THE CYCLE OF FRENCH PIANO DUETS
GABRIEL FAURÉ’S DOLLY SUITE, OP.56, CLAUDE DEBUSSY’S PETITE SUITE,
AND RAVEL’S MA MÈRE L’OYE

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Joanne Chew Ann Chang

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The piano duet gained immense popularity after the late eighteenth century. With Bartolomeo Cristofori’s invention of the fortepiano and leading up to the modern day pianoforte, the piano duet exploited the capabilities of the instrument.

The earliest music written for piano duet can be traced back to the late English Renaissance, with the early to mid-seventeenth century traditions of the Elizabethan Virginal School. As compared to more standard piano duet repertoire, the five and a half octave range harpsichord these English composers used to compose harpsichord duets seemed impossible for two people at a time.

In 1777, Charles Burney published his “Two Sonatas or Duets for Two Performers on One Piano-forte or Harpsichord”. A professional musician and scholar, Burney’s influence was remarkable and “the art of four-hand writing was elevated to respectability.”¹ Burney stated that approaching piano duet repertoire brought many advantages: the convenience of having just one piano, the need to only tune one instrument, and useful repertoire for musical improvement (time, coordination, tone, ideas, and contrasts).

When Classical composers contributed to the keyboard duet repertoire, they specifically noted on the score which keyboard to play on: harpsichord or pianoforte. Some notable composers who experimented with piano duets during that era were Joseph Haydn, Muzio Clementi, Jan Ladislav Dussek, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

The nineteenth century brought tremendous growth to the piano duet repertoire. The keyboard was further developed and transformed to the modern piano. To quote Cameron McGraw: “reinforce, strengthened, and amplified, it established itself firmly as the preeminent musical instrument of the nineteenth century – a Romantic instrument that both inspired and helped interpret the Romantic movement.”

Piano duets of that period were popular in salon parlors. Playing piano duets require a high level of technical demand. Each player must focus on both parts, listening to the harmonies and melodies of one another. The extra attention needed for each performer is a difficult transition as the piano itself was an orchestra of its own. Piano duet compositions allowed the composer’s advantage to explore the limits of the piano for depth, color, tone, sonorities, technique, dynamics, and articulation. The tonal palette of this great instrument brought many beautiful compositions from composers throughout the centuries, from Franz Schubert to Johannes Brahms, and from Antonin Dvořák to Gabriel Fauré.

The French composers enjoyed writing compositions to be performed in chamber settings. Many composers and music enthusiasts would gather themselves in salons and

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2 McGraw, xii.
private settings to listen and to discuss music. As a response to the vast development of the modern piano, French composers of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began producing today’s masterworks of the piano duet repertoire. This trend began with Georges Bizet’s *Jeux d’enfants* (Children’s Games) in 1871, Claude Debussy’s *Petite Suite* in 1889, Gabriel Fauré’s *Dolly Suite*, Op.56 in 1897, and Maurice Ravel’s *Ma mère l’Oye* (Mother Goose Suite) in 1910.

The composers and works that will be discussed in further detail are Debussy’s *Petite Suite*, Fauré’s *Dolly Suite*, Op.56, and Ravel’s *Ma mère l’Oye*. These three prolific French composers served as music leaders of French musical aesthetics. Their lives coincide one another, with Fauré (1845-1924) being the oldest, then Debussy (1862-1918), and later, Ravel (1875-1937). During the course of twenty-four years (1886-1910), these French giants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took the appreciation for French piano duets to a higher level.

Often considered the father of twentieth century music, Debussy’s *Petite Suite*, composed from 1886 to 1889 reflected his early style period. Based on the idea of Baroque dance suites, Debussy used traditional form, modes, harmonic expansions, and court dance influences in this four-movement suite. A piano duet that requires a high demand of technique and coordination from both primo and secondo parts, the *Petite Suite* displays a youthful and vibrant character, along with more personal and intimate qualities.

The *Dolly Suite*, Op.56 by Fauré was written from 1894 to 1896. It consists of six individual pieces based on children themes. The suite was dedicated to Hélène Bardac,
more commonly known as Dolly. Dolly was the daughter of Fauré’s mistress, Emma Bardac. Fauré, who had two sons but no daughters, treated Dolly like his own child. The composer wrote pieces with specific titles describing the story and/or inspiration of the pieces. The themes he used in the suite were all related to Dolly, such as her birth, her brother, her pet dog, and her favorite statue. This light-hearted piano duet suite reflected Fauré’s sensitive style of composition and requires both players to be constantly alert of harmonic and color changes. The amount of listening to both parts is vital for the unity of the work.

Similar to Fauré, Ravel composed *Ma mère l’Oye* based on childhood themes, and more specifically, childhood tales. Ravel started the Mother Goose Suite in 1908 and completed the five-movement “story” for piano duet in 1910. Written for Jean and Mimie Godebski as a present, he illustrates every movement with a different story he favored during his childhood. *Ma mère l’Oye* includes tales from *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Tom Thumb*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. This suite proved to be one of Ravel’s most successful compositions. Ravel included elements of bimodality, special pianistic effects like glissandi, and orchestration techniques. A creative imagination is needed in both primo and secondo parts in order to portray Ravel’s intentions with success.

All three piano duet works reflected the different writing styles and interpretations of each composer. Through these works, a great aesthetic of French music can be heard. With the comparative successes achieved from these three duet works, they were later transcribed for orchestra. These three important French piano duets appear as pleasant to
the listener, filled with coloristic flavors, imagination, and an aura of sophisticated qualities.
CHAPTER II

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

*Where you have invention, you have genius. – Gabriel Fauré*

One of the most influential French composers during the late nineteenth century was Gabriel Urbain Fauré. Born on May 12, 1845 in Pamiers, a town in the south of France, Fauré spent almost his entire life in Paris, from the age of nine until his death in 1924. The sixth child in the family, Fauré grew up in “a modest, cultured family, strong and close-knit.” He developed a compositional style that was very personal, and placed focus on the balance of material and structure. As he grew as a composer, his music became unique to the listener. He would write in a consistent, traditional structure that included new sounds and unconventional harmonies.

Fauré’s musicality developed early as a child. Hours would be spent on playing the harmonium in the chapel of the École Normale at Montgauzy, where his father, Toussaint-Honoré served as director. Fauré was later enrolled to pursue formal music education in Louis Niedermeyer’s newly formed École de musique classique et religieuse in Paris. Fauré studied organ, harmony, counterpoint, piano, and plainsong at the school for eleven years. Niedermeyer’s school was known for its strict, rigorous, and conservative environment, which focused on preparing students to be choirmasters and/or

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organists. A strong emphasis on literature and humanities was enforced upon the students. While teaching at the Niedermeyer school, Camille Saint-Saëns had a huge influence on Fauré’s compositional style, where the former stressed that the focus of a work was its clarity and unity. Saint-Saëns also introduced Fauré to the music of contemporary composers of that time: Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner. Fauré and Saint-Saëns later became life-long friends.

This close friendship led to many new involvements in the Parisian music society. Along with a group of French composers, Fauré, Saint-Saëns, Romain Bussine, César Franck, Jules Massenet, and among others, the Société Nationale de Musique was formed in 1871. It served as a hub to promote and premier new compositions. Through this society, many of Fauré’s works were performed and noticed. His friends and other musicians, however, often thought that his music was too complicated.

Most of Fauré’s employment came through teaching, composing, and serving as organist for choirs. He did not travel often for performances. Many fine composers and musicians such as Ravel, Florent Schmitt, Nadia Boulanger, George Enescu studied with Fauré. Fauré was a highly respected teacher among his students for his clear ideas and “well-informed, attentive teaching.” He stressed the understanding of an individual style “by artistic freedom, an attitude which was Fauré’s hallmark.”

His recognition as a great composer was proved when he succeeded Massenet’s position as Professor of Composition at the Paris Conservatoire in 1897. Some years before his appointment at the Conservatoire, Fauré was categorized as “a dangerous

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4 Long, pg. 24.
5 Ibid, pg. 24.
revolutionary.” Ambroise Thomas, Director before Fauré’s appointment to the Conservatoire, had openly said: “Fauré? Never! If he is appointed, I’ll resign.” In 1905, Fauré took the post of Director of the Conservatoire, where “his influence breathed a new, transforming spirit into the old institution, and his reforms were so radical that they earned him the nickname of ‘Robespierre.’”

Fauré placed much importance of his personal life next to his love of music. He was a man of intense emotions and a strong personality. Fauré’s music has its complexity, but it also possesses a special quality, like an indescribable connection with life. He had a number of relationships with different women during his life. Fauré’s brief engagement to Marianne Viardot, daughter of the leading nineteenth century mezzo-soprano in France, Pauline Viardot, left Fauré with a broken heart. He later married Marie Fremiet in 1882, and had two sons, Emmanuel and Phillippe. With Fauré’s legal marriage to Fremiet, he was also associated with a number of women, among them Emma Bardac (Claude Debussy’s second wife), and Marguerite Hasselmans, who accompanied Fauré for the last twenty-four years of his life. The importance of his personal life in his works was significant. Fauré wrote and dedicated many beautiful, intimate, and passionate works to the women with whom he became involved.

Throughout his career as a composer, teacher, pianist, and organist, Fauré was considered a forward-looking composer of his time by many early twentieth century composers in France. He developed a musical style of his own:

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6 Long, pg. 23.
8 Ibid, pg. 24.
To his countrymen Fauré was a classicist, a Frenchman whose music maintains the ideals of Rameau. He [Fauré] cared little about creating new expressive modes or technical devices; he was content to accept contemporary aesthetics, to regard himself as the logical product of a long-established tradition.  

One of Fauré’s greatest inspirations to his contemporaries was his innovation of creative harmony and melody. During Fauré’s time, Expressionism took over most of Europe, and Wagner was among the most revolutionary composers. However, with Fauré’s interest and traditional upbringing of French aesthetics, he did not accept Wagner’s style. Fauré broadened the classic French tradition of interesting harmonies and linear textures, while maintaining the ideals of a “French identity”. In other words, he further developed the internal building blocks of music, and thus, brought out a special sophistication in his music.

The music Fauré wrote reflected his personality as a quiet revolutionary during the nineteenth century in France. He was considered as “a traditionalist, even a neoromantic; others consider him part of the twentieth century – at the least, a predecessor of modern French music.” Fauré’s music can be divided into three periods. Many musicologists, however, have found Fauré’s musical style to be “a unified musical language from the beginning to the end of his career.” He maintained a strict guideline, but remained in the experimental, developmental, and transitional stages throughout his

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11Ibid, pg. 5.
career. This unique character of Fauré was the reason his music always sounded fresh. Therefore, it is true that his music was difficult to be categorized.
Dolly Suite, Op. 56

"Before him [Fauré] only Robert Schumann had been able to penetrate the mystery of the child’s soul."
– Marguerite Long, in reference to the Dolly Suite.

The Dolly Suite is one of the delightful works Fauré wrote in his life. Composed between 1894 and 1896, this set of six fun, light-hearted pieces for piano four-hands was dedicated to Hélène Bardac. Hélène was the daughter of the accomplished singer, Emma Bardac, who later became Claude Debussy’s second wife in 1908. Fauré had a romantic attachment to Emma during the 1890s, where he composed and dedicated La bonne chanson, Op. 61 to her in 1894. The Dolly Suite was composed shortly after this song cycle. The title of the suite referred to Dolly, a captivating and feminine little blond child, and was also the nickname given to Hélène, for her jolly character. Fauré had a fond liking to Dolly, and he treated her as if she was a child of his own. This set of short pieces marked events in Dolly’s life from the beginning of her birth. Fauré gave the titles of each movement and was the only time he titled works other than those of a musical genre. The Dolly Suite is a popular and much-performed piece for four-hand piano. Henri Rabaud later orchestrated it in 1906.

The suite’s descriptive titles, beautiful melodies, and whimsical qualities, reflected a work that was refined and expressed elegance. During the 1890s, Fauré was still regarded as a revolutionary composer. He grew more confident in his compositions and kept writing in the style he favored. Fauré was constantly finding new discoveries and experimenting with expanding tonal harmony. Some said that Fauré “broke” the rules

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12 Long, pg. 96.
of tonal harmony, but in fact, he expanded the boundaries of traditional tonal harmony that gave in to beautiful, yet interesting new sounds. Fauré was not an Impressionist, but he can be considered as one of the major composers who influenced the beginning of the Impressionistic movement in France, where Debussy and Ravel were then associated.

The *Dolly Suite*, Op.56 reflected Fauré’s understanding of creating a characteristic harmonic and melodic language. Based on a basic structure of ternary form, many elements of new unconventional progressions can be heard in this beloved suite. It was a work with a continuous storyline based on Dolly’s growth as a child. It was positive that the composer’s intention was to continue the idea of programmatic music, a common form during the nineteenth century. The focus of unity and flow was important to Fauré, a firm practice he followed since his studies with Saint-Saëns.

**Berceuse, Op.56 No.1**

The first piece of the *Dolly Suite* for piano duet is titled *Berceuse*, which means cradlesong. It is marked *Allegretto moderato* and is the best-known piece out of the six. Many different arrangements and transcriptions were done based upon it throughout the years. This piece marked the birth of Dolly, and as most berceuses were intended to put a child to sleep, this title fits well with the peace and calamity of a lullaby. The lullaby tune used in this *Berceuse* was used in an earlier Fauré work for Suzanne Garnier in 1864. While the composer was compiling the *Dolly Suite* in 1893, he changed the title from *La chanson dans le jardin* to *Berceuse*, making the work more appropriate for the context of usage.
Fauré showed his quality as a forward-thinking composer by writing new harmonic shifts, along with traditional expectations set for berceuses. For most berceuses, tonal shifts were simple and centered between tonic and dominant key changes. Fauré understood the simplicity of the lullaby tune, but created more unexpected tonal shifts from the tonic (E Major) to the chromatic median (C Major). The interesting tone quality shift can be noticed immediately as the berceuse theme fragment (Ex. 1-1) occurs throughout this piece.

![Example 1-1. Primo, Berceuse, mm. 1-6.](image)

The second theme is written in a more linear fashion (Ex. 1-2). The continuous return of this fragment provides the unity of the piece, and thus, allowed Fauré to explore different harmony and character changes.

![Example 1-2. Primo, Berceuse, mm. 35-39.](image)

The rocking feeling of the cradle is depicted by the secondo, where the short fragment (Ex. 1-3) occurs during the whole piece.
This piece succeeded to portray Fauré’s imaginative ability in reflecting the focus of the subject. He used a simple melodic tune, vivid and easily remembered by the listener, which suggested a beautiful, warm, and cantabile voice in the primo part (Dolly’s mother, Emma), putting Dolly to sleep. The melodic line occurred in the secondo part during the return of the ternary form, possibly suggesting Fauré’s voice. The piece is regarded as a “dreamy, tranquil Berceuse, artless in its simplicity.”\textsuperscript{13} There is certain warmth in the Berceuse, which brings out the innocence and freshness of the birth of a child.

\textit{Mi-a-ou, Op.56 No.2}

The second piece of the Dolly Suite marked Allegro vivo, was written for Dolly’s second birthday in June 1894. Many researches have come to understand the original meaning of the title, which was not referred to a pet cat, but to Dolly’s elder brother, Raoul, whom she tried to pronounce, “who became one of Fauré’s favorite students.”\textsuperscript{14} Raoul later studied with Debussy. At that time, she was learning to call her brother Monsieur Raoul, but was unable to pronounce the name correctly. Raoul’s nickname

\textsuperscript{13}McGraw, pg. 82.

eventually became known as *Messieu-Aoul*. Robert Orledge, a Fauré scholar, found that this piece was initially titled without hyphens. It was later when Fauré’s publisher, Hamelle, hyphenated *Miaou* into *Mi-a-ou*, suggesting easier pronunciation purposes. The hyphens also distinguished the subject reference of a person, instead of a cat. The piece added fun and color with sudden leaps, cross rhythms, syncopations, and hemiola (Ex. 2-1).

![Example 2-1. Primo, Mi-a-ou, mm. 21-27.](image)

Dolly was a charming child in Fauré’s eyes and brought much happiness into his life. In simple triple meter ternary form, the piece flows like a child waltz; graceful, simple, but light with unexpected qualities. One of Fauré’s signature composition techniques are writing blocked chordal structures and arpeggiation. In *Mi-a-ou*, the primo brings out the melodic harmony based on the chordal structures supported by the secondo. Many interesting intervals such as diminished sevenths, minor sevenths, and tritones were present in the melodic line of the primo. The chordal harmony of the secondo moves very much in a chromatic fashion, creating an interesting growth and excitement to the piece. Although the primo is filled with leap motions, and the secondo with more stepwise harmonic motion, the different textures matched the context of this piece: a young child learning how to speak.
Fauré used connecting chordal arpeggiation in both primo and secondo for the B section. The mood suddenly switched from a sweet *dolce* to a smoother *leggiero* in the B section. Both primo and secondo have an interconnected conversation throughout this section (Ex. 2-2, 2-3).

Fauré led the return of the A section in the tonic key (F Major) with the seventh of the dominant key (C Major): B-flat, resolving to A. The harmonic and melodic excitement continues in the Coda section. Fauré began the Coda with *Più lento* in *pianissimo*, an unexpected tempo and color change, then built to the final *Allegro* section with interesting harmonies: $b$ III (A-flat Major) and $b$ VI (D-flat Major). The final reiteration of F Major was built up with a seven measure dynamic crescendo and augmented F triad (#5) harmony, before resolving to F Major (Ex. 2-4).
Le jardin de Dolly, Op.56 No.3

The title translates directly as “The Garden of Dolly” and portrays Dolly on a “fanciful walk into an enchanted dream garden.”\(^\text{15}\) It was a New Year’s Day present for Dolly in 1895. This piece was much known for Fauré’s usage of a phrase quoted from the fourth movement of his First Sonata in A Major, Op.13, for violin and piano, 1876 (Ex. 3-1, 3-2).

Example 3-1. Primo, Le Jardin de Dolly, mm. 7-8.


\(^\text{15}\)McGraw, pg. 82.
Written in a homophonic structure, the primo has the primary melodic material. The secondo has the melodic focus in the B section. The beginning melody is a beautiful linear *cantabile* line in the primo accompanied by chordal arpeggiation in the secondo. The moving harmonies in the lower register are written based on contrapuntal techniques, giving a sense of flow to the piece. Fauré’s use of interesting harmonic progressions was vital for this piece, as it brought out different colors and qualities of sound to the listener (Ex. 3-3).

Fauré made use of enharmonic shifts to project more character depth with a different quality of sound. His maturity in his compositions had since blossomed until this point of his life. Fauré shifted the key center from E Major to D-flat Major, with the melody shifting enharmonically (Ex. 3-4).

The B section has a more somber and serious character in the relative minor key, C-sharp minor. This linear section, marked *expressivo* with a *marcato* melodic line in the secondo, suggested a straightforward harmonic structure with an assertive quality. “It
suggests a walk in a garden filled with beautiful flowers”\textsuperscript{16} with the constant flowing sixteenth note figures accompanying the melody.

\textit{Kitty-Valse, Op.56 No.4}

As a celebration for Dolly’s fourth birthday, Fauré composed this animated valse as part of his four-hand piano suite in 1896. The inspiration to the title was from a reference to the whirling leaps of Dolly’s pet dog, Ketty. Due to a misspelling by Fauré, the correct title should have been the “Ketty-Valse”. As a child, Dolly loved everything she had, and Ketty was her favorite companion. The lively character of the valse portrays a happy, youthful, and simple childhood. Similar to \textit{Mi-a-ou}, the feeling of gaiety and merriness is portrayed in a capricious dance style. Another dance style is used in the final work of this set, \textit{Le pas espagnol}, Op.56 No.6, which is of Spanish influence.

The \textit{Kitty-Valse} flows very elegantly throughout with whirling scale passages: tonal, modal, and chromatic (Ex. 4-1).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example4-1.png}
\caption{Example 4-1. Primo, \textit{Kitty-Valse}, mm. 19-24.}
\end{figure}

A section of the valse alternates from graceful melodic movement to chordal melodic emphasis. Fauré introduced a hemiola section, where the structure shifted to

chordal structures. The unique quality this section produced seemed to show an early Jazz influence in Fauré’s music.

**Tendresse, Op.56 No.5**

This tender piece reflected Fauré as a composer with great sensitivity. His musical technique, aesthetics, and ideas were clearly recognized in this work. Composed in 1896, it has complex harmonic figurations, bold expression, and rounded nuances.

In a private letter, Fauré explained his style by saying: “‘And I always enjoy seeing sunlight play on the rocks, the water, the trees and plains. What variety of effects, what brilliance and what softness… I wish my music could show as much diversity.’”\(^{17}\)

The bass line in the A section of the Tendresse has a big importance in supporting the immensely varied harmony. Fauré would always make use of this phrase: “‘the bass line is with us,’”\(^ {18}\) to reiterate the nuance that the “skeletal line” would produce (Ex. 5-1).

![Example 5-1. Secondo, Tendresse, mm. 15-17.](image)

His maxim stressed, “‘Nuance is the thing.’”\(^ {19}\) The tranquil B section is a conversation between primo and secondo, where canonic repetitions take place, adding fluidity and shading qualities (Ex. 5-2, 5-3).

\(^{17}\)Long, pg. 67.  
\(^{18}\)Ibid, pg. 66.  
\(^{19}\)Ibid, pg. 66.
Le pas espagnol, Op.56 No.6

The final piece of the Dolly Suite was inspired by a Spanish dance in triple meter. Written in 1896, the idea of this piece came from a bronze equestrian statue by Fauré’s father-in-law, Emmanuel Frémiet. The statue was placed on a mantle in the Bardac family house and was an art piece that fascinated Dolly. Filled with energy and virtuosity, this piece focused on rhythmic unity and technical virtuosity. Abrupt key shifts show a distinct quality in Fauré’s music.

Fauré was a composer who always had a planned layout for his works. He immersed his personal charm in music. It was filled with the Romantic spirit of vibrant colors, tonal unity, harmonic modulation, and rhythmic structure.

There are other technicalities with Fauré – use of a series of seventh chords, suspensions, extreme keys, contrasting binary and ternary rhythms – but the first impression of his music is that it defies analysis. For lack of a better word, this inexplicable quality must be called charm. Swiftly moving modulations, subtle chromaticisms, and the easy flowing grace of the melodic line all contribute to this aristocratic music that is the essence of French sensibilité.²⁰

²⁰Gillespie, pg. 304.
The Dolly Suite has many qualities of Fauré as a composer of profound musical ideas. One of his pupils, Charles Koechlin, said: “‘He [Fauré] saw the world as a source of harmony.’” Fauré favored the balance between harmony and unity. His music is inspirational, full of depth, sensitive, and exquisite.

\[21\] Long, pg. 19.
CHAPTER III
Impressionism

Color is my day-long obsession, joy and torment. – Claude Monet

From the 1870s to the 1930s, a new era in music and visual art emerged, called Impressionism. This new aesthetic expression developed in France as a form of artistic revolution against the Expressionist movement in Germany. Parisian society had a great fascination with and support for art, literature, language, theater, dance, and music. Impressionism is an aesthetic value in which art represented impressions, emotions, and sensations, rather than depicting the feeling in detail. The vagueness of interpretation allowed more freedom of thought and expression.

Impressionism first appeared in paintings of great artists like Claude Monet and Édouard Manet, where “they concentrated on the manner in which a picture was painted and were completely unconcerned with subject matter. Their chief aim was to reproduce the general impression of the moment made by the subject on the artist.”\(^{22}\) This early impressionistic school understood the popular realism movement at that time, but they stressed that reality changes. As Monet once said, “For me, a landscape does not exists in its own right, since its appearance changes at any moment.”

\(^{22}\) Gillespie, pg. 328.
In literature and language, Impressionism was related to the Symbolist movement. Notable poets like Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Charles Baudelaire favored subtlety over precision in their work references. The Symbolists favored the Schopenhauer aesthetics, where art brings temporary solace from the pressures of human desire, which is the cause of suffering, as Schopenhauer described. Comfort came to the Symbolists through magical words, sounds, and music in creative writing.

Music grew to its largest scale with Richard Wagner’s Expressionistic style. Music revolution was also growing with the founding of The Second Viennese School by Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern. Twelve-tone serialism and atonality was a major breakthrough in Expressionistic music. The new Impressionistic aesthetic, however, focused on intricacy and manner of symbolic relationships. Composers in response to Impressionism wrote music with focus on imagery, colors, and tonal quality. Similar to the visual arts, where every brush an artist strokes on the canvas creates the impression of painting, every minute detail in a music composition is an expression of sonority.
CHAPTER IV

Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

You are getting nowhere, M. Croche will tell them, because you know nothing but music and obey barbaric laws. – Debussy

As one of the most significant musicians in his lifetime, Claude Debussy proved to be an influential musician, both within France and globally. His success on developing a new aesthetic range of sound, timbre, and color received great appreciation from Symbolists and other twentieth century composers.

The oldest of five children, Claude-Achille Debussy was born in St. Germain-en-Laye on August 22, 1862. His modest family ran a china shop. As a child, he showed much promise in his talent and interest in music. Throughout his career, he travelled to many places outside of France, including Russia, Rome, and London. Debussy passed away on March 25, 1918 in Paris. He had suffered from rectal cancer since 1915.

Due to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Debussy never attended school. He had his first piano lessons with the Italian violinist, Jean Cerutti, while Debussy’s family sought refuge in Cannes with his father, Manuel-Achille’s sister, Clementine. Debussy’s potential was evident upon his acceptance to Antoine Marmontel’s piano studio in the Paris Conservatoire at age ten. Debussy had a natural approach to music and his teachers “recognized that he had a good ear and was
an able sight-reader, although they regarded him as ‘a little backward in the rudiments.’”\textsuperscript{23} Debussy was known for his aversion to the rigid teachings of harmony and composition in the Conservatoire. He often left his professors perplexed with his innovative and unique chord progressions, dissonances, and intervallic relationships.

Debussy’s musical style can be categorized into three periods: early, middle, and late. During his eleven years in the Conservatoire, he exhibited an early stage of experiments and explorations. He favored music that had its own set of rules, rather than traditional exaggerated forms. When the young Debussy was teaching and playing duets with Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s patron, Nadezhda von Meck during the summer of 1880, the latter composer was highly critical of this new style. When Mme von Meck sent Debussy’s \textit{Danse bohémienne} to Tchaikovsky, the great composer replied, “It is a very pretty piece, but it is much too short. Not a single idea is expressed fully, the form is terribly shriveled, and it lacks unity.”\textsuperscript{24}

A few years later in 1884, Debussy won the Prix de Rome with \textit{L’enfant prodigue}. He furthered his studies in Rome at the Villa Medici for two years (1885-1887) and found inspiration from the works of Franz Liszt.

Debussy was exposed to Richard Wagner’s music from his journeys to Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889. Debussy’s appreciation of the Wagnerian \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}’s (Wagner’s ideal of dramatic art) chromatic and dramatic music diminished, as this


universal artwork of exaggerated music did not correspond with his personal aesthetics. Debussy was certain that he cared about individuality in his works. He wanted his music to be without restrictions, and reaffirmed his ideology by saying: “I am sure that the Institute would not approve, for, naturally it regards the path which it ordains as the only right one. But there is no help for it! I am too enamored of my freedom, too fond of my own ideas.”

Debussy developed musical language that was completely original. After discovering the Javanese gamelan at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1889, Debussy pursued a new interest in non-European cultures. Debussy’s fascination with Eastern music, exotic sounds, and ancient and oriental modes became vital elements in his composition style. New influences on sound and free forms expanded his musical boundaries, blending new flavors with his French style.

In 1887, the first links of Debussy as an “Impressionist” came from the members of the Institut of France, with the reference to the symphonic suite, Printemps, Debussy’s first major work that reflected Impressionistic elements. Debussy did not think that it was appropriate to describe him as an “Impressionist”. In 1908, he stressed to his publisher: “‘I’m attempting ‘something different’, realities in some sense – what imbeciles call impressionism, just about the least appropriate term possible.’” Debussy’s unique musical style came to a new association of the term “debussyme”, that could mean connotations in positive or negative terms. Debussy was of a devotee on Symbolist literature (Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire) and Impressionistic art

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26 Lesure, pg. 102.
(Claude Monet, Édouard Manet, Katsushika Hokusai). He “created what was virtually a new musical language, free of superimposed formal constraints and deterministic tonal harmony; a language, in short, that reached into the subconscious and was uninformed by overemphasis or rhetoric.”

The mid-1890s marked the peak of Debussy’s career as a composer, musician, writer, and critic. Debussy had a fully established career in the large scene of the Parisian artistic society and was a frequent face in Mallarmé’s Tuesday salon performances. He developed a lifelong friendship with Ernest Chausson, who gave Debussy great support throughout his career. By 1895, Debussy was known as the composer of a famous string quartet and the controversial Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune. When Pelléas et Mélisande, Debussy’s only opera, had its first performance in 1902, there were ongoing public demonstrations. This major work made a huge impact towards the music industry. Debussy was the most well known composer in France at that time.

As a writer, Debussy contributed articles to journals beginning in 1901. His published writings were compiled in a book entitled Monsieur Croche, The Anti-Dilettante and officially published in 1921. Debussy created Monsieur Croche as his alter ego. According to Emil Vuillermoz:

He [M. Croche] ‘is not the traditional contradictor, the devil’s advocate, who pretends to be a professor of aesthetics and prepares facile victories for himself. He does not attempt to sustain false theories, finally permitting the author to refute them with virtuosity… Monsieur Croche is rather a second Debussy – a bitter and sarcastic Debussy, intentionally paradoxical, who dares say what he likes. He is affectionate caricature… Monsieur Croche was the safety valve which guaranteed against danger of

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inelegant explosion a mind in which at times the pressure of irritation mounted too high.”

Debussy’s compositions relate to many other aspects of his life. During his final years, which coincided with World War I, Debussy lived in a state of creative depression. He only managed to compose the *Berceuse héroïque* at that time. After his diagnosis of rectal cancer in 1915, his later compositions reflected a character of serious and somberness. His music became so personal that in 1914, he rejected other references by saying: “‘There comes a moment in life when one wants to concentrate, and now I’ve made a resolution to listen to as little music as possible.’”

Debussy had a challenging personal life. He formed romantic relationships with a number of women, but failed to find lasting happiness with them. When he was eighteen, he had an eight-year affair with the wife of a Parisian lawyer, Marie-Blanche Vasnier. He had another relationship with his great supporter, Gabrielle Dupont for nine years. Additionally, he married Lilly Texier, a fashion model, in 1899. During his marriage to Texier, Debussy became frustrated with her lack of musical sense and appreciation. In 1904, when one of his favorite students, Raoul Bardac (who also studied with Fauré), introduced Debussy to his mother, Emma Bardac, a mutual relationship blossomed. Emma was a sophisticated and accomplished singer with intellectual ideas, and both Fauré and Debussy were fond of her. When Debussy ended his marriage to Texier in 1904, she attempted suicide by shooting herself in the chest at the *Place de la Concorde*, a major public square in Paris. Texier survived, but the bullet remained in her vertebrae.

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29 Lesure, pg. 102.
for the rest of her life. Debussy and Texier’s divorce became official a year later. Many family and friends were influenced by this scandal. Debussy was alienated by many and Bardac was disowned by her family.

The same year, Claude-Emma, better known as “Chouchou” was born. Debussy dedicated his Children’s Corner suite to “Chouchou” when she was three. Debussy and Emma Bardac were married in 1908 and remained together until Debussy’s passing in 1918. His death devastated his family. This was reflected in “Chouchou’s” letter to her brother Raoul, when she wrote: “It’s unbelievable. I don’t know how I stay alive, and I can’t believe the awful truth.”

Debussy’s musical language developed artistic explorations in harmony, texture, rhythm, form, and sound. Every detail in his compositions was thought out. Debussy’s works remained French in style, but his harmonies blend modal and tonal qualities together. The ambiguity of key was a favorite trait of Debussy. He loved writing long series of parallel chords. Each chord had a different quality. The temperament would change when he frequently shifted key centers. Whole-tone, pentatonic, and modal scales gave color and importance to Debussy’s harmonic language.

On texture, Marguerite Long agreed that both Debussy and Ravel were great orchestrators of the twentieth century. Debussy often combined audio and visual elements while composing a piece. Referring to Debussy’s alter ego, M. Croche “spoke of an orchestral score as if it were a picture. He seldom used technical words, but the dimmed and slightly worn elegance of his rather unusual vocabulary seemed to ring like old

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He disregarded Wagner’s thick texture, referred Wagner’s music to “a sort of many-colored ‘make-up’ spread almost uniformly, in which, he said he could no longer distinguish the tone of a violin from that of a trombone.”

Musical expression is often discussed when playing Debussy’s music. The composer himself was recalled as a performer who played in strict time. Debussy’s rhythmic pulse was steady, but allowed certain amounts of flexibility depending on the work. His notations were clear and descriptive, indicating the effect that needed to be produced. Most of his works showed a clear formal structure. According to Roy Howat, Debussy’s major compositions from the late 1880s (La mer, L’isle joyeuse, Images for piano) reflected clear writings of “sophisticated proportional structures based on symmetry and the golden section (often following the numbers of the Fibonacci series).” Debussy favored techniques such as hemiola, syncopation, suspension, and intervals of sevenths and ninths. He also wrote many compositions in dance styles.

Regarding timbre and choice of instruments, Debussy favored the orchestra and piano for its extensive tonal palette. Debussy spent his career searching for the right sonorities and inflections in his music, which became his greatest contribution to Western music in the early twentieth century.

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31 Debussy, pg. 5.
32 Ibid, pg. 5.
33 Lesure, pg. 110.
**Petite Suite, L. 65**

*Music is the arithmetic of sounds as optics is the geometry of light.* – Debussy

Composed from 1886 to 1889, the *Petite Suite* is one of Debussy’s popular early period works. It was written upon his return to Paris from the Villa Medici in Rome. A set of four pieces for piano duet, Debussy focused on different dance movements. As implied by the title, Debussy composed the *Petite Suite* based on the tradition of dance suites from the Baroque era. Dance was an important idiom in his musical endeavors, and the *Petite Suite* reflected Debussy’s individual artistic command as a notable composer of the twentieth century.

During Debussy’s early style period, he was frustrated with musical expectations of the rigid environment in the Paris Conservatoire. Influenced by Impressionistic paintings and Symbolist literature, he stressed that French music needed more lyrical clarity.

The *Petite Suite* does not reflect Debussy’s later Impressionistic harmonic style and keyboard technique. These pieces were greatly influenced by the Baroque dance suites, and the titles like *Cortège, Menuet,* and *Ballet* came from dance styles. Debussy used ABA ternary form for the four pieces: *En bateau, Cortège, Menuet,* and *Ballet,* a common practice for his short piano pieces. It is a “melodic, graceful, but not
impressionistic\textsuperscript{34} composition. Some prominent qualities in this music include open fifths and octaves (Ex. 1-1), parallel structures (Ex. 1-2), and seventh chords (Ex. 1-3).

Example 1-1. Secondo, \textit{Cortège}, mm. 8-10.

Example 1-2. Secondo, \textit{Menuet}, mm. 51-54.


Debussy was a strong believer that music cannot be controlled and it should be determined by the moment itself. In his entire output for piano, he left less than twenty pedal markings. Debussy understood that pedaling was subjective. Too little or too much pedal could distort the impression intended by the composer. As a musician who travelled, he knew that pedals of different pianos allow different shades of timbre. Therefore, he left much of his pedal markings to the liberty of pianists, with the intention that he should listen for sonorities and color.

This work is published separately by Durand. The first performance of the entire suite was by Debussy and his student, Jacques Durand, who was also his publisher’s son. These four pieces of moderate length and difficulty classified Debussy’s pre-Impressionistic style. All four pieces carry a sophisticated French quality within its form and texture. The *Petite Suite* was a popular four-hand piano duet and gained more attention when Henri Büsser orchestrated it in 1907.

*En bateau*

Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, and Maurice Ravel all shared a common interest on one subject matter: water. Debussy was fascinated with the reflections and movements of water and he wrote many compositions that focused on this flowing matter. One example is the first piece of the *Petite Suite*, *En bateau*. One of his earlier explorations of water, the title translates as being “in a boat”. This piece has a constant rocking motion that portrays a gondola (Venetian rowing boat) over the Grand Canal of Venice. 1886 marked the return of Debussy to Paris from Rome, where he furthered his studies for two years after winning the *Prix de Rome* in 1884. It is possible that Debussy was introduced to Venetian culture during his time in Italy.

The flowing quality of the piece is sustained by the constant arpeggio figures in the secondo part (Ex. 1-4).
Debussy also took note of the time signature $6/8$. This gave a feeling of a pleasant, smooth ride in a boat. His musical ideas provided a clear depiction of the subject. He used connecting repetitions, alternating in both primo and secondo, to unify the piece. The melodic line was simple and easily remembered for its beautiful contour. “With its facile and melodious barcarolle,”\(^{35}\) it reflected Debussy’s focus on the importance of the moment, an Impressionist quality he attained from paintings. The sonorities become warmer when Debussy doubles the melody in two octaves (Ex. 1-5). The space between two octaves is great and the contrast of register creates a special quality.

The B section is marked *risoluto*, which means determined. The first of two *forte* markings appears in the beginning of this section, with the tonal focus on D Major (Dominant harmonic shift from G Major in the A section). This rhythmic section of dotted rhythms and series of parallel fifths reflected Debussy’s association to French dance styles, such as the *Gigue* (Ex. 1-6).

\(^{35}\)Thompson, pg. 272.
The piece quiets down from the return of the A section towards the end, with clear dynamic indications and slowing down. This section could portray a picture in which the boat has reached its destination, with the water ripples fading away slowly from the surface.

**Cortège**

Debussy believed that each key had its own mood and feeling. For example, in *En bateau*, the barcarolle section is in G Major, a beautiful and soothing key. The *Cortège*, a lively rhythmic dance, Debussy sets the energetic feeling with E Major. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the basic idea of distinguishing a choice of key was from its mode: major or minor. For Debussy, every key has its importance in depicting an image or color for his music, be it major, minor, or modal. The *Cortège* is a ceremonial procession. This animated march is technically challenging for both parts. Full of grandeur, the piece has parallel thirds and chordal structures throughout.

The first statement of the piece is introduced in parallel thirds in the primo part (Ex. 2-1).
Debussy freely used dissonances in his compositions. He favored sustained chords with added sevenths, ninths, and elevenths. In the *Cortège*, Debussy used syncopation to reflect the perkiness of the B section (Ex. 2-2).

*Menuet*

The *Menuet* is the most intimate and personal piece of the *Petite Suite*. Written in simple triple meter, the first eight bars suggests a prelude to the dance. The prelude section is composed with a series of parallel sixths, a harmonic technique favored by Debussy (Ex. 3-1). This feature resembled parallel organum.
The *Menuet* theme is short and easily remembered, like the *En bateau* theme. It is straightforward in its contour and very much associated to a dance style. Debussy introduced register shifts for a change in tone quality when the melody sings in the lower register (Ex. 3-2).

![Example 3-2. Secondo, *Menuet*, mm. 25-29.](image)

Debussy also utilized parallel sixths in both primo and secondo to bring out coordination and interesting pitches in both parts (Ex. 3-3, 3-4).

![Example 3-3. Primo, *Menuet*, mm. 17-20.](image)

![Example 3-4. Secondo, *Menuet*, mm. 17-20.](image)

Reminiscence of the Baroque dance suites can be seen with the ornamentation markings in the secondo of the middle section. The next fragment after the “ornamented” fragment included rhythmic imitations of the dance suites (Ex. 3-5). Rhythmic precision for dances was important in keeping with the feeling of the movement.
Example 3-5. Secondo, Menuet, mm. 43-46.

**Ballet**

The final piece of the *Petite Suite*, this vigorous dance focused on Debussy’s idiom of rhythmic precision. Unlike the previous three pieces, the first melodic theme of the *Ballet* appears in the secondo. Debussy used many open intervals of a perfect fourth in the melodic subject (Ex. 4-1).

Example 4-1. Secondo, *Ballet*, mm. 1-5.

As a contrast with the main melodic theme, Debussy introduced modal passages in stepwise contour to the second melodic subject. The first modal passage was an introduction to the second melodic subject that used the B-Dorian mode (Ex. 4-2). The modal theme based on the B-Aeolian mode appears in the secondo (Ex. 4-3). The primo connects the melodic theme with the F-Lydian mode (Ex. 4-4).

Example 4-2. Primo, *Ballet*, mm. 11-15.
The *Ballet* has a rhythmically driven and percussive quality for the outer sections.

Debussy stressed that rhythm precision is determined internally: “the internal rhythm of all music depends on who is playing it, just as every word depends on the mouth that is speaking it.”

He understood music as a subjective art; therefore, he left no tempo markings on any pieces of the *Petite Suite*. The year of 1889 was a remarkable year for Debussy, where he was first exposed to the exotic qualities of the Javanese gamelan. A percussive instrument, and a great fascination of Debussy, some qualities of a gamelan ensemble can be heard in the outer sections of the *Ballet* (Ex. 4-5).

For a change of mood, Debussy writes a *Tempo di Valse* for the B section. Many expressive chromatic harmonies were introduced in this graceful section.

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36 Long, pg. 71.
A man with a continuous stream of ideas, who sets his own rules, Debussy remains a phenomenal twentieth century musician until today. Originally critiqued as a composer without form, he is now considered an important composer in western music history. As Monsieur Croche once said: “To be unique, faultless!... Discipline must be sought in freedom, and not within the formulas of an outworn philosophy only fit for the feeble-minded. Give ear to no man’s counsel; but listen to the wind which tells in passing the history of the world.”37

37 Debussy, pg. 12.
CHAPTER V
Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)

We should always remember that sensitiveness and emotion constitute the real content of a work of art. – Ravel

Despite challenges and criticism, Maurice Ravel is a significant composer in western music history. His music possessed the sensitive quality of Fauré, and the color palette of Debussy. Ravel was considered “one of the most original and sophisticated musicians of the twentieth century.”

Joseph Maurice Ravel was born on March 7, 1875 in Ciboure, a Basque town close to the borders of France and Spain. The Basque heritage remained close to Ravel, especially towards his musical endeavors, even after his family moved to Paris. Ravel’s father, Pierre Joseph Ravel, was a Swiss civil engineer who was “keenly interested in music.” Joseph was an organized inventor and perfectionist. When he saw Ravel’s potential in a musical career, he fully supported his son’s pursuits in music. Ravel had a happy childhood, and he knew that “it [his career] was to be music from the very beginning… as a concert pianist or as a composer.” The result of Ravel’s death in December 28, 1937 was probably from a brain surgery he underwent in Paris to overcome an injury sustained from a road accident in 1932.

40 Ibid, pg. 11.
Ravel’s Basque origins came from his mother, Marie Delouart, who Ravel had “the deepest emotional tie of his entire life.” Ravel’s strong attachment to his mother nurtured his growth and enthusiasm in music and she was always proud of Ravel’s accomplishments. Madame Ravel’s ailing health caused Ravel great concerns. At the time, he also had his own health complications from dysentery. His mother’s death in 1917 was a painful and devastating period for Ravel and he wrote little compositions while mourning over her passing. He regained his creativity slowly and was quoted as saying: “his late mother’s ‘infinite tenderness’ had been, in retrospect, his ‘only reason for living.’”

Ravel’s musical education began with his first piano lessons with Henry Ghys at age seven. Ravel studied harmony, counterpoint, and composition with Léo Delibes’ pupil, Charles-René. 1889 marked an important year for Ravel. He had his first public performance at age fourteen, along with pupils of his second piano teacher, Émile Decombes, including Reynaldo Hahn and Alfred Cortot. The same year, Ravel was offered admission to the Paris Conservatoire. Two huge influences on Ravel’s career were his exposure to both Russian music and the Javanese gamelan at the 1889 World Exposition in Paris.

Upon Ravel’s dismissal from Charles-Auguste de Bériot’s studio, the young composer left the Conservatoire in 1895 and focused on composition. The same year, Ravel completed the “Habanera” for two pianos, a remarkable work later transcribed for orchestra. His influences on Spanish music came from his Basque heritage and close

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41 Orenstein, pg. 8.
friendship with Ricardo Viñes. The origin of the “Habenera” began when the two boys were “experimenting with new chords”\(^{43}\) during their Conservatoire days.

Ravel was very grateful to both his teachers, Gabriel Fauré and André Gédalge. Fauré stressed a communication between composer and listener. Ravel was interested in Fauré’s musical depth. Ravel’s focus on clarity and structure were related to the teachings of Gédalge. He stressed a melodic focus and clarity in music, much like the music of great composers like Johann Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In 1900, Ravel and a group of art enthusiasts formed Apaches, a group who referred to themselves as artistic outcasts. They openly discussed and performed new works by living composers of that time.

Ravel was a short man with a small figure. He was noted for his handsome physical appearance and sarcastic humor. When Madame Nijinsky met Ravel at the composer’s performance of the opera *Daphnis et Chloé*, she portrayed Ravel as “a charming young man, always a little extravagantly dressed, but full of gaiety.”\(^{44}\) Ravel was a fashion icon, as he was constantly keeping up with the latest trends of the time, and “he was among the first to wear pastel-colored shirts in France.”\(^{45}\)

Ravel was influenced by many great composers. He had a deep appreciation for Bach’s music and a great interest in eighteenth century counterpoint techniques. Ravel enjoyed the French music styles of César Franck, François Couperin, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and new music by his contemporaries: Erik Satie, Gabriel Fauré, and Claude

\(^{43}\) Orenstein, pg. 16.  
\(^{44}\) Ibid, pg. 111.  
\(^{45}\) Ibid, pg. 111.
Debussy. Ravel’s musical influences also took him as far as the exotic Eastern sonorities, as well as to the early developments of American jazz. Ravel created his musical world by accepting diverse forms of music, which then evolved into his individual style.

Ravel and Debussy have been compared and contrasted for many years. Undeniably, both composers underwent musical training at the Paris Conservatoire and led French music to a new level of appreciation. They shared common interests in art and literature, and had mutual friends. It was true that both composers influenced one another to some extent, and Ravel admired Debussy for his free individuality. Regardless of the similarities of both composers, the younger composer pointed out that his style was “opposite to that of Debussy’s symbolism”46 and “by nature I [Ravel] am different from Debussy.”47 Ravel did not prefer Debussy’s open structure of form, as he worked very much within the constructions of traditional structures.

Ravel was often called an imitator. He attained musical inspirations from the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods, but composed his works with his own style and expression. As for claims that he was an imitator of Debussy, Sergei Prokofiev noted: “While continuing to some extent the creative style of Debussy, Ravel contributed to music much that was highly individual and original.”48 Zoltán Kodály also proclaimed Ravel to be an original inventor:

This interesting composer belongs to the New French School, but though Debussy is its starting point, and though he [Ravel] shares many of his peculiarities of style, he is not to be regarded simply as imitator. In Ravel, the incorporeal, ethereal music of Debussy is

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46Orenstein, pg. 126.
infused with an alien element, a savage determination which, though maybe it brings him closer to the world of everyday experience, prevents him from achieving so often the poetic quality of his master.\textsuperscript{49}

The musical language of Ravel balanced simplicity and complexity. These traits were common since his Conservatoire days studying with Fauré and Gédalge. Ravel favored the traditional forms along with complex harmonies and sonorities. His ideas were a fusion of the old and new, a bridge from classical form to modern harmony. His optimism, idealistic, and innovative feature led him to great friendships and projects within in and out of France.

Ravel used a wide range of tertian harmonies (favoring major sevenths and ninths) and harmonic planing in his music. He favored the church modes over major and minor scales, and would often use exotic scales such as pentatonic and whole-tone. Ravel’s distinctive, refined, and elegant style “produced a uniquely personal style that exploits the use of modal melodies and the intervals of the seventh and ninth. Ravel extended the pianistic traditions of Franz Liszt but expressed himself in a quintessentially French way.”\textsuperscript{50}

Ravel often introduced chromaticism and bitonality in his music, but never departed from tonality. The revolution created by The Second Viennese School was great, but Ravel’s aesthetics centered along the lines of Impressionistic French art. He stressed that his music must always possess engaging emotional connections to remain true music.

\textsuperscript{49}Holmes, pg 117.  
The sparkle in Ravel’s compositions proved himself as a successful modern French composer. With Ravel’s interests with the writings of the American poet, Edgar Allan Poe, who emphasized form and structure in art, all of Ravel’s compositions were planned with precision and careful thought. Poe was “considered his [Ravel] third teacher after Fauré and Gédalge.” Poe recognized the limited attention spans of people. He felt that thorough planning and construction determined a great work. His views on creating a piece of good work remained a strong emphasis in Ravel’s craftsmanship. Ravel constantly strived for perfection in his works, where every measure was crafted with beauty and expression.

Ravel was a diverse man with broad interests: from myths to fairytales, and machines to toys. His interest in mythological beliefs and fantasies came from his beloved mother. She made a great impact on Ravel’s creative thinking with stories and folk songs from her Basque heritage. Ravel’s interest in machines and toys was from his father’s profession as an engineer. Ravel’s favorite toy was “the mechanical bird, ‘Zizi’.” It sat next to him on his writing table.

Ravel constantly strived for perfection. He showed interest in almost everything: art, culture, society, innovation, and literature. He was lucky to have wide and varied exposure as he grew up in Paris, one of the primary culture centers at that time. Ravel was “sensitive to every kind of music.” The criticism and comparisons did not stop him.

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51 Kelly, pg. 868.
53 Orenstein, pg. 131.
from making music his own way, which brought us a great collection of charming music today.
Spring: a host of little birds, still awkward, are preparing their recitals. – Excerpt from a letter from Ravel to Cipa Godebski

Ma mère l’Oye

Ma mère l’Oye for piano four hands was based upon childhood themes. Also known as the Mother Goose Suite, it is a delightful set of pieces based on children’s fairytales. Ravel began composing the first piece of Ma mère l’Oye, Pavane de la belle au bois dormant (Pavane of Sleeping Beauty) for the Godebski children, Jean and Mimie in 1908. Ravel did not originally intend to compose a piano duet suite on childhood themes. Upon his publisher Jacques Durand’s encouragement after a performance of the Pavane de la belle au bois dormant by the Godebski children, Ravel wrote more children themed duets, which later formed the completion of Ma mère l’Oye in 1910.

Ravel maintained a close friendship with Ida and Cipa Godebski, parents of Jean and Mimie. The composer made frequent visits to the Godebski home at Valvins. Ravel was fond of the lovely children. This affection motivated him to compose piano duet pieces for them. His friendship with the family was evident when the composer dedicated his early major piano work, Sonatine to Ida and Cipa in 1905. Later, Ma mère l’Oye was dedicated to the children as a present in 1910.

The premiere of Ma mère l’Oye came shortly after it was published in 1910. Ravel intended for the Godebski children to premiere this work, but Mimie was overwhelmed with performing a new work in the first Société Musicale Indépendante (a new group formed by Ravel and several others in response to the broken ties with the Société Nationale de Musique) concert. Thus, two young students at the Conservatoire,
Jeanne Leleu and Geneviève Durony premiered the work. Ravel enjoyed the premiere of *Ma mère l'Oye* and thanked Jeanne “for her ‘childlike’ performance, thus thanking a child for being childlike.”54

While composing *Ma mère l'Oye*, Ravel chose his favorite fairytales of French origins and set them as themes for the individual pieces. He picked five tales as the foundation for ideas: *Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant; Petit Poucet; Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes; Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête;* and *Le Jardin féerique*. These charming fairytales were chosen from the children stories of Charles Perrault, Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, and Marie Leprince de Beaumont. The title, *Ma mère l'Oye* was named after Perrault’s *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose Tales, 1697*) collection.

Ravel noted “cinq pièces enfantines” (five children pieces) under the titles of each movement. *Ma mère l'Oye* was written for children, but they are hardly children’s pieces. The work “requires sophisticated and subtle pianism, great dynamic control and sensitivity, and considerable dexterity for effective performance.”55

The success and popularity of the suite after its publication was abundant. Ravel, whom the pianist Marguerite Long praised as a great orchestrator, went ahead and produced the orchestra transcription and ballet version of the suite in 1911. Ravel added additional movements to the ballet, including a *Prélude*, the *Danse du rouet*, and interludes. The orchestral version of the suite remains much adored by the public.

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54Ivry, pg. 65.
Ravel’s contribution to *Ma mère l’Oye* marked his success in writing music on childhood themes, following the steps of Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*, Fauré’s *Dolly Suite*, and Debussy’s *Children’s Corner*.

**Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant (Pavane of Sleeping Beauty)**

Based on Charles Perrault’s tale on *La Belle au bois dormant* (The Sleeping Beauty), Ravel begins the storytelling in an enchanted world. The pavane is “slow and thin-textured,” which “describes the calm, unearthly quiet of Beauty lying asleep in the enchanted forest.”

This pavane is completely unlike Ravel’s *Pavane pour une Infante défunte*. Ravel connects the story with a beautiful opening in the A-Aeolian mode. A pavane is a slow processional European court dance popular during the Renaissance. It is usually danced by a couple.

Simple and straightforward, the opening movement of *Ma mère l’Oye* is twenty measures in length, with five phrases of four-measure phrasing. The AA\(^1\) form movement evolves in a slow and smooth processional texture, with reflections of Ravel’s techniques in quiet counterpoint and harmony. Ivry suggested that the repeating theme fragment represented “the metamorphosis of adult love”\(^57\) (Ex. 1-1).

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56 McGraw, pg. 225.

57 Ivry, pg. 65.
**Petit Poucet (Little Tom Thumb)**

The opening of the movement begins with Ravel’s characteristic traits of favoring modes over major and minor keys. The basic tonality is C minor, and is brought out by the left hand of the secondo. Ravel introduces a D-Dorian and D-Phrygian modal scale above the C minor tonality in parallel thirds (Ex. 2-1). Both modes were very favored by Ravel in his compositions.

![Example 2-1. Secondo, Petit Poucet, mm. 1-4.](image)

The parallel motions of the tonal and modal lines bring ambiguity and suspense to the piece, parallel to the tale of Little Tom Thumb. Ravel noted in the score:

*Il croyait trouver aisément son chemin par le moyen de son pain qu’il avait passé; mais il fut bien surpris lorsqu’il n’en put retrouver une seule miette: les oiseaux étaient venus qui avaient tout mange. (Ch. Perrault.)*

He [Tom Thumb] believed that he could easily find his path by means of bread crumbs which he had scattered wherever he passed; but he was very much surprised when he could not find a single crumb: the birds had come and eaten everything up. (Ch. Perrault.)

Ravel’s artistic qualities can be reflected throughout this piece with imitations of birds chirping, and cuckoos (Ex. 2-2). The wandering winds portray the confusion and

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58 Goss, pg. 131.
anxious feelings of *Petit Poucet* in parallel thirds (Ex. 2-1). It was possible that Ravel picked the tale of *Petit Poucet* as a self-description of himself, who had a small figure.

![Example 2-2. Primo, Petit Poucet, mm. 51-54.](image)

Clear indications on tempo, dynamics, articulation, and phrasing remained distinctive musical interpretations of Ravel. Continuous unity is focused throughout *Ma mère l’Oye*. He starts the *Petit Poucet* in a *pianissimo* dynamic level and concludes the movement with the same parallel fragment in *pianissimo*.

*Petit Poucet* is a tale of oral tradition transcribed by Charles Perrault in his Mother Goose Tales in 1697.

*Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes* (*Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodes*)

The third movement of *Ma mère l’Oye, Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes* is a tale from Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s *Serpentin Vert* (The Green Serpent). *Serpentin Vert* was published in d’Aulnoy’s 1698 *Contes Nouveaux ou Les Fées à la Mode* (New Tales, or Fairies in Fashion).

Influenced by the pentatonic scale, this piece portrays a scene of an Asian ugly princess, *Laideronnette*, stepping into her bath accompanied by viols, lutes, bells, gongs and hundreds of pagodas and pagodins. Transformed by the magical bath, *Laideronnette*
later became a beautiful Empress of the Pagodas. In this story, the *pagodes* were not Eastern buildings, but instead, referred to tiny people who sang and played mini instruments. Ravel included a description title for the piece:

> Elle se déshabilla et se mit dans le bain. Aussitôt pagodes et pagodines se mirent à chanter et à jouer des instruments: tells avaient des théorbes faits d’une coquille de noix; tells avaient des violes faites d’une coquille d’amande; car il fallait bien proportionner les instruments à leur taille. (Mme d’Aulnoy: Serpentin Vert)

She undressed and got into her bath. Immediately the Pagodas and Pagodins began to sing and play on their instruments: Some had theorbos made of walnut shells; others had viols made of the shell of an almond, for of course it was necessary to fit the instruments to their size. (Mme d’Aulnoy: Serpentin Vert)

Ravel used the black key pentatonic scale throughout this movement in F-sharp Major (Ex. 3-1).

![Example 3-1. Primo, Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes, mm. 9-13.](image)

Quartal harmonies were used throughout the movement that projected a wide range of sonorities (Ex. 3-2).

![Example 3-2. Primo, Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes, mm. 24-25.](image)
Ravel wanted to distinguish *Laideronnette* with the previous two movements of sensitive color and modal quality by adding a percussive nature to the *Laideronnette* movement. The secondo consists of percussive qualities with open intervals (Ex. 3-3).

![Example 3-3. Secondo, Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes, mm. 25-31.](image)

Ravel’s compositions always had a melody, which was undisturbed by harmonic changes and textural shifts. An example is shown where the primo has to sustain the melodic idea and preserve its percussive quality (Ex. 3-4).

![Example 3-4. Primo, Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes, mm. 185-188.](image)

The B section of this ternary form piece consists of beautiful gong-like imitative sonorities from linear melodic lines and interesting harmonies (Ex. 3-5).

![Example 3-5. Secondo, Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes, mm. 75-84.](image)
Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête (Conversations between Beauty and the Beast)

Adapted from Marie Leprince de Beaumont’s La Belle et la Bête (Beauty and the Beast), this famous tale tells us the moral of “embracing ugliness, and the metamorphosis of ugliness into beauty.” In Ravel’s portrayal, the piece begins at the scene where the Beast asks for the Beauty’s hand of marriage. Set in a moderate waltz tempo, the opening depicts a dance scene shared with Beauty and the Beast. Its homophonic texture is easily remembered and pleasant in tonality.

As the movement approaches the B section, the melodic chromaticism in the secondo (Ex. 4-1) and weak beat accents in the primo (Ex. 4-2). This section can suggest the Beast in his low warm voice conversing with the Beauty. When the Beauty refused the marriage proposal, her thoughts were revealed with chromatic textures in the primo (Ex. 4-2).

Example 4-1. Secondo, Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête, mm. 49-52.

Example 4-2. Primo, Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête, mm. 69-72.

59Ivry, pg. 65.
The movement returns to the A section with both the Beauty and the Beast theme overlapping. The Beauty finally overcomes her revulsion for the Beast and agrees to marriage. The charming glissando in the primo suggests Ravel’s portraying the transformation of the Beast to a handsome prince, and the tale ends quietly with a happy ending (Ex. 4-3).

![Example 4-3. Primo, Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête, mm. 146-147.](image)

**Le Jardin Féerique (The Enchanted Garden)**

The short finale movement of *Ma mère l’Oye, Le Jardin Féerique* reflects a fantasy garden, composed with Ravel’s typical charm and poised qualities. His former classmate, pianist Alfred Cortot claimed influences of Fauré in this piece. The origin of the tale is unknown.

Written in C Major, the beginning section contains counterpoint techniques of four-part harmony, possibly imitating a chorale (Ex. 5-1). The line flows smoothly with constant beautiful diatonic harmony changes.

The next section expands to an enchanted scene filled with charming arpeggiated chords, like fairies sparkling across the whole garden (Ex. 5-2). Ravel is a great illusionist in this work of art, like a painter brushing every detail with love and care. For every detail, his outspoken melodic line remained its clarity and sparkle (Ex. 5-2).


The piece is also noted for “its sober chords, marked ‘slow and with gravity,’ are of a rare lyric beauty.” The increasing growth and intensity of the homophonic section reached the climax, where glittering colors dispersed over every corner with the brilliance of the glissandi in the primo (Ex. 5-3).

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60Ivry, pg. 67.

The end is signaled by the trumpet and horn calls. This feels like a happy ending celebration, much like the end of a fairytale (Ex. 5-4).

Example 5-4, Secondo, *Le Jardin Féerique*, mm. 50-55.

As Ravel matured as a person, he was a dedicated man who cared about many things. He cherished his family, supported his friends and their families, loved pets and nature, and kept his love for illustrations, toys, and music. Ravel was an interesting character; he was often in the public’s eye, but:

He was always, in a sense, trying to escape from reality; he looked at life rather than took part in it, and preferred to create his own world – a subnatural place peopled with fairies and mechanical marvels, where the rude winds of violent emotion never blew. These things inspired him and called to him for interpretation; in setting them to music he felt safe – no one could here accuse him of sentimentality… He has even been accused of superficiality… These feelings nevertheless occasionally break through the mask of indifference with which he seeks to conceal them, and it is this sense of hidden depths and restrained emotion that makes Ravel’s music so intriguing and at the same time so delightful. ⁶¹

⁶¹ Goss, pg. 133-134.
Ravel’s influence has reached to a universal level. His life and compositions strike a profound appreciation to many others. The composer Witold Lutoslawski once said: “I see Ravel as a classic, a Mozart of our century. And as such, he must be the source of inspiration for all those who want to write durable music, super-temporal, capable of surviving.”

\[62\] Goss, pg. 186.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

Gabriel Fauré’s *Dolly Suite*, Op. 56, Claude Debussy’s *Petite Suite*, and Maurice Ravel’s *Ma mère l’Oye* are among the most important piano duet repertoire. Written by these great French composers, these suites have achieved tremendous acclaim and success since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The years between 1886 and 1910 showed a trend of the piano duet repertoire in France. The growth of new French musical aesthetics can be seen throughout these amazing compositions. Debussy reconstructed the Baroque dance suites with rhythmic precision, a special tone quality, and exotic influences. An early work by Debussy, it obeys a formal structure that allowed the composer’s imagination freedom for contour, sound, and ideas. Although the *Petite Suite* does not reflect Debussy’s later free-flowing Impressionistic style, this artwork of precision showed the beginning of a remarkable composer.

Fauré was known for his contrapuntal techniques and focus on individuality. He proved his stature as an influential composer in France. Form and structure laid the foundations of his compositions, including the *Dolly Suite*, Op. 56. A charming set of pieces illustrated from children’s themes, this suite also brings out Fauré’s maturity in music. Fauré exhibited his personal style right from the early years of his career, which explained the consistency he maintained throughout his compositional life. New idioms
(melodic and harmonic) along with traditional forms confirmed Fauré as a confident and consistent musician.

Ravel always loved childhood stories. Fantasy, tales, myths, and legends made up his creative mind. Ravel’s life was filled with diverse elements such as machines, toys, art, literature, culture, and pets. *Ma mère l'Oye* is a work that can describe Ravel’s personality. He was curious, interesting, charming, suspicious, and open-minded. This suite, based on childhood tales, reflected Ravel’s own personal taste. The brilliance from this magnificent work is most memorable.

These pieces were composed with personality and pianistic qualities, and continue to be beautiful French works studied with creativity and passion on the piano.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


