PORTRAIT OF A LIFE
ANALYSIS OF THE RAVEL PIANO CONCERTO IN G

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by

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) had contemplated writing a piano concerto for much of his compositional career. It is fitting that the last work he wrote for solo piano was his Concerto in G for Piano and Orchestra (1929-1931). Marguerite Long, to whom the work is dedicated, describes the concerto as “a work of art in which fantasy, humour and the picturesque frame one of the most touching melodies which has come from the human heart.”

The piece can seem plain, ordinary, or even trite to a listener unaware of Ravel’s musical intentions, but this criticism cannot be farther from the truth. In many respects, this work is a testament to his philosophy of composition that he developed over the course of his life. It can also be seen as a reflection or synthesis of his musical output, as there are some striking similarities to some of his earlier works. Most important, it is a representation of him. Many of the musical and extramusical ideas that influenced his writing throughout his life can be found in this work.

To an extent, Ravel was influenced by the evolving musical world around him. He lived during a time of substantial musical innovation worldwide. The dominance of such German composers as Richard Wagner, Gustav Mahler, and Richard Strauss continued into the twentieth century. They exhausted tonality and explored its boundaries, leaving composers like Ravel with the task of developing a new compositional language. The Second Viennese School, with founding members Arnold

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Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern, revolutionized music in the use of twelve-tone serialism and atonality. This technique, which abolished tonal centers and placed equal importance on all twelve pitches, was a breakthrough in music. Not all composers chose to adopt these new ideas, and parts of the world began to turn against German music. France responded with Impressionism, which was both a visual and musical art style. Composers such as Claude Debussy, Erik Satie, and Gabriel Fauré strove to have their music represent an idea, image, or scene. With the use of church modes, extended harmonies, and other exotic scales and sonorities, this music was unlike anything ever conceived because it strove to paint elaborate scenes and leave impressions about specific subjects rather than continuing the tradition of absolute music. The Russians also left a mark on this time of musical exploration. Driving rhythms, industrialization, and nationalism are a few of the influences in the music of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, and Dmitri Shostakovich.

Given all the musical upheaval within this short period in history, the task of establishing a musical language that was completely original would not be easy for the young Ravel. Being French, he had the good fortune to grow up in and around Paris, arguably one of the greatest music centers in the world at that time. A breeding ground for aspiring composers and promising performers, the Paris Conservatory was one of the top music institutions in the world, and Ravel was shaped by his experiences while enrolled. Just as important in his musical development was Basque culture and music, which was full of lively rhythms and gorgeous melodies. Not only did Ravel incorporate local musical style and tradition into his compositions, he also made himself aware of the
greater musical world. The scales and open sonorities of the Far East entwined within the threads of early American jazz are repeatedly found in his output. To say Ravel was eclectic would be an understatement. In many ways, he was a modern Johann Sebastian Bach, who had keen awareness, deep appreciation, and sincere respect for the many diverse styles of eighteenth-century Europe. Ravel highly regarded his musical influences and considered them “inevitable, [even] declaring that a composer who does not admit influence should stop composing.”

Ravel’s extra-musical influences were also crucial in the development of his style. Though growing up Catholic in a religious family, he acquired a penchant for the mystic and mythological – the satanic and diabolical. He took a particular liking to the Greek god Pan, “a noisy, merry god…[who] was a wonderful musician.” Literature, especially the work of Edgar Allan Poe, was important to the formation of Ravel’s concepts for composition. The complex but harmonious inner workings of watches, toys, and other gadgets fascinated Ravel such that he put the same attention and detail into his works. Whether he would admit it or not, serving his country during World War I had an incredible impact on him. From an early age, Ravel’s parents nurtured and supported his musical ambitions, instilling within him a deep love of art, literature, culture, and society.

To simplify any part of Maurice Ravel’s life would do a disservice to this complex and thoughtful man. An intense dichotomy of ideas, associations, and beliefs makes him the unique and completely original musical force known today. Maternal and

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paternal, simplicity and complexity, old and new, purity and ruggedness, society and solitude: all of these and much more show how diverse his outlook on music was. The wealth of experiences and broad interests are what make Ravel’s music so original and enticing. He could be considered the great imitator since he successfully embedded so many of his influences within his music. Perhaps it was because of this obvious imitation that critics and musicians alike often rejected the new music he produced, declaring it unoriginal. Lifelong friend Ricardo Viñes already acknowledged this fact when Ravel was a mere twenty-one years old:

I take this opportunity of declaring that Ravel is one of the most unlucky and misunderstood people of all because, in the eyes of the crowd, he passes for a failure, whereas in reality he is someone of superior intellect and artistic gifts, at odds with his surroundings and worthy of the greatest success in the future. He is…very complex: there is in him a mixture of medieval Catholicism and a satanic impiety, but he also has a love of art and beauty which guides him and makes him respond sincerely.⁴

People misunderstood the complexity of his music because of the perceived simplicity and ease by which his music is performed. Critics “got into the habit of openly charging him with insincerity…refus[ing] to invest Ravel’s neo-classicism with the same seriousness as was attached to Stravinsky’s more flamboyant dressing up.”⁵ Ravel was always confident in his musical identity, despite moments of harsh criticism. He knew who he was and what his music was meant to communicate.

Few people misunderstood his Concerto in G, and it was hailed “as a token of French art.”⁶ Had he not been plagued with injury and failing health, Ravel would have

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⁶ Long, pg. 42.
toured the world showcasing this new and fresh piece as its premiere soloist. Nonetheless, this work brought him more acclaim than earlier piano works such as *Jeux d’eau* and *Sonatine* had. The extensive tour of Europe, featuring him conducting the concerto and Marguerite Long performing the solo part, garnered much success for the declining composer. Audiences were dazzled and excited by the new work, and their lengthy ovations usually prompted an encore performance of the final movement.\(^7\)

Clearly this piece resonated with listeners. Unlike so much of the music that was being produced at this time, his music embraced ease, lightness, and brilliance. There is a driving and almost motoric aspect to his rhythms, but there is always that gorgeous, elegant melody that holds the music together. Traditional forms and styles combine with complex harmonies and exotic sonorities. Met with both acclaim and criticism, his music, including the Concerto in G, has endured the test of time and remains a symbol of the purity in French music. The great twentieth-century Polish composer Witold Lutosławski recognized the impact of Ravel’s music, and noted that “he must be the source of inspiration for all those who want to write durable music, super-temporal, capable of surviving.”\(^8\)

This paper will explore the many different aspects of Maurice Ravel and how they are integral components of his Concerto in G. His influences stretched beyond the musical world, including family, art, philosophy, culture, mythology, his service in World War I, and machinery. Madeleine Goss aptly noted that “books that he read,

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music that he heard and studied, and life itself were the materials he utilized for the perfecting of his art.”⁹ Ravel had clear opinions about what he appreciated and valued in music and art, but he was always open to new sounds, ideas, and philosophies and was molded by them. He was shaped at an early age by a plethora of influences, and his insatiable quest to write a piece that incorporated all of them was realized in his Concerto in G.

CHAPTER II

THE INFLUENCES

When analyzing a work that represents a composer and his beliefs about music, it is crucial to study the influences that affected the composer and the work itself. Maurice Ravel’s influences range from local family heritage to far-reaching areas of the world, from philosophy to legend, from instruments to toys. These and everything in between can be found in the Concerto in G, adding depth and appeal to the work. Ravel claimed he was “sensitive to every kind of music,”10 and his varied compositional output along with the kaleidoscope of techniques, idioms, and influences found in this piece show how universal he was.

His Parents

Upbringing is a major factor in an individual’s development, and parental influence cannot be denied. The young Maurice had two loving and supportive parents, each of whom provided their son with different influences that he would later value and reflect in his music. Joseph Ravel was a Swiss engineer, inventor, and watchmaker who had aspirations of being a concert pianist as a child. Unable to make a career out of these two divergent areas of expertise, he was fortunate to have two sons who followed in his two passions: elder Maurice in music and younger Edouard in engineering. Although Maurice wanted to be a professional musician, he was fascinated by Joseph’s work.

10 Orenstein, pg. 131.
Planning, meticulousness, ingenuity, and perfection were the qualities of Joseph that Maurice greatly respected and sought to emulate. His compositional approach combined intense preparation with an unquenchable search for perfection in his music. This scientific approach ultimately transitioned to the construction of the Concerto in G.

While Joseph was a cerebral influence on Maurice, Marie nurtured his growth. A loving mother from the Basque region between Spain and France along the Pyrenees, she “was undoubtedly the deepest emotional tie of his entire life.” Marie told young Maurice Basque fairytales and sang folksongs that remained with him throughout his life. The influences that these stories and songs had on Maurice can be heard in his music, and the Concerto in G is full of references to the Basque culture that Marie ingrained within her son. These references will be discussed in the following section. Marie was accused of being too easy on her children, to which she replied, “I would rather that my children loved me than that they should merely respect me.”

Maurice’s love and devotion for his mother could be seen in his care for her during her elderly years. Pianist Robert Casadesus remembers one of these instances at a concert where Maurice “was…tenderly holding the arm of his aged mother, helping her to her seat.” He was deeply troubled when Marie died, questioning whether her “infinite tenderness…[was his] only reason for living.” Perhaps it is that soaring melody in the second movement of the Concerto in G where Maurice immortalized his mother – her spirit imprinted within the one composition to which he most closely related. Ravel loved his parents deeply and only he knew to

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11 Orenstein, pg. 8.
12 Goss, pg. 21.
13 Ivry, pg. 6.
14 Ibid, pg. 102.
what extent they were represented in his music. Without a doubt their strong influences made their way into his compositions.

Basque Heritage

Stemming from the close relationship Maurice Ravel had with his mother, Basque heritage – and more specifically Basque music – was an important part of his musical identity. He “always felt close to his Basque heritage, and by extension, to Spain.”\(^\text{15}\) The songs his mother would sing to him as a child and his frequent visits to his hometown of Ciboure in the Basque region allowed Ravel to bring the characteristics of this rich culture into his music. His memories of the “fête days in Ciboure, when the village people gathered…to dance the fandango and make music”\(^\text{16}\) are frequently depicted in his music. In particular, the first movement of the Concerto in G utilizes many of the characteristics of Basque and Spanish music. The energetic opening theme, the modal transition, the singing second theme, and the rhythmic closing section all connect to represent the excitement of Basque culture and music.

The opening thematic material is an allusion to the Basque instrument txistu. This three-holed instrument related to the recorder or flute is played with the left hand alone, and a drum is hung on the left arm of the player – a txistulari – allowing the right hand to play the drum with a drumstick. Often, the txistulari is accompanied by another drum.\(^\text{17}\) Many traditional and historic Basque melodies written for the txistu use the G

\(^{15}\) Kelly, pg. 864.

\(^{16}\) Goss, pg. 19.

Mixolydian mode, and the rustic opening theme of the Concerto in G is Ravel paying tribute to this representative instrument. The theme is placed in the piccolo to imitate the high, focused sound of the txistu. The rhythmic pizzicatos in the violins and violas mimic the drum the txistulari would play along with the melody, and a snare drum roll, cello tremolandos, and fast arpeggios in the solo piano accompany the txistulari. A dramatic crescendo that culminates with the trumpet repeating the brilliant theme ends the solo for the txistulari that Ravel so masterfully recreates in this movement. An encore is afforded the performer at the recapitulation.

A transitional section uses the two modes that Ravel most frequently used in his compositions: Dorian and Phrygian. The piano opens the section in F-sharp Phrygian, highlighting the characteristic minor second interval between the first two pitches of the mode. When the orchestra comes in, various instruments play a calm and lazy melody in F-sharp Dorian accentuating the defining tritone within the mode. The Phrygian mode in particular is often heard in Spanish music, while the Dorian mode is favored in jazz – a style which also influenced him greatly. The second theme is a beautiful melody that can be considered syllabic since nothing smaller than a quarter note is used. This melody’s “syllablism” reflects traditional Basque song where the poetry in the words was of great significance. Following is a driving closing section that grows in intensity and urgency. This section could very well be imitating the lively dance music of the Basque culture. Such a striking dichotomy of moods and emotions within a single movement shows how much Ravel appreciated the vivacious Basque society along with the calm and peace in

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18 Orenstein, pg. 131.
19 Baroja, pg. 346.
this beautiful part of the world. Ravel pays homage to this part of his heritage in the Concerto in G.

French Heritage

Just as important as upbringing and culture in the formation of an individual are education and training. Paris at this time in history was one of the great centers for musical cultivation, and Ravel was quite fortunate to have been born at this time. He studied under the leading pedagogues in France, met the elite composers and performers of the day, and was fortunate to have all of these people hear his own music as well. These musicians instantly recognized his musical sense and abilities, gaining him entrance into the Paris Conservatory in 1889. Igor Stravinsky, who left Russia to make a career in Paris with Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, noted that Ravel’s “musical judgement was very acute…[and] I would say that he was the only musician who immediately understood Le Sacre du printemps.” Ravel’s natural musical identity was honed and nurtured in Paris, and the piece which is one of the most mature examples of his French training is the second movement of the Concerto in G. Stunningly beautiful and perfectly structured, this work is a testament to his French training at the Paris Conservatory.

He was fortunate to gain entry into the studios of Gabriel Fauré and André Gédalge, both of whom taught Ravel ideas that he would emulate throughout his compositional output. Fauré was considered a radical of his day, but his music contains a

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20 Nichols, pg. 113.
certain depth to which Ravel was instantly drawn. It was Fauré’s principle of “never abandoning the quality of tender intimacy”\textsuperscript{21} that influenced the aspiring composer. Even when Ravel attempted large-scale compositions, he never lost that feeling of personal communication between composer and listener – creator and interpreter. He was so thankful for what he learned that one of his great works for piano \textit{Jeux d’eau} is dedicated to Fauré. This concept of intimacy is throughout Ravel’s music, but Fauré speaks most clearly in the highly personal second movement of the Concerto in G. Though combining sparse textures with full sounds, there is never a feeling of the melody being overwhelmed; it always soars above the underlying music. The winds function as the main melodic conversation born out of the initial piano statement. No percussion is present in this movement, and the strings and occasional brass fill out the texture with enveloping warmth. When reflecting on the valuable mentoring and guidance Ravel received throughout his growth as a composer, he wrote, “As for Fauré, his artist’s advice gave me encouragement of no less value.”\textsuperscript{22}

André Gédalge was another of Ravel’s major instructors at the Paris Conservatory who reinforced concepts he had already gleaned from his parents. The first was something that Ravel’s mother had instilled in him through her singing, and that was the importance of melody. Gédalge heavily taught the works of Johann Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, two composers who also relied on the preeminence of the melody and who continuously influenced Ravel’s music. Ravel admits that the second

\textsuperscript{21} Ivry, pg. 19.  
\textsuperscript{22} Roland-Manuel, \textit{Maurice Ravel}, translated by Cynthia Jolly (London: Dennis Dobson Limited, 1947), pg. 25.
movement of the Concerto in G was written while studying the Mozart Clarinet Quintet, K. 581. Gédalge also stressed a solid structure within a composition, an idea which Bach and Mozart highly valued. Ravel reflected on what these tenets meant to him:

You may not realize everything that Gédalge meant to me: he taught me to realize the possibilities and structural attempts which may be seen in my earliest works. His teaching was of unusual clarity: with him, one understood immediately that technique is not simply a scholastic abstraction.\(^{23}\)

As an inventor like his father, Ravel recognized that the technical aspects of composing were just as important as the creativity. Each movement of the Concerto in G is structurally sound and symmetric, and this will be discussed further in Chapter 3. The French influence served to reinforce what his parents had already taught him and make him appreciate meticulous and thoughtful composition. As Ravel admits, he greatly respected the values and teachings of Gabriel Fauré and André Gédalge. Their attention to detail contributed to the perfection Ravel sought in all of his compositions.

Impressionism

Ravel’s compositional language is a clear fusion of the styles of the past that he admired most and the new sounds of French Impressionism. He greatly admired the works of Franz Liszt, who could be considered one of the first Impressionists. Ravel was attracted to the idea of aural simplicity coupled with harmonic complexity. He embraced the techniques of Impressionism, such as extended tertian chords, harmonic planing, the use of modes and scales outside of major and minor, and simple formal structures. There

\(^{23}\) Orenstein, pgs. 19-20.
were specific reasons, however, for why he sought so desperately to distinguish himself from the other Impressionist giants of the time. Erik Satie and Claude Debussy wrote in ways that Ravel admired, but there were aspects of their philosophies of composition that were in contrast with his own beliefs.

Known for his compositions that were radically different from the music of the time, Erik Satie was admired by young composers searching for new sounds, but he was scorned by a public who misunderstood his music. While at the Paris Conservatory, Ravel “became one of Erik Satie’s most ardent admirers.”24 Like Fauré, Ravel was intrigued by the new ideas being employed by his French counterpart. Over time he distanced himself from Satie as his reputation increased. Laurence Davies describes just how opposing the two composers were:

Satie…possessed a firm streak of exhibitionism in his nature. He liked the role of enfant terrible, probably out of a feeling of spite…if he could not be looked up to without qualification, Satie preferred to don the defensive garb of professional leper or outcast. Ravel’s temperament was totally different…he was saddled with a classically introverted outlook in which exhibitionism played not the smallest part…nothing would have nauseated him more than to be held up as an object of public derision of the sort which Satie and his followers virtually invited.25

Satie wanted to make a ruckus; he worked to have his music discussed around the world positively or negatively. Ravel, tirelessly striving to please the public, wrote music that was both understated and flamboyant but always appealing. His Impressionism was built around a melody as in the slow movement of the Concerto in G, whereas Satie’s Impressionism was built around sounds and colors. It was not in Ravel’s nature to be an

24 Goss, pg. 42.
25 Davies, pg. 122.
outcast or to be held up by public derision. There were moments when the public began
to turn against his music, and he would not stop working until he restored his place in
public opinion; Satie likely would not have approved.

Ravel knew the music of Debussy and wanted to live up to the success of his elder
counterpart. When he heard Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, Ravel
reflected, “It was when I first heard that [piece] many years ago that I realized what
music was.” The second theme of the first movement of the Concerto in G can easily
be heard in the same vein as Debussy. Though he learned much from Debussy’s works,
Debussy also learned from Ravel. It is widely believed that Debussy’s *Soirée dans
Grenade* was a tribute to Ravel’s earlier *Habanera*. The two composers broadened
harmonic language and molded it into what can be easily recognized as French
Impressionism. Despite writing in a similar style, their music is quite different. What
separated these rather similar composers is best outlined by Christopher Palmer:

> The originality of Ravel’s Impressionism lay in the compromise he
> effected between the studied vagueness and sensuousness of Debussian
> Impressionism on the one hand, and the clean hard contours, pragmatism
> and logic of classicism on the other. His was a classically objectified
> art…but in the soundness and creativity of his response to Debussy’s
> concept of emancipation of harmony and the reconditioning of texture he
> was second to none.\(^\text{27}\)

Obviously Ravel’s music was the result of his admiration for Debussy’s original
conception of music. It was in his blending of classical techniques and Impressionistic
qualities that created a voice that clearly defined Maurice Ravel. His popularity grew

\(^{26}\) Christopher Palmer, *Impressionism in Music* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), pg. 112.

\(^{27}\) Ibid, pg. 113.
throughout his lifetime, and “after Debussy’s death in 1918, Ravel was generally regarded as France’s leading composer.”

Exoticism

European composers were becoming more aware of exotic music at this time in history. Incorporating styles and techniques of “outside” music fascinated both composer and listener alike. J.S. Bach’s keyboard suites use dance styles from Germany, Italy, France, and Spain. Mozart took a liking to the sounds and unique instruments of the Turks and Moors. Nationalistic composers during the nineteenth century such as Frédéric Chopin of Poland, Franz Liszt of Hungary, Edvard Grieg of Norway, and Antonin Dvořák of Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) saw their music thrive around the world. 1889 proved an influential moment in Ravel’s life when he attended the World Exposition at the Paris Conservatory.

There, he heard Russian music for the first time. Ravel was always drawn to a great melody, so it was only natural that he was attracted to the wonderful melodies and new colors of the Russian masters Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Mussorgsky, and Alexander Borodin. Ravel was fortunate to be in the audience at the World Exposition when Rimsky-Korsakov conducted some of his own compositions. Combining gusto and bravura with dreamy sweetness, Russian music was a perfect blend of what Parisian concertgoers loved to hear, including Ravel. While his music never sounds particularly Russian, Ravel undoubtedly incorporated the drama and fire so characteristic of the

28 Kelly, pg. 867.
Russians into his music. It is even possible that he related the folk-like energy in Russian music to that of his Basque heritage.

Much more influential to Ravel at the World Exposition was the music of the Far East. The unfamiliar sounds of a Javanese *gamelan* – an ensemble of pitched gongs, percussion, and sometimes string instruments – fascinated and inspired many composers of the day, including Debussy. Many composers have tried to imitate the sounds of this ensemble in their music; a few examples are Debussy’s *Pagodes* from the piano suite *Estampes* and Ravel’s *Laideronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes* from the suite for piano duet *Ma Mère l’Oye* which was later orchestrated for ballet. One element of this new music that can be found in many of his Ravel’s works including the Concerto in G is the pentatonic scale. The second theme of the first movement of the Concerto in G is obviously pentatonic, and elements of a Javanese *gamelan* can be heard in his orchestration. Ravel’s music “is far more modal than Debussy’s, and takes its colour less from the East than from early European sources.”

Ravel took the influences from the World Exhibition and weaved them into the fabric of his European education to create a new palette of expressions and sounds for his French listeners.

Another influence that was unfamiliar to most of Europe at the time was American jazz, and Ravel often incorporated it into his music. At the time, jazz utilized many folk melody techniques, including the downward series of *do* to *la* to *sol* (scale degrees one to six to five). This sound can also be found in the Dorian mode, the pentatonic scale, and many of the Basque folk songs he remembered from childhood, so

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it is obvious why Ravel was drawn to this sound. Chromaticism was also utilized in early jazz, and the chromatic trombone slides heard every so often in the Concerto in G give a jazzy edge to the piece. The third movement also bases an entire section on the chromatic scale. Upon hearing these jazz influences in Ravel’s music, listeners misunderstood their intentions and found them trivial. This could not be farther from the truth. Ravel “believed that jazz was legitimate material for composition, and was surprised that so few American composers had availed themselves of this rich and vital music…jazz, to Ravel, was the most important contribution of modern times to the art of music.”30 Ravel had developed clear ideas of what he liked in music, and those sounds – European, Eastern, and American – all found their way into the Concerto in G.

Atonality

By embracing the exotic, Ravel was clearly open to new sounds and ideas about music. One idea that fundamentally changed music was Arnold Schoenberg’s concept of atonality. The idea of abolishing traditional tonality and functional harmony was groundbreaking, and a long line of composers – including fellow French composer Olivier Messiaen – embraced and continued this new theory of tonal arrangement. While there were critics of the new system claiming that it was a dead end in music, Ravel admitted that “while as a system it may be so, it certainly cannot be as an influence.”31 He believed that even if a musician or composer does not appreciate or choose to utilize the serial style, simply knowing about and experiencing serial music will have an effect

30 Goss, pg. 225.
31 Orenstein, pg. 126.
on their ideas of music. Ravel did not write any serial or atonal music since he “believed…in the inevitable return to tonality,” but he certainly knew of Schoenberg’s methods and developed his own based on them. The technique that incorporated Ravel’s inclination toward tonality and the movement of Schoenberg’s atonality was bitonality.

The Concerto in G is a highly contrapuntal work, layering motives and themes on top of each other throughout every movement. Ravel had already explored the concept of bitonality in earlier works, and he knew the works of Igor Stravinsky and Darius Milhaud that used the same technique. For him, “bitonality, like polyrhythm, is the extreme limit of independence in the relationship of contrapuntal parts.” The adoption of bitonality also shows that Ravel did not want to abandon the tonal relationships that have driven music over the previous three centuries. Through this process, he “reconcile[d] the new harmony of Schoenberg and Stravinsky with Satie’s impulse toward simplicity.”

Bitonality was the means for Ravel to achieve new sounds by establishing two tonal relationships and applying functional harmony to each simultaneously. The opening of the Concerto in G employs the simple technique of arpeggios with a defining bitonality of G major and F-sharp major. Other clear examples can be seen in the rhythmically energetic closing themes of the first and third movements where tonal relationships are utilized within each hand but are unrelated between the hands. Ravel was adamant that he did not want a musical exercise or drill to destroy the essence of music, but he

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32 Davies, pg. 121.
recognized that the basic foundations of atonality and his adopted bitonality opened up a new world of tonal relationships in his music.

Edgar Allan Poe

Ravel’s artistic and musical aesthetic was very much influenced by literature. The writer having arguably the greatest influence on Ravel was American Edgar Allan Poe. Someone who insisted that music should not be conceived as or driven by philosophy, Ravel based much of his compositional techniques and ideas about music on Poe’s philosophy of art. Ravel “was always more interested in how things were constructed than in the finished product…prefer[ing] depth to breadth.” In other words, careful thought and precise construction were integral components to Ravel’s compositional process, and he attributed this to Poe “whom he considered his third teacher after Fauré and Gédalge.” In his essay “The Poetic Principle,” Poe discusses two ideas about poetry that left an imprint on Ravel’s mind: the length and purpose of poetry. Both of these can be seen in the Concerto in G as well as the rest of his compositional output.

The length of any artistic composition was highly regarded by Poe, who claimed that long poems should not exist:

I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul…that degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After a lapse of half an hour, at the very

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35 Orenstein, pg. 118.
36 Goss, pg. 46.
37 Kelly, pg. 868.
utmost…a revulsion ensues – and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.  

Poe felt that if length bars a reader, listener, or observer from being completely committed mentally to the work – in other words, if he or she becomes distracted or loses interest because of great length – then the work loses the necessary sense of unity and credibility. He is speaking of attention spans, insinuating that a person’s attention can only be held for thirty minutes at the most. While this is Poe’s opinion and may seem random or contrived, Ravel took this assertion quite seriously, and most of his compositional output runs under thirty minutes. The Concerto in G runs about twenty-two minutes in length.

Poe writes heavily about the purpose of art, feeling quite strongly that it is to attain beauty rather than truth. Regarding truth, Poe believes that it has no place in art:

The demands of Truth are severe…in enforcing a truth, we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical…he must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth.

According to Poe, the complex, rigid, and exacting demands required in order to convey truth diminished the value of art. He firmly believed that an artist cannot take on the role of philosopher; the result would be a composition that is the opposite of “the poetical.” Ravel strongly upheld the notion that beauty was the key ingredient in the creation of a lasting piece of music; it must “charm” the listener. It would be easy to confuse his sense

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39 Ibid, pg. 183.
of artistic beauty with triteness or insincerity as some people did. All Ravel strived to achieve in his music was the conveyance of the unlimited expressions of beauty within a structured work of art. The Concerto in G was his final, large-scale attempt at this idea.

Pan

Pan was...a noisy, merry god...but he was part animal too, with a goat’s horns, and goat’s hoofs instead of feet. He was the goatherds’ god, and the shepherd’s god, and also the gay companion of the woodland nymphs when they danced. All wild places were his home...but best of all he loved Arcady, where he was born. He was a wonderful musician. Upon his pipes of reed he played melodies as sweet as the nightingale’s song.40

Mythology and other mystic legends fascinated Ravel, including those of his Basque heritage. He associated himself with the wild, playful, or even animalistic aspects of some mythological characters, and it served as a release from the self-imposed constrictions of society. Many aspects of Edith Hamilton’s description of Pan can be applied to him. Always a refined, proper, and private man, he viewed Pan as a model for when he wanted to escape from the conformities of high French society. People who knew Ravel privately saw how playful, humorous, and charming he could be – three words which precisely describe much of his music. Some have described his behavior as evoking Puck from A Midsummer Night’s Dream,41 a similar character to Pan in his lighthearted antics and fun-loving attitude. Pan was always ready to dance or entice listeners with his beautiful melodies. The music “of the animalistic leaper...could be

40 Hamilton, pg. 41.
41 Ivry, pg. 113.
irresistibly charming,  

and Ravel’s music is no exception. The musical aspects of Pan contributed to Ravel’s compositions, including the Concerto in G.

The romping, rustic first theme of the first movement with excited and driving energy would make Pan dance wildly. Ravel’s use of solo reed instruments in the first and second movements imitates the beauty of Pan’s own reed pipe. In the first movement, the soaring second theme is placed in the extreme upper register of the bassoon, giving an ethereal quality to the already beautiful melody. One of the best English horn solos in the repertoire is found in the second movement of the Concerto in G when it restates the entire melody that the solo piano introduced at the onset of the movement. The heavenly theme that seems to unfold from pure inspiration would make Pan proud. Following the rustic opening movement and the gorgeous middle movement, the end releases any remaining Panic energy. The E-flat clarinet interjects itself over the piano, flying up to the extreme register and dancing down with the piano in grace notes; other instruments excitedly follow suit. All aspects of Pan’s music can be found in this concerto, whether Ravel intended it or not. This character was an important influence on Ravel, and, like all his major influences, it was represented in the Concerto in G.

Toys

For most children, watching a train pass by or a toy robot pace the floor is simply fascinating. While toys, gadgets, and machinery have evolved through generations, that same intrigue remains. It was the same for Maurice and his brother Edouard, both of

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42 Ivry, pg. 16.
whom thoroughly enjoyed when their father would take them on tours of the various factories with which he was associated. The composer describes one such evening:

How can I tell you about these great smelting castles, these incandescent cathedrals, and the wonderful symphony of travelling belts, whistles, and terrific hammerblows in which you are submerged? And everywhere the sky is a scorching deep red…how much music there is in all this! – and I certainly intend to use it.  

Ravel was taken by the grand constructions of the machines and the specific purposes each part had in the grand scheme of the mechanism. In line with what Poe taught Ravel, the planned-out precision of great machines and small toys was reproduced in his compositions. Ravel appreciated how all the inner workings of a complex construction would work together tirelessly and harmoniously, and he showed the same admiration toward it as he would a symphonic masterpiece.

All of Ravel’s works exude that commitment to perfection. Much like his father, the brilliant engineer and inventor, Ravel respected the means as much as the ends in order to create a perfect piece of art. As a child, Ravel would “pull these [toys] apart to see just how they worked.” As a composer, he strove to create works that he would be proud to have people “pull apart” and analyze; he was not satisfied until “every scant detail…was made to occupy its appointed place in the scheme of things.” It was one thing if people did not appreciate his music, but Ravel would be outraged – at himself – if his music was criticized from a construction standpoint. He worked unceasingly to ensure that he avoided this, but he did this work in private. He wanted to create the

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43 Orenstein, pg. 10.
44 Goss, pg. 22.
45 Davies, pg. 123.
impression that the perfection and ease of his music came naturally to him. He wanted to remove the “toil and tedium of the musician’s existence”\textsuperscript{46} from public perception. The opening four chords of the third movement, which return throughout the work, act as the wind up mechanism of a toy, and when the bass drum releases it, the toy operates and runs with total ease until the short movement uses up the energy. The innocence in Ravel’s music is partially a result of his lifelong obsession with toys.

Concerto for the Left Hand

As divergent as these two pieces are, one has to question whether the Concerto in G would be the same had Ravel not been commissioned to write the Concerto for the Left Hand. Sketches for the Concerto in G began prior to the commission and was finished after the Concerto for the Left Hand. Paul Wittgenstein, a virtuoso pianist who lost his right arm during the First World War and commissioned left-hand concertos from Sergei Prokofiev, Paul Hindemith, and others, commissioned the concerto. He did not understand the work originally, but he grew fonder of it over time. Written unconventionally in one movement – a rare instance for the conventional Ravel – the work is beloved for its “anguished tone and mix of musical styles…[where] tragedy and torment are keynotes.”\textsuperscript{47} Florid technique is required and Germanic drama unfolds as the piece progresses. The work reflects the previous anguish in \textit{La Valse} and the devilishness of \textit{Scarbo}. It is possible that, having served in and witnessed the unspeakable horrors of the First World War, Ravel intended the work to be a

\textsuperscript{46} Davies, pg. 123.  
\textsuperscript{47} Ivry, pg. 165.
representation of his memories of the war as performed by a veteran from that war. Whatever his intentions, the work is unlike anything Ravel had previously composed.

In stark contrast lies the Concerto in G. Ravel said that this work was “plus Ravel,” unwilling to “make a dramatic or formal affair” of it.\textsuperscript{48} This was his concerto—brilliant, sparkling, innocent, and fun—and it was the one work that Ravel most wanted to premiere. The Concerto for the Left Hand represented all the sorrow of his mother’s death and his sobering images of the war; the Concerto in G is a direct contrast, full of optimism, gaiety, and humor that defined Ravel throughout his life. In one instance, however, a direct connection to the left hand concerto can be seen. The cadenza in the first movement of the Concerto in G is a flowing, arpeggiated figure in the left hand with the melody in the same hand’s thumbs. Ornamented by right hand trills, the passage is a clear display of left-handed technique that he similarly used in the sister work. Another passage for the thumbs is in the opening theme in the third movement where the melody alternates between hands. Manuel Rosenthal explained that Ravel “made use of his extraordinary thumbs which were quite independent of the rest of his hand and almost on a level with his index fingers.”\textsuperscript{49} The displays of the left hand and additionally his nimble thumbs seemed an appropriate homage to the Concerto for the Left Hand.

Register is an important tool for composers. The piano’s range is vast, and color, mood, and style are greatly affected by where the music is being played on the instrument. Gerald Larner considers how register was used in Ravel’s two concertos:

\textsuperscript{48} Goss, pg. 243.
\textsuperscript{49} Nichols, pg. 90.
The obvious difference between the Piano Concerto in G major and the Piano Concerto in D major for the left hand is that while the former is characteristically bright in colour the latter is predominantly dark. This is largely a technical matter: although the left hand covers most of the keyboard in the Concerto in D, it is necessarily based in the lower half. So that the piano would not seem freakish in this respect, Ravel had to favour the lower registers.  

The left hand naturally sits at the low half of the piano, so it makes logical sense that a work for only that hand would tend to reside in that register throughout the piece. Mobility at the piano is much easier when both hands are participating, and Ravel exploits this in the Concerto in G. The piano cadenza right before the recapitulation in the first movement begins near the bottom of the piano, but it quickly moves all the way up the piano. A broken chromatic scale at the end of the third movement similarly travels the entire length of the keyboard with ease. No one can say if the Concerto in G would be the same without the Concerto for the Left Hand, but the influences of the latter on the former cannot be denied or ignored.

Imitation

Ravel studied everything deliberately and carefully. All of the above influences not only affected his Concerto in G but also the entirety of his compositional output. He cared deeply about these influences for various reasons, and the extent to which they touched him related to their presence in his music. His famed pupil Roland-Manuel analyzed why this was the case:

Ravel was wary of submitting the powers of art to the fluctuations of sentiment…he learnt the techniques of the classics. He made a methodical

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analysis of the scores of Liszt, Chopin and Charbrier…then he discovered Borodin and the Russian School. But he had already found himself and so much the more surely in that he did not try too hard to be original. As a result, his personality seemed the more striking, since the objectivity…separated him from his own work.  

He was a perfectionist – similar to his watch-making father – such that his compositional approach was remarkably different from that of so many other composers.

Ravel had an “unshakable belief in illusionism” which put him in direct contrast with the foundations of Impressionism. The Impressionists sought to produce music which depicted or gave the impression of a specific idea or subject. Debussy placed all the titles of his preludes at the end of the pieces since he believed his perception of each piece might not align with the perception of others, but nonetheless he wanted the listener to imagine something specific. Ravel consciously wanted the listener to be aware of what he was imitating, but he “aimed not so much at depicting the object as recording its aesthetic reverberations.” In contrast with Debussy’s two sets of *Images* which are sketches of specific ideas about a subject, Ravel’s *Miroirs* – meaning mirrors – are brilliant reflections and vivid distortions of what the subject of each piece is. That is as far as Ravel wanted the listener to go; he was not creating a scene, but rather recreating a scene as he perceived it. He sought to give an illusion, not an impression.

The Concerto in G includes so many different and varied illusions in every section that one cannot possibly hear them all in one sitting, but there is great satisfaction and pleasure when one recognizes and appreciates the references. Critics have accused

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51 Roland-Manuel, pg. 24.
52 Davies, pg. 150.
53 Ibid, pg. 127.
Ravel of insincerity in his music because of his planned and almost controlled compositional style. Ravel felt that “sincerity is of no value unless one’s conscience helps to make it apparent.”

His belief in the necessity of the conscience in composing aptly explains the use of imitations and illusions in his works. The Concerto in G is brimming with imitations from all of the above influences. Perhaps the Italian composer Ildebrando Pizzetti was correct when analyzing Ravel as a caricaturist.

Whether his objective was humor, sincerity, profundity, or imitation, Ravel successfully poured what was most meaningful to him as a man and a composer into his music. The Concerto in G is a shining example of study, precision, and influence coming together to create a work of incomparable brilliance and beauty.

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54 Orenstein, pg. 118.
55 Ivry, pg. 84.
CHAPTER III
THE CONCERTO

This chapter delves into the Concerto in G. Connections are made to specific influences from the previous chapter, and emphasis is placed on Ravel’s manipulation of structure and the symmetry in this work. There are bitonal, modal, and chordal relationships between the movements that add to the continuity of the work as a whole.

Movement 1 – *Allegramente*

Ravel originally contemplated making this the only movement of the concerto, and consequently he poured a lot of energy into it. There is a certain type of perfection in the symmetry, structure, and breadth – all components of Edgar Allan Poe’s compositional philosophy. Though the first movement is in traditional sonata form, there are a few striking exceptions: there is no repeat of the exposition and the development section only consists of a brief piano cadenza that does not develop any of the themes as would be expected. The main sections are the first tonal area with the first theme, a transitional section with a couple of themes, the second tonal area with the second theme, a closing section that incorporates parts of all the themes, and a coda at the end of the recapitulation. While the closing section is the most like a development, it is difficult to label it a true development section because it recurs in the recapitulation. Related sections are varied between the exposition and the recapitulation, but the consistent thematic material between the sections keeps the work symmetrical.
The tempi of each movement are of great concern to the performer. The first two movements include specific metronome markings with tempo indications, and the performer should respect how meticulously Ravel planned out every intention of the music. Vlado Perlemuter, student of Alfred Cortot who studied all of Ravel’s piano music with Ravel, believes that “the first movement is the most complicated to interpret…[because] the rhythmic first theme contrasts with the *meno vivo*…which must be played very flexibly, even *poco rubato*, without, however, upsetting the unity of the sequence.”\(^5^6\) He also succinctly pointed out that “*Allegramente* does not mean *Presto*.”\(^5^7\)

Many pianists perform this movement faster than indicated, destroying the dance-like quality of the music. Since it is stylized Basque song and dance performed by a *txistulari*, the major beats must be “stepped.” From a practical standpoint, the clarity of the notes in the piccolo and trumpet can be lost if taken too fast. Freedom and liberties can be taken in the *Meno vivo* or *Andante* sections that follow, but every return of *Tempo I*\(^5\) should return to the original tempo. A confident and controlled performance of this movement is the goal.

The first tonal area centers on the pitch G. Percussion plays an important role in this movement. The opening strike by the slapstick may have been a jab at Paul Wittgenstein. Discussed in the previous chapter, Wittgenstein did not initially understand the Concerto for the Left Hand which he commissioned, and he got into an argument with Ravel about the piece. In a letter he sent to Ravel, Wittgenstein asserted that

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\(^5^7\) Ibid, pg. 88.
“‘Interpreters must not be slaves!’ to which Ravel replied, ‘Interpreters are slaves!’”

Perhaps the slapstick acts as a whip that gets the soloist started.\(^{59}\) The snare drum enters with the slapstick and has an extensive roll that mimics the tremolos in the cellos. The upper strings play pizzicato chords that are a homophonic reduction of the arpeggios in the piano (Example 1). These arpeggios are in a bitonal relationship between G major and F-sharp major, and they are in second inversion. This bitonal relationship is separated by only a half step, a close relationship that Ravel uses throughout the entire piece. All of this is underneath the piccolo – the only instrument playing\(^ {forte}\) – which introduces the twelve-measure first theme.

### Example 1

Movement 1, mm. 2-4: The bitonality in the piano arpeggios is reduced to rhythmic chords in the upper strings. The use of second inversion chords implies instability and a sense of moving toward the true arrival of G major.

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\(^{58}\) Ivry, pg. 167.  
\(^{59}\) Ibid, pg. 168.
This continues until the left hand of the piano breaks off from the arpeggios and plays a few measures of descending triads. When the piano arrives on the pitch D, it begins a series of glissandos up and down the piano with D being the initial pitch for all of them. The clarinet enters, repeating the descending motive *do-la-sol* from the first theme in G Mixolydian, and the flute and piccolo join the clarinet. The bassoons, flute, English horn, and French horn begin a quasi-fanfare idea in C Lydian. The upper strings play chords summarizing the relationship that Ravel has established between G and C. To support the piano that is solely emphasizing D, the oboe and later the English horn play repeated Ds that project through the texture. The oboe joins the upper winds in the G Mixolydian motive, and the trumpet enters to replace it. A firm polytonality is now established between tonic G, dominant D, and subdominant C. A crescendo begins, assisted by snare drum and cymbal rolls, and these layers compound to create a great swell of sound. The triads that the piano played leading into this section start again in various orchestra instruments and unfold in contrary motion, either up or down a G major scale. The contrapuntal energy is released at the end of the crescendo, and the entire orchestra plays a pure G major chord for the first time in the piece.

The trumpet restates the first theme as a fuller orchestral texture plays the same chordal accompaniment as before. The addition of the harp allows for the bitonality established earlier to still be present but not as prominent. The horns and trombone also begin a motive of accented chromatic appoggiaturas that resolve to chord tones within the G major tonality. Presented in quick pairs of sixteenth notes in the same rhythm of the accompaniment, the piano will use this motive throughout the rest of the work. When the
trumpet finishes, the last four measures of the first theme are immediately repeated by multiple instruments in a surprising shift to B minor. This tonal movement of a mediant is used extensively in the Concerto in G. Low F-sharps keep the rhythmic accompaniment from before and prepare the listener for the next section. Another crescendo occurs with a Brahmsian three-against-four rhythmic swell propelling it forward. The English horn has a calming two-measure solo that leads into the transitional section.

This section centers on F-sharp, but C-sharp is also emphasized which introduces the prominence of the open fifth interval throughout the piece. The piano plays a lazy solo theme, and the F-sharp major arpeggios add an aura and haze perhaps depicting a beautiful evening in Spain. Cymbals and woodblock play off beats in a steady eighth-note rhythm that may be alluding to the familiar sound of castanets that Ravel would have known from his Basque childhood. The strings accompany with held F-sharp major chords. The first example of modal ambiguity is seen in the piano melody (Example 2).

The triplet figures use G-naturals to imply F-sharp Phrygian; although more G-naturals follow in the piano theme, a few D-sharps – which hint at F-sharp Dorian – add a
surprising color to the mood. The modal shift also functions to usher in the flowing woodwind theme which is in Dorian. The only leap in this theme is a descending tritone that is characteristic of the Dorian mode (see Example 3). The trumpet plays the woodwind theme muted, adding to the jazzy feel of the theme. A low staccato F-sharp pedal note is heard throughout this section in the piano, but toward the end it changes to a B. At this point, the horns walk down a chromatic line while the piano repeats F-sharps in the middle register. The horns arrive on a B, forming a perfect fifth with the piano’s F-sharp. This ushers in the second tonal area in E major.

The second theme begins by using the E Pentatonic scale. It is mostly accompanied by open fifths in the bass, and it is interrupted twice by the off-beat eighth-note figure introduced in the previous section. Ravel also brings back triplets in the accompaniment to let the theme seem as ethereal and Impressionistic as possible. When the latter half of the theme shifts to C-sharp Aeolian, the texture becomes purely chordal with the planing of unresolved major seventh chords. Here, there is no doubt that Ravel has left the Basque region and is now reveling in the sounds of French music. When the piano ends, the bassoon takes the theme soaring up to its highest register. The orchestra continues the eighth-note interruptions while the piano plays quick sextuplet arpeggios of the chords used in the orchestra parts. There is something motoric about this addition in the piano, and it certainly prepares the listener for what immediately follows.

The closing section of the exposition incorporates many of the elements found in the previous sections, including harmonic movement and thematic usage. The piano begins in C-sharp minor with a new motoric eighth-note pattern. Moving surprisingly to
a B major seventh chord, the same pattern is continued in B major with F-sharp in the bass. Ravel is bringing back the pairing of F-sharp and C-sharp from the transition section. He is also using a popular modal progression of the Impressionists: i – VII – i.

The orchestra’s function in this section is to keep the pulse steady and outline the piano harmonies. There are two more repetitions of the eighth-note pattern before another sudden shift occurs. F-sharp regains its prominence and becomes a definite pedal point as accentuated by the timpani. The piano begins an idea that combines the end of the first theme in D Mixolydian followed by the woodwind theme in D Dorian (Example 3).

Moving up a chromatic mediant like earlier in the exposition, the same two themes are stated in F Mixolydian and F Dorian. Another thrust by chromatic mediant to G-sharp – enharmonically spelled A-flat – occurs. Quick glissandos in the violins, cellos, and trombone are placed between the modal changes and mediant movements.

Example 3 Movement 1, mm. 123-129: Ravel continues to make sudden mode changes, here moving from D Mixolydian to D Dorian. He also uses the end of the opening theme followed by the wind theme of the transitional section.
The music suddenly shifts to a rhythmically energetic and bitonal passage. The F-sharp pedal lowers to an E, and an immediate bitonality between E and G-sharp is heard in the piano. The passage in the piano consists of alternating bass notes and right hand chords with accents highlighting the bitonality (Example 4). The descending *do-la-sol* figure from the first theme can always be heard in these passages. The bass then moves a fifth, and the new relationship is established between A and G-sharp. In these first two bitonalities, Ravel emphasizes the mediant and half-step relationships that are constantly returning to importance in this piece. The bass then moves another fifth to D, and the orchestra briefly interrupts in G major. Fragments of the first theme are heard in the horn, and the piano plays the accented chromatic appoggiaturas heard earlier in the horns and trombone (see Example 20). All woodwinds and the trumpet play two eighth notes

Example 4  Movement 1, mm. 142-147: Bitonal relationships in the closing section are established here. The left hand moves by fifths, as will the right hand in the following measures. The right hand also incorporates the *do-la-sol* figure from the opening theme throughout this section.
reminiscent of the off-beat eighth-note figures from the transition section. The piano continues its bitonal passage with the bass moving another fifth from G to C and the right hand establishing B major. After a two measure crescendo, both parts move a fifth to F and E. A long crescendo begins as the bass pounds a persistent F and the right hand moves by a fifth from E to A. Before the top of the crescendo, there are two more shifts by intervals of a fifth in this bitonality: F and A move to B-flat and D followed by E-flat and G. Ravel is using the age-old technique of progressing through the circle of fifths in this passage. Out of this final bitonality, E-flat prevails, and the orchestra outlines E-flat dominant seventh chords. A three-note descending figure in the piano emerges – sol-fa-mi in the key of E-flat major – and three measures of this pattern are performed in E-flat. Another three measures of the same pattern are played in C major with the underlying E-flat harmony remaining – a bitonal relationship at the chromatic mediant. After a brief swell, the entire orchestra and soloist cut to silence, ending the exposition.

Ravel’s overall tonal motion between the sections has been stepwise. He begins in G and moves to F-sharp and E successively. After moving around the circle of fifths, he arrives on E-flat. A brief piano cadenza replacing the development section keeps E-flat as the focal point. Accented chromatic appoggiaturas scurry up the piano in four-note groups of eighth notes (Example 5). While E-flat major is the overarching sonority, D major is also implied. The appoggiaturas create yet another bitonal relationship between these two keys. Eventually, D-naturals are replaced with D-flats to form an E-flat dominant sonority. By continuing to retain the F-sharp which always resolves to G, Ravel heightens the anticipation of the recapitulation in G major. Despite the heavy
Example 5  Movement 1, m. 171: While D major is alluded to in this figure, E-flat major is the overall sonority.

The focus on E-flat major in this figure – a chromatic mediant away from the tonic G major – the cadenza begins on a D and ends on a G, emphasizing a traditional harmonic movement of V – I. This is also an example of how Ravel exploits the entirety of the piano and moves easily through all registers.

Like the slapstick in the exposition, the bass drum signals the start of the recapitulation in a much more obnoxious manner. The opening Basque theme of the first tonal area is now played fortissimo by the piano in full tertian chords. Ravel breaks the melody among the hands to allow for register changes and add to the excitement of the theme (Example 6). The entire orchestra plays the rhythmic accompaniment against this extravagant statement of the melody. The opening bitonal relationship is downplayed as only the harp plays chords combining G and F-sharp tonalities. The horns and bassoons brashly play the accented chromatic appoggiaturas that have become a fixture of the

Example 6  Movement 1, mm. 172-176: The original theme is broken between octaves, registers, and hands, but it retains its melodic continuity. Rhythmic chords accompany the theme as in the opening (see Example 1).
energetic sections. Every so often, groups of woodwind instruments play the theme with the piano. At the theme’s conclusion, the earlier arrangement of the last four measures of the theme is played, this time shifted by a chromatic mediant to B-flat major. A bassoon includes a C-sharp – D-flat enharmonically – in this sonority, giving modal ambiguity to this section. The woodwinds play subito piano, but the strings and piano interrupt and begin a much larger swell than earlier in the exposition. As will continue in the remaining sections of the piece, Ravel’s heightened drama and excitement in the recapitulation is found in his variations of each section since basically no new material will be presented until the coda. It is the thematic relationships, however, that keep the recapitulation so tightly related to the exposition.

The oboe receives the two-measure solo this time, and the *Meno vivo* transitional section is presented around the pitch A – a continuation of the stepwise relationship between the sections. Ravel continues to highlight what is different between the recapitulation and the exposition. This transitional section feels more spacious than before because the piano plays quintuplets instead of triplets. The same modal ambiguity is heard between Phrygian and Dorian, but these quintuplets add a mystical quality to the Spanish flare of the section. Perhaps Ravel was contemplating Panic lore and mythology during this section. Mischief, which Pan was known for, can be found throughout this section. The piano interrupts its theme and begins another brief cadenza based on the wind theme. Triplet arpeggios in A major rising from the bass of the piano accompany the Dorian theme. After one statement of the theme in its original rhythm, Ravel begins continuous repetitions of the theme in equal triplet rhythm descending down the piano
with the left-hand arpeggios. Sixteenth-note figures similar to the quick instrumental glissandos stretch the tempo and arrive in a new Andante section.

In this section, multiple instruments are featured in somewhat unusual or mischievous ways, but the themes of the original transitional section continue. First, a harp cadenza continues the piano theme against its own glissando a piacere. Despite the sustained chords in the low strings and one moment of high strings and triangle, the harp takes center stage and is the focal point. At its conclusion, “Panic” ensues. Returning to Tempo 1°, the piano plays shooting arpeggios – A major in the left hand and A minor in the right hand. While it seems like a tribute to Béla Bártok’s use of split chords, the mode mixture simply highlights what Ravel has done throughout this piece: a theme in the Dorian mode, which has minor implications, accompanied by parallel major. Except the basses, which sustain a low A, the strings play glissandos that follow the contour of the piano arpeggios. The winds hold long notes outlining A major and A minor simultaneously. Flute, clarinet, and trumpet successively play the woodwind theme while flutter-tonguing. Trombone and bass glissandos transition to yet another unusual solo. The horn performs the piano theme in its extreme upper register similar to when the bassoon plays the second theme in the exposition. If this Stravinsky-esque effect does not draw the listener’s attention, the Panic dialogue in the woodwinds certainly will. Against the horn, the bassoon, flute, and piccolo rapidly play A major arpeggios with added chromatic passing tones. After a final chromatic descent in the bassoon, the clarinet plays its own chromatic scale before handing it off to the oboe which plays a series of chromatic broken octaves. This heavy use of the chromatic scale will return in
the third movement. A sort of haze is created throughout this variation of the transitional section, perhaps because of the Panic and Basque legends that fascinated Ravel.

The orchestra dies away as the section ends, and Ravel makes the piano cadenza reprise the second tonal area. In many concerti through this point in history, the cadenza combines many of the themes or motives in a florid and virtuosic manner and rarely serves a structural purpose. As would be expected of the second tonal area, the theme is in the tonic G major. Undoubtedly a result of previously writing a Concerto for the Left Hand, the theme is placed in the left hand. Along with playing the theme mostly in the thumbs, sweeping arpeggios are played below the theme, almost as if the right hand was not necessary. Ravel, however, adds extensive right-hand trills to the texture. This works because of the peculiar effects heard in the woodwinds in the previous section, almost as if the piano was responding to them. Though there are swells, this cadenza never advances beyond the dynamic of piano. It is an understated cadenza, especially when compared to those of Romantic concerti.

As the theme unfolds, the right hand trills incorporate the theme from the left hand, creating an eerie and almost weeping variation of the warm theme. Here, Ravel is imitating a musical saw, a folk instrument where the flat side of the saw blade is stroked most commonly with a violin bow. As discussed by Harold Taylor in his editor’s notes, “the two features of the musical saw were its pure, unearthly sound and its continuous glissando.” 60 The right hand trills imitate the vibrato of this haunting instrument, and the chromatic tails linking the trills together replicate the glissando effect (Example 7). This

60 Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, pg. 91.
shows Ravel’s brilliant ability to imitate even the most original sounds. It also allows the soloist to display his or her sensitivity to color and tone quality and the fluidity of extended trills. After, the strings join the piano for the theme’s restatement as in the exposition. The strings play rich chords while the piano plays arpeggations of the same chords in sextuplets. A swell begins with an accelerando, and both strings and piano race to their upper registers. The piano begins descending bitonal arpeggations of F-sharp major and E minor chords, which is a combination of the F-sharp and E tonal centers from the exposition. Their descent ends on the lowest A of the piano, signaling the start of the closing section.

Whereas the first closing section utilized the middle and upper registers of the piano with moments of sparkling chords and orchestral assistance, the final closing section lurks in the lowest register of the piano with mysterious accented chords. Only low strings in the orchestra play, and they serve to sharpen the sounds of the piano as it begins its dramatic finale. Centering on the pitch A, the piano, supported by the cellos and basses, walks up an A Phrygian scale with the inclusion of an E-flat to help arrive on F. Here the trumpet briefly states the theme of the closing section as the piano brings

Example 7 Movement 1, mm. 238-239: The musical saw, able to bend and slide between pitches, is imitated during the piano cadenza. Ravel specifies the exact half steps for the trills, and he includes the sliding pitches that form glissandos between melody notes.
back the accented chromatic appoggiatura figures. Suddenly, the bass line in the piano shifts a fifth from F to B-flat, and the bitonal passage begins anew. Similar to earlier in the exposition, the bitonalities progress tonally and eventually arrive on the E-flat dominant seventh chord. The persistent sol-fa-mi figure returns for three measures. One final use of a modulation by chromatic mediant occurs when E-flat shifts to G. By raising the B-flat in the three-note figure to B-natural, it becomes mi-re-do in G major—a satisfying way to transition to the coda.

As the coda begins, the piano continues this descending figure, and the trumpet, flute, and clarinet alternate playing fragments of the first theme in G. The remaining instruments outline chords that alternate between C and D major, highlighting the opening polytonality. After six measures of these multiple ideas in a type of conflict with one another, all instruments unite to oscillate between E minor and B minor for four measures. The piano drops to the lowest register with only bassoons, cellos, and basses playing. Instruments are layered one on the other, systematically intensifying a repeating fragment of the first theme as the piano also ascends. The chords that are outlined in these measures are A dominant ninth and D dominant eleventh. Beginning with E minor, the tonal movement of this part of the coda is the traditional vi – ii – V, and only one chord can follow V at this point in the piece. The dramatic eight-measure crescendo erupts at the final arrival of pure G major. The triads from the opening section return to the horns, trombone, oboe, and bassoons, and another swell pushes the piece toward fortissimo. The last three measures incorporate the planing of descending root position chords across a G scale. The first half of the scale is obviously G Ionian—although it
Example 8  Movement 1, Final Scale: This is the final scale Ravel uses to close the first movement. G to D could be considered G Ionian and D to G suggests G Phrygian. If one looks initially at G to C as the first section, however, C Lydian is another possibility. This scale which Ravel creates employs elements used throughout the entire movement.

could be considered C Lydian which would reflect the opening fanfare. Ravel shifts to G Phrygian for the latter half, a final homage to his Basque heritage (Example 8). The similar and unifying motion of the instruments contrast the contrary motion found at the first G major cadence in the exposition. The bass drum is struck at the final G major chord, and this complex, tight, and aurally gratifying movement comes to a rousing end.

Movement 2 – Adagio assai

The beauty of this movement is in its simplicity and melody. In a simple ternary form, there is a static, buoyant quality to the mood. The theme, restated and embellished by the woodwinds, ebbs and flows – tenses and releases. Roland-Manuel, famed pupil and one of the few close friends of Maurice Ravel, analyzes the theme of this movement as follows:

Some critics have professed to find the contrast of the adagio assai and the two movements which bound it incongruous…it is as legitimate a contrast as the precisely similar example in the larghetto of Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet, which Ravel took as his model. The adagio is really a lied whose calm contemplation brings it unusually close to Fauré’s musings. The composer confessed…when [Marguerite Long] praised the free development of the leisurely melody, he had written it ‘two bars at a time, with frequent recourse to Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet.’”

 Roland-Manuel, pg. 102. Marguerite Long’s personal experience with the Concerto in G is presented in Chapter 4.
An important aspect of Ravel’s music is the melody, and this is an example of one whose beauty and grandeur unfolds completely naturally despite intense construction.

Whenever the piano plays the themes in this movement, all the accompaniment is in the left hand. By devoting the right hand entirely to the melody, a focused and pure sound is created. While the movement is in an elegant and stately 3/4 time, the left hand is in a floating 6/8. The waltz-like theme supported by a rocking accompaniment creates some moments that move and others that are held. There is an “archaic lyricism” reflective of Satie’s *Gymnopédies*, but similarities can also be seen in Ravel’s own *Menuet antique*, *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*, and the first movement of his Sonata for Violin and Piano. While fascinated by the wildness of Pan and mythology, he greatly respected the beauty and timelessness of the Greeks. The age and breadth of this culture is represented in the hollow and open sounds of this movement.

The deliberateness that a tempo of *Adagio assai* can force upon the performer should be avoided. Perlemuter reflects that “it’s a case where the personality and feeling of the interpreter is involved…[but] when the *cor anglais* repeats the theme, you must play it…so that this instrument can express itself with ease.”

Marked at 76 to the quarter note, this can seem quite slow for such a flowing melody. If, however, the performer allows the motion of the left hand to carry the sometimes static contour of the right hand, the melody comes alive and can be affected at the specified marking. As will be discussed, the interval of a fifth is quite important in this movement. Mediant and

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62 Orenstein, pg. 205.
63 Perlemuter and Jourdan-Morhange, pg. 89.
half-step relationships are focal points in the outer movements, but the fifth allows for the middle movement to have an expansive and ancient quality.

Solo piano sets the mood for the whole movement as it plays through the entire theme before the orchestra enters. The left hand sets up the rocking 6/8 rhythm before the right hand enters. The first two notes in the melody are a G-sharp quarter note and an A half note over an accompaniment in E major. Functioning as an eleventh and receiving the longer note value in the measure, the A foreshadows the unresolved sevenths and ninths that Ravel deliberately places on the strong beats of many measures (Example 9). Satie and Debussy embraced this use of unresolved extended tertian chords, but Ravel’s thin texture in this movement separates him from them. This melody is also quite tonal. It wanders and does not always function traditionally, but tonal relationships are obvious to the ear. Another element of the accompaniment that propels the melody forward is its own linear and melodic aspects. The accompaniment in 6/8 is divided into low tones on strong beats and chords on the remaining weak beats. The low bass tones inherently have melodic implications, but the inner voices also move in small segments (Example 10). For most of the solo, there are only four voices present, and it could be said that Ravel is

Example 9  Movement 2, m 2 and mm. 7-10: Ravel places the extended tertian chords on the strong beats of many measures in the opening piano solo, creating a pure and open sound.
Example 10  
Movement 2, mm. 12-17: A layered accompaniment runs throughout this solo, and each voice has its own melodic implications. Disregarding the octave leap in m. 15, the low voice walks down a full octave over these six measures. In m. 12, contrary motion makes for good voice leading. 

decomposing a Bach chorale. Each line can function independently and with its own voice. Through delayed resolutions, suspensions, anticipations, and modern harmonies, Ravel stylizes and imitates the uplifting and timeless choral music of J.S. Bach.

Through exploring the relative key of C-sharp minor with many inclusions of G-sharp minor chords, Ravel prepares the listener for what he will do in the following section. After the climax in the melody, A major is tonicized. The piano trills on an F-sharp, and the flute enters in its high and soaring register. Followed by the oboe and clarinet, the woodwinds imitate and play off of each other. The piano only plays the 6/8 accompaniment and strings outline the harmonies. Eventually, this transitional section settles on a D-sharp major chord. Although Ravel does not explore this tonal center, highlighting this chord at a major cadence is important. Because E-flat major was used at dramatic points in the first movement, it can be implied that there will be some drama following this enharmonic chord in the middle of the second movement.

The piano enters with a new theme, and low English horn, clarinet, and bassoon provide support. The first downbeat of this section is met with a striking dissonance of B-natural and B-sharp in the outer voices. Just as D-sharp major reflected back on the
first movement, the bitonality and modality of this middle section does as well. The very
French and Impressionistic opening section is interrupted by the Phrygian mode as the
basis for this new melody. It begins in G-sharp Phrygian with C-sharp minor
accompaniment (Example 11). It should be noted that this bitonality is in a perfect fifth
relationship, keeping with the spacious quality of this movement’s music. Both voices
shift for an immediate restatement of the theme, now in F-sharp Phrygian and
accompanied in B minor. The harmonic progressions starting with the D-sharp major
chord anticipate similar progressions to be used in the third movement. Beginning in C-
sharp minor, the progression is II – V\(^{6/5}\) – i. Eliding the end of this progression with the
start of the next, a ii – V\(^{6/5}\) – i progression in B minor is heard. Among the dissonant
bitonality is a modern imitation of very traditional harmony. A tag added to the theme
modulates to and cadences on D major.

Strange and mystic sounds return in this transitional section, and more features of
the first movement are used. D major becomes a D diminished sonority, and the piano
plays sextuplets outlining B-flat Phrygian. The woodwinds ascend in triads, planing up
an F Dorian scale. The strings double the D diminished harmonies in the piano. After

Example 11  Movement 2, mm. 45-49: The melody in G-sharp Phrygian creates
obvious half-step dissonances with the accompaniment in C-sharp
minor. The C-sharp minor ninth chord in m. 48 serves to bring the
two tonal centers together for the cadence in m. 49.
two measures of this wash of sound, the piano and strings drop to B-flat minor and cadence on E-flat minor. The woodwinds end their planing on B-flat minor, which could be considered part of an E-flat minor ninth cadence. Using its enharmonic equivalent again, D-sharp diminished harmonies are in the strings and piano left hand. B Phrygian is in the piano right hand, and the woodwinds plane over F-sharp Dorian. After two measures of this, every instrument cadences in E minor. The tag of the middle section’s theme returns to the strings, and it modulates to G major.

G becomes a pedal point as the sextuplets continue in the piano, and the planing moves to the strings. A large crescendo begins as the piano and strings move up their instruments. Piano and strings unite under E minor and against the persistent G pedal. The climax of the crescendo is where the woodwinds enter, and all instruments dramatically shift to G-sharp minor – another half-step bitonality. Woodwinds drop out and strings decrescendo with the piano. The G pedal drops to F-natural, and a return to E major is clear. Magically, G-sharp minor resolves by a mediant to E major and F releases into E. The prolonged G was clearly a means for Ravel to use the Phrygian mode one final time to complete a satisfying return to the original tonic key.

Piano and strings accompany the English horn as it reprises most of the opening theme (Example 12). It plays the first seventeen measures of the theme, skips ten measures, and continues with the climactic final 6 measures. The piano left hand brings back the 6/8 accompaniment exactly as it was originally stated and corresponds to the appropriate measures of the theme in the English horn. The piano right hand plays a long string of thirty-second notes in free counterpoint which outlines harmonies and moves up
Example 12  Movement 2, mm. 74-77: The English horn and the left hand of the piano reprise the opening piano solo while the right hand outlines harmonies and scales in free counterpoint.

and down related scales. One of those scales used periodically is the pentatonic scale (Example 13). Not only does this reflect back to the second theme of the first movement, but the openness and other-worldly quality of that scale perfectly enhances the mood of this section. It could be said that this section is a heavenly duet between Pan and the woodland nymphs.

After the English horn’s trill, the surprising harmony of C-sharp major is heard. The continued use of C-sharp minor in previous sections of the movement makes this arrival incredibly special and uplifting. At this point, the woodwinds enter again. First the flute outlines a C-sharp major chord, and then it plays a descending figure which the oboe and English horn successively repeat. The last three notes of the English horn are
Example 13  Movement 2, m. 88 and m. 93: Within the free counterpoint, Ravel places the Pentatonic scale in a few measures to help add to the ethereal ambiance of this section.

\[sol\text{-}la\text{-}do\] in E major – an inversion of the first theme fragment used throughout the first movement – and the bassoon echoes it two measures later. The piano plays a long trill on B, and the strings begin to decrescendo. Above an E major chord in the strings, the final measure in the piano is a widely-spaced open fifth in the piano, emphasizing the importance of this interval in the movement. The calm and finality of the ending makes the arresting start of the third movement quite a surprise.

Movement 3 – *Presto*

Unlike in the previous movements, Ravel does not indicate a metronome marking here. A simple explanation for this could be that Ravel took into consideration the varying technical abilities of all performers and orchestras. Since this is basically a toccata movement, the technical capabilities of the performer would determine the tempo. *Presto* implies that the tempo should be very quick, perhaps as fast as is comfortable for the soloist. It is a flashy, showy piece for piano and orchestra, and its persistence reflects back to the *Perpetuum mobile* in the Sonata for Violin and Piano. There are also frequent allusions to American jazz which he loved and admired. This movement can sound improvisatory based on Ravel’s variations of the themes and the spontaneity of the piano
and solo instruments. The movement “recalls the circus atmosphere of Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*…coupled with Gallic clarity and wit.”\(^6^4\)

A seven-beat fanfare opens this movement, providing a lively contrast to the peaceful ending of the second movement. Its recurrence and variance throughout the movement harkens back to yet another technique of Baroque music. Because of the fanfare’s brevity and the fact that it is not in the same key every time it is heard, this movement cannot be considered a rondo. It has elements of sonata form, but it is more sectionalized than the first movement and does not evolve like a sonata form. A popular form used in many Baroque concerti that explains the fanfare and the movement’s sections is ritornello form. Whenever this fanfare is played, a new section begins similar to how the ritornello theme would recur and be used at transition points in the form. In the middle of the movement, however, when the themes are restated, the fanfare is left out and all of the sections move into one another seamlessly. Baroque ritornello forms often have extended sections when the ritornello theme is absent. From this point to the end of the movement, a quasi-*perpetuum mobile* can be heard as the momentum builds until it unleashes into the final statement of the ritornello. This movement is a great example of his constant manipulation of structure and allusions to old forms.

Percussion retains its importance, as the fanfare includes a snare drum roll ending with a hit of the bass drum. After this statement of the ritornello, the piano goes into a wild display of oscillating sixteenth note chords (Example 14). It is a long, rambling theme with no predictable end. Two things are important to note in this first section.

\(^6^4\) Orenstein, pg. 205.
Example 14  Movement 3, mm. 5-8: The opening piano theme is heard in the inner voices of these oscillating chords. The entire passage uses many open fifth chords which is a continuation of the second movement’s emphasis on that interval.

First, the chords for the most part are open fifths and fourths. Despite dramatically changing the mood between the second and third movements, Ravel keeps the openness a part of this quietly energetic section. Second, the theme is heard buried within the chordal texture. The theme is played almost exclusively in the thumbs as it moves effortlessly between the hands. The first half is in G Lydian while the second half modulates to C Lydian. During the second half of the theme, the clarinet and piccolo successively play a shooting countermelody which has incredible jazz implications. It is in this movement where the “‘nerve-racking virtuosity’ of jazz musicians [Ravel] so much admired” comes prominent. The trombone continues its glissandi throughout this movement, but in this section it begins a rhythmic motive that simply walks up a chromatic line. Followed by the horn and trumpet, these three statements of the motive lead directly into the ritornello fanfare, signaling a new section. These three ideas – the piano theme, jazz countermelody, and chromatic motive – will be developed later.

The second section is based on triads but continues to feel jazzy due to the syncopation, off-beat accents, and rhythmic drive. Whereas the first section’s jazz element is soloistic flare, this section utilizes a modal jazz tune. A descending motive of

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65 Larmer, pg. 212.
three triads is repeated three times before developing into a theme that playfully rises up and down A Aeolian. The strings take over a second statement of the theme while the piano plays a succession of repeated notes that are preceded by an accented chromatic appoggiatura. When the woodwinds enter and double the strings, the theme has modulated to E Aeolian. Following a sharp E major chord, a light transitional section is derived from the opening piano theme. Only high-pitched instruments are used, and the piano’s interruptions are also in its upper register. The piccolo plays in E Dorian followed by the clarinet in D Dorian. The piano takes over this “music box” idea, modulating to F major and ending with the ritornello fanfare in B major. The relationship of B major and F major is used again in the third section.

A pair of horns opens this section with a march-like theme in D major, and the trumpet mockingly answers a chromatic mediant away in F major. The upward chromatic motive of the first section returns, but it is inverted. First stated by the trombone, the clarinet repeats the motive in rhythmic augmentation. The piano plays an upward arpeggiation of an A augmented chord arriving on B major. It then restates the horn segment in B major and trumpet segment in F major (Example 15). This tritone

Example 15 Movement 3, mm. 95-98: This statement of the fanfare employs a tritone relationship between the halves. The use of a D-sharp and D-natural in the same chords of mm. 95-96 brings back the modal ambiguity of the first movement.
relationship is reminiscent of the tritone emphasis in the Dorian woodwind theme of the first movement. Doubled in the horns, some of the piano’s B major chords include both a D-sharp and D-natural. This is yet another example of Ravel intentionally clashing the major and minor mode, adding to the ambiguity of tonal stability. The piano continues to play the same extension and variation of the theme that the brass trio played, and the inverted chromatic motive is also played with the same rhythmic augmentation. Another transitional section begins with the winds playing a chord combining E minor and B major seventh chords. The piano plays a furious chromatic scale idea, first connected and then broken. After each statement of the chromatic idea, the fanfare is heard in the piano over long, rising scales in the strings.

The last scale leads into the final section. A four-measure theme stated back-to-back in the right hand twists and woodwinds as the left hand outlines a clear harmonic progression of iiø⁷ – V⁷ – i (Example 16). This is a common progression in both Western tonal harmony and jazz. Placing this progression within a movement of heavy jazz influence is very appropriate. If, however, the bass is analyzed as one progression instead of two, the root movement follows the circle of fifths which is also used in the

Example 16 Movement 3, mm. 140-143: Beginning with a chromatic run, this passage is built around a half-step bitonality of F major and F-sharp minor. Striving for tonal implications within his bitonalities, Ravel has the bass follow a ii⁹⁷ – V⁷ – i progression.
closing section of the first movement. The implied harmonic movement also reflects the progression used in the middle section of the second movement. Because there is tonal movement in the right hand as well, however, bitonality can be ascribed to this section. The first four-measure statement of the theme has a bitonality of F major and F-sharp minor; the second statement is between G-sharp major and A minor. A crescendo begins as both hands rise up the chromatic scale. The hands unite and the woodwinds enter at the top of the crescendo on E-flat major – a chord that once again serves as a high point in the music. For two measures, the piano plays descending E-flat major arpeggios as the orchestra decrescendos. This marks the exact halfway point of the movement, which is a fitting place to highlight one of the most important chords of the piece. The E-flat chord extends through measure 153, and the entire movement is 306 measures.

The rest of the movement could be considered a repeat of the first half without the ritornello fanfare. Some of the sections are shortened or expanded, but each of the previously established themes is once again used. What can seem like an expanded first section could also be considered a development section – perhaps to make up for the lack of one in the first movement. The bassoons begin by stating the rambling opening piano theme in E-flat Lydian. Soon after this, low harp and cellos reintroduce the triadic theme from the second section, this time in C minor. Before a modulation, the horn makes one brief statement of the march-like theme in G minor. These themes work in counterpoint to fuel a motor that began in the bassoons and will continue accelerating until the end of the movement. The keys in which Ravel chose to place these themes are functioning to help modulate to C major. E-flat moves a chromatic mediant to C, C minor adjusts to its
parallel major, and G minor acts as a v – I cadence. Now in C major, the piano continues
the first theme in C Lydian and the cellos propel the triadic theme forward in A minor.
Ravel is establishing a mediant bitonal relationship between these two themes.

The piano begins a stretch of chordal arpeggios while the orchestra continues to
layer the first three themes in counterpoint against one another. In the first instance,
cellos play a variation of the first theme in A major while the clarinet and violas play the
second theme in C-sharp minor. Two horns play the third theme, but one plays in C-
sharp minor and the other plays in A major. The basses’ accompaniment varies
throughout this section based on the key, but a C-sharp – enharmonically spelled D-flat in
certain instances – remains constant throughout this section. Moving up a half step and
continuing his use of the chromatic scale in this movement, Ravel now repeats this in B-
flat minor. Momentum builds and intensifies as the themes compound and the
orchestration expands. Further modulations explore F-sharp minor, E-flat major, and E
minor. At the end of this last modulation, the unrelenting C-sharps in the basses finally
resolve up to D. The orchestra returns to G major as the development section ends.

At the return of the tonic, Ravel alludes to the opening of the first movement: the
strings are in G major and the piano is in F-sharp major. The violins continue the
opening piano theme while the piano brashly brings back the jazz countermelody. This
counterpoint immediately repeats, and both instruments shift to E major and E-flat major
respectively. The piano then begins to imitate the short chromatic motive from the
trombone (Example 17). It is presented in the planing of minor triads. This motive ends
on a C major triad which elides into the second section. Whereas this section was in A
Example 17 Movement 3, mm. 224-227: This is the chromatic motive from the trombone earlier in the movement. It is heard within a series of agitated minor chords that plane up the scale.

minor originally, it is restated in C major. Adding to the exciting arrival of C major, the triadic theme is broken between octaves and registers in the piano, similar to the onset of the recapitulation in the first movement (Example 18). After the theme, the piano planes ascending major triads as the bassoons, horns, and cellos plane descending major triads – a tribute to the contrary motion of the triads in the first movement. All instruments arrive together on pure G major.

The third section is abbreviated, but its effect is brilliant. The piano states the first half of the march, and the trumpet answers the call. After another call and response, the orchestra shifts to E-flat major. The piano plays a mellow variation of the end of this theme and includes the inverted statement of the chromatic motive. It is repeated in F-sharp major before moving directly into the final section, which is presented very

Example 18 Movement 3, mm. 37-38 and 230-231: Ravel varies the second statement of the triadic theme by changing register and breaking the theme between hands and octaves as he has done throughout the concerto.
Example 19  Movement 3, mm. 288-292: Ravel varies his use of the chromatic scale throughout this movement, and in this final instance he breaks the scale between octaves and registers. It is similar to his treatment of the melodies in Examples 6 and 18.

similarly to its first statement. The bitonal relationship moves from F-sharp major and G minor – the last time this most common relationship is used in the piece – to A major and B-flat minor. After an extended run up the chromatic scale, the piano ends on B major. The orchestra immediately restates the second section’s theme in the G-sharp minor. Afterward, another long chromatic scale broken between octaves in the piano is doubled by the woodwinds (Example 19). The woodwind instruments have to hand the scale off to one another as it moves through the registers. The scale ends on G, and a series of accented chromatic appoggiaturas follow in the piano with woodwind and string imitation (Example 20). This repeating and hypnotic figure grows until the entire orchestra strikes a G major chord. The ritornello fanfare triumphantly returns for the final time followed by the timpani and bass drum striking the last beat. The piano reaches to hit a low G octave on the last beat, but the bass notes on the piano end a whole

Example 20  Movement 1, mm. 150-151 and Movement 3, m. 296: Ravel has used the accented chromatic appoggiatura throughout the Concerto in G. In these two spots, their treatment is quite similar.
step before the desired G. Since that G does not exist, the lowest A is replaced. The
minor seventh chord creates a strange ending, but the percussive effects in the rest of the
instruments makes the “wrong note” almost inaudible. It is a wild and fantastic ending to
this Concerto in G.
Maurice Ravel’s Concerto in G incorporates many of the varied influences he had throughout his life as a composer. The concerto was met with tremendous success, and it earned him the respect of his contemporaries. Barbara Kelly perfectly summarizes how these interests, relationships, and beliefs affected his recognition as a modern French composer:

Many parallels have been drawn between Ravel, neo-classicism and the younger generation of French composers. However, although he shared a number of their musical concerns, Ravel was firmly rejected in the 1920s by Milhaud, Poulenc, and Auric…concurring with Satie’s view that Ravel was an establishment figure. Stravinsky and Ravel…had grown apart…Although Ravel was not at the forefront of Modernism, his advocacy of certain principles, notably those of economy and objectivity, and his openness to jazz and bitonality, lent these preoccupations a certain respectability on account of his own secure status.  

Ravel was always more interested in making his music pleasing and favorable to his listeners, and some criticized its supposed triteness. The depth, originality, and charm of his music evolved, and he created a voice that people grew to love.

Ravel worked tirelessly to craft perfect pieces of music. He slaved in private over his scores, never being satisfied until the end result was, in his opinion, flawless. Edgar Allan Poe had instilled this quest for compositional perfection in the young composer, even going so far as to suggest that a piece should be completely thought out before putting the pen to the paper. He was asked how he began working on a composition, and

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66 Kelly, 875.
Ravel replied, “A note at random, then a second one and, sometimes, a third. I then see what results I get by contrasting, combining, and separating them…I then range and order them like a mason building a wall.”67 This approach gives a glimpse into how Ravel tediously sorted out the inner workings of his music until they came together in a final composition. Much like the exactness required of his father’s engineering, Ravel upheld the same meticulousness in his trade.

Ravel had strong opinions about all music, including his own. None of his pieces was met with more personal favor and satisfaction than the Concerto in G. Musically, Ravel purposefully placed a multitude of influences in this piece. The wealth of allusions in this work unites harmoniously and makes it purely Ravelian: Basque and French, simplicity and complexity, old and new, tonal and bitonal, the familiar and the exotic. The purity of Bach, the lyricism of Mozart, the brilliance of Liszt, and the energy of Rimsky-Korsakov can all be heard in this piece. To simplify, it was his “fascination with the past and with the exotic [that] resulted in music of a distinctively French sensibility and refinement.”68 Despite these varied and eclectic influences, Ravel never lost his kinship with Satie, Debussy, and the French school of musicians.

Marguerite Long had a strong passion for the Concerto in G. Touring Europe with the composer, she witnessed firsthand the enthusiasm of the listeners at the premieres of the piece. Her account and opinion of the work as follows details her love of the piece:

67 Nichols, pg. 55.
68 Kelly, pg. 864.
[The Concerto in G] is essentially a work of our country. Placing the most original details of harmony, rhythm and melody in a traditional framework Ravel arouses many parts of our sensibilities with discreet and economic touches; he speaks a new language within the ambit of Mozart and Bach. The music is evocative but not commanding. The composer’s personality is modestly kept out of sight. Yet the whole work is amazingly perfect – quintessentially French music. The critics made no mistake in this respect and the one point which struck me most in the reviews of many concerts given by Ravel and myself throughout Europe was precisely that the Concerto in G was represented as a token of French art. As soon as it was recognized in Paris it crossed frontiers and Ravel and I traveled far and wide in Europe.\(^{69}\)

She also explains how the first movement of the Concerto in G is such a personal description of Ravel’s Basque heritage:

One cannot go wrong in saying that Ravel has put into the opening pages of this work…a characteristic of Basque life. One needs to have seen Saint-Jean-de-Luz on a summer night – with the blue tunny fishboats rocking under the moon – when the young men would jump up at the first sound of the fandango from the kiosk in the square; when the terraces would awaken from sleepy reverie, the ice-seller would leave her barrow, the paper-man would throw down his bundle; when they would form facing lines and – chest out and arms raised – beat time with their corded sandals in sheer rhythmic joy.\(^{70}\)

As explained by this favorite pianist of Ravel, this is a work that very much excited Europe at its premiere.

The Concerto in G continues to dazzle audiences today. The Basque first movement, the Impressionistic second movement, and the jazzy third movement combine to create an exciting piece of music that is representative of Ravel’s compositional style. Able to imitate whatever style or idea he had for the music, Ravel’s vivid imagination, musical maturity, and range of influences are heard throughout the concerto such that his

\(^{69}\) Long, pg. 42-43.  
\(^{70}\) Ibid, pg. 49-50.
every intention is clear. His was a stylized art, firmly built on the classics but always looking forward toward the future. Everything from life experiences to the newest theories about music are found in this work. Despite it being Ravel’s final contribution to the piano repertoire, its influence and impact on the present cannot be ignored. The Concerto in G is truly a portrait of the life of one of France’s greatest composers.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


