'; for a fuller discussion of Roland-Manuel's efforts as Ravel's apologist, see Kelly, 'Re-presenting Ravel' in Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel*, 41–62.

⁴⁸ See Lawrence Kramer, 'Consuming the Exotic: Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*' in Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 201–25; Puri, *Ravel the Decadent*; Steven Huebner, 'Maurice Ravel: Private Life, Public Works', in Jolanta T. Pekacz (ed.), *Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 69–87.

However, Ravel's late works do not quite conform to this image, resulting in their relative scholarly neglect.⁴⁹ His post-war works reveal an eruption of subjectivity by someone who studiously sought to avoid it. Ravel's opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1925) has attracted considerable attention for the insight it gives both into contemporary psychology and into Ravel's own mind.⁵⁰ Drawing on the contemporary psychological theories of Melanie Klein, scholars have argued that Colette and Ravel's opera explores the tortured relationships between child and parent. The opera is fantastical; the boy falls out not only with his mother, but with the household spirits and animals, who teach him a lesson by tormenting and frightening the child until he displays some compassion for a squirrel he has injured. This act enables his reconciliation with the spirits and animals and, of course, with the unseen mother. The opera deals with the child's experience of growing up; the child observes adult sexual relationships in the duet between two cats, an experience that is clearly frightening. The composer's friends frequently observed that Ravel remained childlike. Not only was he childlike in stature and height and often sought out the company of children in preference to his hosts, he sought the protection of his network of friends (the group the Apaches and a handful of intimates, including Hélène Jourdan-Morhange and Marguerite Long) who nurtured and protected him throughout his life and sought to shape an understanding of his significance after his death.⁵¹ Ravel's avoidance of intimate adult relationships and his deep attachment to his mother were other signs to his friends that he never quite became fully adult.

Musically, *L'Enfant* is extremely eclectic. Ravel employs an array of styles and techniques almost in the manner of Baroque composers, who could adopt the French, Italian, or English style at will. He was open about his ability to switch on a particular style, acknowledging that 'the score of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* is a well-blended mixture of all styles from every era, from Bach up to . . . Ravel . . . ! It goes from opera to American musical, passing through the jazz-band'.⁵² The opening, in pseudo-Chinese style of parallel fourths outlining the pentatonic scale, is a deliberate cliché akin to the required 'once upon a time': in an instant we are transported to a child's world of clocks, shepherds, naughty cats, and numbers out of control. Ravel's musical treatment shows his keen ability to identify with his subject. The work does not attempt to engage with contemporary styles or techniques

⁴⁹ There are exceptions, of course, but it is striking that Puri's emphasis in his *Ravel the Decadent* is overwhelmingly in favour of the works up to the *La Valse* (1920).

⁵⁰ See Richard Langham Smith, 'Ravel's operatic spectacle: *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*', in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 188–210; Emily Kilpatrick, 'The Language of Enchantment: Childhood and Fairytale in the Music of Maurice Ravel', PhD diss., Elder Conservatorium of Music, University of Adelaide, 2008, chapters 1 and 8; and Peter Kaminsky, 'The Child on the Couch; or, Toward a (Psycho) Analysis of Ravel's *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*' in Kaminsky, *Unmasking Ravel*, 306–30.

⁵¹ See Jann Pasler, 'A Sociology of the Apaches: "Sacred Battalion" for *Pelléas*', in Barbara L. Kelly and Kerry Murphy (eds), *Berlioz and Debussy: Sources, Contexts and Performances* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 149–66.

⁵² Ravel, 'Avant-première à l'Opéra de Monte-Carlo, *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*', poème de Mme Colette, musique de M. Maurice Ravel', *Le Gaulois*, 20 March 1925 in *Maurice Ravel, Lettres, Écrits, Entretiens*, ed. Arbie Orenstein (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 349.

in any consistent way. Rather his identification with the boy (who was originally planned as a girl by Colette) is palpable. For these reasons, the opera stands out from Ravel's oeuvre for appearing to place the composer, as the child patient, on stage. Moreover, its stylistic eclecticism demonstrates yet another way in which Ravel's post-war work showed signs of lateness.

Les Chansons madécasses is a post-war work that has discomfited listeners and critics since its première in May 1926. On the one hand, in terms of instrumentation, texture, and harmonic language, the work has many qualities of the most recent music. Ravel reflected on this in his 'Autobiographical Sketch':

The songs form a sort of quartet in which the voice plays the role of the principal instrument. Simplicity is all-important. The independence of the part writing is pronounced, and it will be even more conspicuous in the Sonata for Violin and Piano.⁵³

In embracing the ideal of 'simplicity' and independent part-writing, he aligns himself with the recent aesthetic priorities of Satie and his youthful protégés. Ravel exploits the percussive qualities of the cello in experimental ways so that the cello sounds like a primitive drum; in so doing, he builds on Debussy's Sonata for Cello and Piano and also appears to approach Milhaud's more delicate instrumental writing in *Les Malheurs d'Orphée*.⁵⁴ While the exotic subject could easily suggest a return to fin-de-siècle fashions, Ravel shows an uncharacteristic side. First, for the only time he treats adult eroticism in a direct way in the first song, 'Nahandove'. Ravel had always avoided such depictions, preferring to portray it through animals (the peacock in *Histoires Naturelles* and the cats in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*) or youths in *Daphnis et Chloé*. Second, Ravel appears to drop his emotional guard in the second song, 'Aoua'. The song is shocking on account of its brutal opening war-cry and the menacing character of the suppressed and monotonous vocal line. Based on an eighteenth-century text by Evarist-Désiré, it tells the story of the white man's treachery towards the indigenous people. Yet Ravel appears to be reacting to an imaginative text. Parry had little experience of Madagascar and contemporary relations with the French protectorate in the 1920s were peaceful. As I argue in *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, Ravel's arguably 'misplaced' anger may well be a reflection of a collective French memory of more recent nineteenth-century colonial conflicts with Madagascar.⁵⁵ It reveals Ravel's attitude towards injustice more generally, which was in keeping with his left-of-centre politics. The song is unique in exposing Ravel's political ideology; furthermore, *Les Chansons madécasses* as a whole constitute a rare instance of a high degree of musical experimentation infused with subjectivity in a post-war French context that was dominated by neoclassical objectivity. Ravel's biographer, Roger Nichols, accounts for this subjectivity by suggesting that the composer abandoned the 'style dépouillé' in favour of Schoenbergian expressionism.⁵⁶ In so doing he follows Ravel's own comment that although the songs sound in no way Schoenbergian, he could not have written

⁵³ Ravel, 'An Autobiographical Sketch', p. 32.

⁵⁴ For a fuller discussion see Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 125–32. ⁵⁵ Kelly, 131–2.

⁵⁶ Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (London: Dent, 1977), 128, and Nichols, *Ravel* (2011), 278.

it if his Austrian colleague had not composed.⁵⁷ Rather than rejecting French classicizing tendencies, I believe that Ravel combines them with a rare expressionism, creating an uneasy musical alliance that reflected his own determined openness to music from different traditions. These conflicting ideological and musical elements remain unresolved, contributing in large measure to the work's discomfort and impact.

TOWARDS OLD AGE: SERVING THE *PATRIMOINE*

From a position of active and open resistance as a leading figure of the avant-garde, Ravel's later compositions and writings indicate that he seems to have rethought the purpose of art and the relationship of the artist to his country, developing a notion that the artist should write with an awareness of both his individual and national consciousness.⁵⁸ Ravel's late works and his professional activities on state-sponsored tours reveal his acceptance of his role and status in the context of the *patrimoine*. Said writes about late style tending to cut artists off from commercial considerations; this is not so with Ravel. Far from this clichéd image of the late composer attaining an unworldly state in old age with no commercial sense, Ravel became highly aware of his own position and artistic value.⁵⁹ The archives of the Association Française d'Expansion et d'Échanges Artistiques (at the Bibliothèque Nationale) reveal that the composer increasingly knew his international value for the French state and exploited his celebrity status on occasion, even at times of world economic crisis. In the first example, Ravel embarked on an extended tour of America and Canada between December 1927 and April 1928, where he performed and conducted in many major cities, supported by the French Ministry of Fine Arts and promoted by a private management company, Bogue-Laberge, based in New York and Montréal. The company broke protocol by claiming the patronage of the Ministry of Fine Arts, when it had only secured a lower level of state support for artistic exchanges, thereby causing a crisis within the ministry.⁶⁰ However, Bogue-Laberge's audacity in advertising the sponsorship on all their publicity left the ministry with no choice but to accept it. Ravel, sensing his value as a diplomatic pawn joined in the brinkmanship by asking for free passage on the SS *France*, having been offered a better deal by a German company. Inevitably, for the sake of French honour, Ravel appears to have got his way.⁶¹

The second example to illustrate Ravel's artistic value for the French comes from Ravel and Marguerite Long's European tour in 1932–3. The tour was centred on the première of the composer's long-awaited Concerto in G. The publicity initially

⁵⁷ Ravel, 'Contemporary Music', in Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 47.

⁵⁸ Ravel, 'Contemporary Music', *The Rice Institute Pamphlet*, 15 April 1928, 131–45 in Orenstein, *Ravel Reader*, 40–9.

⁵⁹ See Said, 'Return to the Eighteenth-Century', 40, and 'A Lingering Old Order', in *On Late Style*, 92.

⁶⁰ See extensive correspondence, BnF Mus., Fonds Montpensier: Ravel (Etats-Unis Tournée, 1928); for a full account of this diplomatic episode, see Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 227–9.

⁶¹ See notes on phone call made on 10 November and letter from Brussel to M. Henard, 17 November 1927, Fonds Montpensier: Ravel, BnF Mus. See Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France*, 229.

announced that Ravel would be the main attraction, not only as the composer but also as the soloist. It became increasingly clear, however, that Ravel was not well or able enough to carry this out.⁶² The news that Ravel would be replaced as soloist by Marguerite Long and that he would conduct his work was not uniformly welcomed by some orchestras and diplomats. Most shocking was the reaction of the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Wilhelm Furtwängler, who insisting that Ravel perform the work himself, threatened to offer the original date instead to Hindemith.⁶³ A diplomatic row ensued; René Dommange, Ravel's publisher, took Furtwängler's reaction as an insult.⁶⁴ The row blew over and the Concerto was performed by Mme Long one day rather than one year after the initial date. While Furtwängler only valued Ravel for the spectacle he could create as a virtuoso performer, Dommange spoke for the French establishment when he objected to this slight against 'our greatest composer'.⁶⁵ This different perception of value is also evident in the reaction of the Viennese to the news. Seeking reassurances that Ravel would conduct and not cancel on grounds of poor health, they accepted Long as the soloist, but announced subsequently that they could not pay a fee because of the financial crisis.⁶⁶ It was therefore down to the French state to contribute 35,000 francs to the European tour of sixteen cities.⁶⁷ It was a visible sign that despite increasing frailty, Ravel, as their most prestigious living composer, had become a valuable and increasingly expensive part of the French artistic propaganda effort.

The focus of the tour, Ravel's Concerto in G, is a work bearing many of the signs usually associated with lateness. Often seen as a trivial, light-hearted companion to the darker and deliberately virtuosic Concerto for the Left Hand—which Ravel wrote for the one-handed pianist, Paul Wittgenstein—it is a work that reflects music heard and created over a number of generations. The work is confessional in giving an insight into Ravel's musical preferences and current preoccupations; it is both deeply nostalgic while also engaging with recent styles and idioms. The opening movement immediately suggests Ravel's celebrated contemporary Stravinsky, but rather than the current neoclassical Stravinsky, Ravel recalls the pre-war Russian phase of *Petrushka*, full of the bright orchestral colour that betrays

⁶² See Nichols 2011, 322.

⁶³ Furtwängler, failing to understand that Ravel would never be able to perform the concerto, suggested delaying the concert by a year to enable Ravel to regain his health. See Fonds Montpensier: Ravel (Tournée en Europe 1932–33), letter from M. A François-Poncet, Ambassadeur de la République française à Berlin, to 'son excellence Monsieur Aristide Briand, Ministre des Affaires étrangères', 21 December 1931.

⁶⁴ Letter from Dommange to Robert Brussel, 29 December 1931; see also Nichols 2011, 322–33.

⁶⁵ See Said on the performer as an object of wonder, in the case of Glenn Gould, 'Virtuoso as Intellectual', in *On Late Style*, 118.

⁶⁶ Letter from M. Clauzel, Ministre de la République française en Autriche à Son Excellence Monsieur Briand, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères, 21 December 1931; see also letter from the Ministre des affaires étrangères à Monsieur le sous-secrétaire d'État des Beaux-arts (Service d'Action Artistique à l'étranger), 4 January 1932.

⁶⁷ Letter from François-Poncet, Ambassadeur de la République française à Berlin, à son excellence Monsieur Aristide Briand, Ministre des Affaires étrangères, 21 December 1931, Fonds Montpensier: Ravel, Robert Brussel, Association Française d'Expansion et d'Echanges Artistique, to monsieur Brunetière, letter stamped 20 April 1932. See also Nichols (2011), 322.

Rimsky-Korsakov's influence.⁶⁸ Ravel fuses this with a more contemporary 'polite' jazz, which is very close to Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Concerto in F; the two had spent time together in 1928 and had shared compositional ideas and this was Ravel's musical response. The second movement is harder to pin down; critics and scholars have detected Saint-Saëns, Liszt, and Mozart in the disarmingly lyrical melody. But there is another, more recent source: Satie. Certainly Satie could never have written such an expansive melodic line, but the melodic simplicity and plodding, child-like, and harmonically static accompaniment reveal that Satie was clearly in his mind; it could also signal a return to his younger self of *Ma Mère l'Oye*, which, based on fairy tales to be performed by children (in the piano duet version), overtly acknowledges and celebrates Satie's influence. Ravel returns to Russian-period Stravinsky in the final movement, this time evoking the *Firebird* in its use of brass and percussion. Ravel switches from deliberate simplicity to expose his virtuosic, indeed formulaic, pianistic writing, for which he was equally renowned. At least in this respect, Ravel appears to conform to some of the expectations of a concerto. Yet, the virtuosity is all on the surface; the movement is an energetic romp. The Concerto in G has always disappointed its critics and has received little scholarly attention in comparison to the Concerto for the Left Hand. The critic 'V. J.' remarked after the Budapest performance that the Ravel was showing a characteristic virtuosic charm:

To tell the truth, this Concerto does not represent anything particularly new in Ravel's evolution, who, long before Stravinsky... undertook to reinstate 'glamorous music'... Of course, this similarity doesn't in any way diminish the importance of the Concerto, in which the resources of a limitless imagination acquire an incomparable character (flavour). No one reproaches Ravel's lack of profundity in the least, seeing it as a profession of faith. It is flirtatious elegance in his hands.⁶⁹

The difficulty with the Concerto in G is that it has never been taken seriously. For Messiaen, it revealed the humourist in Ravel, but he chided his older compatriot for not taking the second movement seriously enough: it was for him poor quality Fauré or even Massenet.⁷⁰ Not only had the Concerto been long expected, the concerto form is regarded as one of the stalwarts of the classical tradition. It is no accident that Ravel avoided it until he was older because there were expectations of grandeur and monumentality, expectations Ravel could or would not fulfil in this particular work. It was not that he was unable; he achieved it at the same time in the challenging brief of writing the virtuosic Concerto for the Left Hand (1929–30).

⁶⁸ We know that Ravel much preferred the exotic, Russian Stravinsky and could not understand Stravinsky's move to a more European, sterile idiom.

⁶⁹ 'A vrai dire ce Concerto ne représente rien d'essentiellement nouveau dans l'évolution de Ravel, qui bien avant Stravinski... avait entrepris de réhabiliter la "musique brillante"... Cette parenté ne diminue naturellement en rien l'importance du Concerto, auquel les ressources d'une imagination sans limites prêtent une incomparable saveur. Et qu'on ne reproche point à Ravel son manque de profondeur puisqu'il en fait profession. C'est chez lui une coquetterie'. V. J. *Journal*, 20 February 1932, Fonds Montpensier: Compositeurs français: Ravel, Tournées en Europe (*Boléro, La Valse, Le Tombeau de Couperin, Concerto*), Bibliothèque nationale, Département de Musique.

⁷⁰ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 38; Nichols 2011, 324.

Yet while *The Concerto for the Left Hand* was rarely performed in the first six years owing to the restrictions imposed by his commissioner, the pianist Wittgenstein, it was the lighter *Concerto in G* that would be widely exposed through the major concert tour, thus stereotyping Ravel's achievement and reputation as a composer of 'coquetterie' who was no longer offering anything new but evoking his personal sound world (of past and present) through his most characteristic individual traits. Ravel's resistance to the pressure to conform can be seen as a persistent trait; from his refusal to conform to the expectations of the Conservatoire and the Société nationale as a young man, he partially turned his back on the avant-garde in middle age, as we have seen. Finally, in one of his most public final gestures, he contributes a concerto that limits rather than celebrates his achievement, taking it around Europe in an unspoken sign of perhaps not defiance as much as independence. Although he lived until his brain surgery in 1937, Ravel gradually lost the ability to compose, perform, and even write as his final illness took hold. He only completed one more work, the *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* (1932–3). The *Concerti*, therefore, mark the culmination of Ravel's creative life and, whether or not he or his contemporaries quite knew it, they constitute his very last works.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering Ravel through the prism of late style presents a number of fascinating issues. First, Ravel's late style was perceived, even provoked, by his contemporaries. In contrast to Shakespeare and even Schubert, Ravel came to be very conscious of his artistic ageing. This chapter shows that late style is not just about proximity to later life; lateness came to Ravel early because of the historical turmoil and trauma of the First World War. Indeed, as we have seen, it was difficult for artists to ignore the impact of war; they even used it as an opportunity to celebrate the cult of youth and to declare a new artistic order. This sense of rupture has been reinforced by historians of all varieties who have been preoccupied by the periodization caused by war and have ignored the many continuities between the generations. It is they and us who continue to separate artistic and historical discussions along these inflexible time lines. Perhaps most striking is that Ravel largely acquiesced in his own premature ageing; although he became less influential in determining style, it gave him a certain freedom. His works and actions from 1920 until 1933 show many characteristics that became associated with late style, in particular, stylistic and aesthetic inconsistency (*La Valse*), eclecticism (*L'Enfant et les sortilèges*), nostalgia (*Concerto in G*), and a personal desire for physical isolation from the city that had promoted and nurtured his originality. The retreat was not total; just as Ravel visited Paris when it suited, he engaged selectively with the most current musical fashions and priorities, producing some of the best examples of the stripped-down style in the *Sonata for Violin and Cello* and the *Chansons madécasses*. In other respects, his late compositions work against stereotypes of lateness. In a reversal of Adorno's account of late Beethoven, the *Chansons madécasses* also show a creeping subjectivity, which the dandy Ravel had hitherto fought to resist; the individual

seeps into these disturbing exotic songs, showing a political and emotional engagement. Finally, Ravel's attitude towards his *patrimoine* shifts subtly as he accepts his role as a symbolic artistic figurehead, not of the avant-garde, but of his nation, even visibly enjoying some of its more material privileges. In one of his final works, the Concerto in G, he fuses memory and nostalgia with a consideration of new popular sources but does so in a way that captures his own artistic personality. Known for his life-long inability to conform to expectations of the musical establishment during his student years, to the avant-garde after the war, even in this truly late work, Ravel resists the expectations of the concerto form. Late style tells us a good deal about Ravel, about the time in which he created, and about the profound impact world-changing events have on artistic movements and individual creative output.