

Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

Preface

Chapter: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Source:

Of all the volumes in this series, this one, covering the first half of the twentieth century, surely differs the most radically from previous accounts. The reason goes beyond matters of selection and emphasis. The traditional narrative of twentieth-century music history is heavily—though often unwittingly—conditioned by a philosophy of history, conventionally identified as Hegelian, that arose in the nineteenth century in the aftermath of the French Revolution and that was first attached to the history of the arts, and to music in particular, in the 1850s. Unashamedly teleological, this historiographical bias was first enunciated in support of what was known at the time as the New German school, the faction figureheaded by Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner and chiefly promulgated by the music historian Franz Brendel. It is laid out in detail and critiqued in the eighth chapter of the previous volume in this series (*Music in the Nineteenth Century*), to which the reader is referred for a fuller understanding of the many references in the present volume to the philosophy of the New German school and its transformation in the twentieth century into the discourse of modernism.

In brief, the recognition of the continuity between the discourses of romanticism and modernism leads to a novel and (the present author is firmly convinced) truer representation of the evolutionary course of twentieth-century music in the literate (or “art”) tradition. This new interpretation is most decisively reflected in a revised subperiodization whereby the early decades of the century, usually represented as marking a violent break with the technical and expressive traditions of the nineteenth century, are cast instead as an intensification—or maximalization, to use the word introduced within—of those very traditions. The true break with tradition came in the 1920s with the movement, often identified as “neoclassicism,” which the conventional narrative represents as a return, or regression, to traditional ways.

In common with its companions in this series, this volume resolutely rejects the romantic viewpoint that asserts a fundamental divide between art history and world history. In particular, the fundamental tenet of neo-Hegelian art history—that the arts steadily progress toward a state of ever more perfect autonomy—is discarded as impeding by design the investigation of the actual causes of esthetic and stylistic evolution, which are to be sought within rather than outside the histories of social and political affairs. The narrative thus offers an uncompromising challenge to the viewpoint adhered to by a majority of practicing musicians and composers, even down to the present. It is admittedly and deliberately provocative, and proponents of the conventional narrative have often received it with hostility, but it is not offered in a hostile spirit. Rather, it is offered as a benevolent corrective that, by promoting understanding, can only foster enhanced appreciation of the artistic phenomena it describes.

R. T.

November 2008

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Modernism: Mahler, Strauss, Schoenberg

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

MODERNISM

This is the whole flaw of “emotional” music. It is like a drug: you must have more drug, and more noise each time, or this effect, this impression which works from the outside, in from the nerves and sensorium upon the self—is no use, its effect is constantly weaker and weaker.¹

—Ezra Pound

Ezra Pound, an American poet living in London, wrote these weary words in 1914. By then he had lots of evidence with which to back his pronouncement up, evidence that we will be tracing in this and the following chapters. The period we will be investigating, from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the year in which Pound made his disillusioned diagnosis of its effects, is sometimes called the early modernist period. It was a time of enormously accelerated stylistic innovation, accompanied by an enormous expansion of technical resources. The two accelerations were symbiotic: neither can be called the effective cause of the other, but each fed the other since both fed off the same underlying drives, drives at which Pound was rather darkly hinting.

Before investigating those drives and their artistic consequences, a word is in order about the term “modernism” and the concepts it embodies. To make an ism out of being modern is on the face of it paradoxical, since if modern simply means “of or pertaining to present and recent time”² (as one dictionary defines it), then everyone is modern by default, and always has been, since we cannot live at any other time than the present. To be modernist, then, is more than to be modern. Modernism is not just a condition but a commitment.

It asserts the superiority of the present over the past (and, by implication, of the future over the present), with all that that implies in terms of optimism and faith in progress. It was an optimism that many had begun, under the stress of industrialization and its social discontents, to lose toward the century’s end, leading to the malaise that the term *fin de siècle* (end of the century) was coined to evoke. The generation gap that began to widen between disillusioned romantics and young moderns is illustrated by a possibly apocryphal anecdote that, owing to its very aptness, became a veritable legend. Gustav Mahler (1860–1911), one of this chapter’s protagonists, was supposedly taking a walk with Johannes Brahms at Bad Ischl, an Austrian spa where Brahms habitually vacationed, in the summer of 1896 (Brahms’s last).

In the version of Richard Specht, one of Brahms’s biographers,

Brahms began discoursing, as usual, on the decline and fall of music, but Mahler suddenly took his arm and, pointing down to the river they were passing with his other hand, exclaimed, “Just look, doctor, just look!” “What is it?” Brahms asked. “Don’t you see, there goes the last wave!” It was a good symbol for the eternal movement in life and in art, which knows of no cessation. But I seem to remember that it was Brahms who had the last word, thus: “That is all very fine, but perhaps what matters most is whether the wave goes out to sea or into a swamp.”³

This tension between generations stimulated the modernist penchant to celebrate innovation as a mark of vitality. It further implies exclusivity: all are modern, few are modernist. Some live in the present with resignation; others with indifference; still others in a state of resistance to it. Modernists live in the present with enthusiasm, an enthusiasm requiring audacity, high self-regard and self-consciousness (along with its complement, heightened alertness to the surrounding world), and, above all, *urbanity* in every meaning of the word from “citized” to “sophisticated” to “artificial” to “mannered.” All of this sounds like the very opposite of romanticism as originally defined—in terms, that is, of spirituality, sincerity, naturalness, spontaneity, naïveté, authenticity, pastoralism, and transcendence of the worldly, all being aspects or echoes of the original romantic revolt against the militant optimism of Enlightenment. Modernism celebrates every quality that Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Johann Gottfried von Herder reviled—and does it, moreover, with irony (as anything so self-aware must do), so that any attempt to reduce modernism to a set of core beliefs or practices quickly turns into an exercise in chasing one’s tail.



fig. 1-1 Gustav Mahler, bust by Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) at Vienna State Opera.

But of course we have been observing a symbiotic process of highly self-conscious technical innovation and

expanded technical resources over the whole course of the nineteenth century; one carried out, moreover, in the very name of romanticism. The romantic century, after all, was also the great age of industrialization and urbanization. We have already witnessed immense changes in artistic aims and means brought about as by-products of underlying changes in demography, as the populations of Europe and America were increasingly concentrated in cities. Nor are we strangers by now to irony. We know how calculated the impression of romantic spontaneity can be. We know how detached an artist has to be in order to create a complicated artwork, even one that broadcasts immediacy. Indeed, we will find that one of modernism's great ploys is to hide itself behind a mask of pastoral innocence. It is a long time since anyone has dared take anything at face value.

And we may also be wondering what the difference could possibly be between modernism and the "Zukunftism" (future-ism) of the New German School, epitomized in Wagner, which was also predicated on optimism and faith in progress. Haven't we seen it all before? Was there ever a more sophisticated composer than the one who wrote *Tristan und Isolde*? Was there ever a more artificial or mannered technical innovation than the *Tristan*-chord, however elemental and seemingly natural its representational power? Isn't the difference between what we've already seen and anything we're likely to see now just a difference in degree?

Of course it is—with one possible reservation. Consider the implicit paradox that has always attended Wagner and his "future-istic" methods. The most radically innovative composer of the nineteenth century—or at least the man so reputed, however equivocally—was in fact no friend of modernity. On the contrary, the social vision that motivated Wagner's artistic reforms was one of restored premodern harmony. At least by the time he finished composing *The Ring of the Nibelung*, his gargantuan mythological tetralogy, Wagner was not a futuristic utopian but the very opposite, a nostalgic (which is to say, a reactionary) one. The nostalgic vision, widely shared in the nineteenth century in direct reaction to the social discombobulations caused by modernization, informed not only Wagner's spectacular artistry but also his horrid politics. For the very incarnation of modernity in its every threatening aspect was, for Wagner and for every other nostalgic nationalist, the figure of the emancipated, assimilated, urbanized Jew.

And so, inevitably as it might seem, two of the paradigmatic early modernists within the German sphere—two of the leaders in the radical acceleration of stylistic innovation and technological advance that we will now be tracing—are Mahler, whom we have already met, and Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), both of them emancipated, urbanized, and assimilated (indeed, converted) Austrian Jews. Their modernism was widely taken—not only by their enemies, but also by their supporters and even by themselves—as the expression of that social emancipation and racial assimilation. Modernism, for them, was a source of optimism in the face of romanticist gloom. As always, what threatened some promised deliverance to others.

But it also expressed withal (and inevitably) their ineradicable sense of outsiderhood and, eventually—for Schoenberg, especially—of social alienation. And so modernism—like the romanticism it in some ways continued, in others supplanted—has always been an ambiguous and ambivalently regarded phenomenon. There is radicalism of ends and radicalism of means; and as Wagner's case already makes clear, the two do not necessarily coincide. Not all radicalism should be regarded as modernism. And not all modernism requires radical means of expression.

But of course the easy association of modernism with Jewry, whether maintained by friend or foe, was illusory. Jews had no lock on modernism. Just as deserving of the name among German composers, at least for a while, was Richard Strauss (1864–1949), who although a gentile was equally at the forefront of stylistic innovation and technological expansion during the rough period 1890–1914. Nor did assimilated Jews necessarily identify themselves consciously as modernists. Some were ardent defenders of tradition, seeing any attempt to upset the social or artistic apple cart as a threat to their precarious status. Even Mahler and Schoenberg showed signs of ambivalence about their modernism. They identified strongly with the distinguished tradition of German music in all its aspects, the Wagnerian one emphatically included. They saw themselves as its heirs and rightful continuers.

To maintain such a divided consciousness meant detaching musical tradition from social and ethnic

tradition, and regarding it exclusively as a matter of style and technique. That was the most controversial move of all, and (being the one with which Wagner would have most vehemently disagreed) the most exclusively modernist one. So successful has the modernist viewpoint been in the twentieth century, though, that even Wagner has been assimilated to it. It is the only way in which Jews can love and follow him. And since emancipated Jews have not only been among the strongest creative talents in the twentieth century, but among the most influential historians as well, that is the way Wagner has figured in modernist musical history—worshipped as a stylistic innovator and technical expander, forgotten (or repressed) as a political and social thinker.

The modernist narrative, even though it is at bottom an instrument of social change, has always insisted on representing art as divorced from the social world, subject only to internally motivated stylistic change. In music history that view was most powerfully promulgated by Guido Adler (1855–1941), another emancipated Austrian Jew (a pupil of Bruckner and in his youth an ardent Wagnerian), who succeeded Hanslick as professor of music history at the University of Vienna. In 1885 Adler published a paper entitled *Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft* (“Scope, methods, and aim of musicology”), the influence of which can hardly be overestimated.

As the zeal with which its centennial was observed in 1985 made clear, this short article managed to chart the course of the newly recognized academic discipline of musicology for a hundred years, limiting its scope to the study of music in the literate Western tradition as an autonomous discourse (as opposed to “primitive music,” which could be studied as a social phenomenon); limiting its methods to those of “style criticism” or stylistic classification; and limiting its aim to that of narrating and justifying the progress of the art toward the autonomous, socially divorced status that warranted the establishment of an independent academic discipline for studying it.⁴ The circularity of the project was as momentous as it was paradoxical.

The viewpoint of this book, meanwhile, even though it accepts Adler’s definition of the territory it will cover, nevertheless implicitly opposes that divorce, canonized though it has been within the discipline of musicology. Its coverage of modernism will go perforce against the grain, just as (and just because) the advent of modernism made insistence on the divorce explicit. Things will have to be represented here, on occasion, in ways that contradict both the traditional viewpoint of music history and the formulated declarations and explanations of the historical actors. The relationship of the early modernists to tradition will be the first case in point. Though they tried to present it as an unproblematic matter of inheritance, it was a deeply conflicted and contentious relationship. The conflicts, and the tensions to which they gave rise, were themselves among the engines driving the accelerated pace of change.

Notes:

(1) Ezra Pound, “Arnold Dolmetsch” (1914), in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 434.

(2) *The American College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 781.

(3) Richard Specht, *Johannes Brahms* (Hellerau, 1928), p. 382.

(4) See Erica Mugglestone, “Guido Adler’s ‘The Scope, Method, and Aim of Musicology’ (1885): An English Translation with an Historico-Analytical Commentary,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* XIII (1981): 1–22.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

MAXIMALISM

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Within the period 1890–1914, and especially in the German-speaking lands, modernism chiefly manifested itself in the manner to which Pound drew attention in the passage that heads this chapter as an epigraph: as a radical intensification of means toward accepted or traditional ends (or at least toward ends that could be so described). That is why modernism of this early vintage is perhaps best characterized as *maximalism*. The cultural phase we are about to embark upon was called the *fin de siècle* not only because it happened to coincide with the end of a century, but also because it reflected apocalyptic presentiments—superstitious premonitions of ultimate revelation and possible catastrophe—such as attend any great calendrical divide. The acceleration of stylistic innovation, so marked as to seem not just a matter of degree but one of actual kind, requiring a new “periodization,” looks now, from the vantage point of the next *fin de siècle*, to have been perhaps more a matter of inflated rhetoric than of having new things to say.

What were the traditional ends given radically intensified or maximalized expression? Pound has already mentioned emotional expression, one of the prerequisites of romantic art. Another, from the very beginning of romanticism, was a sense of religious awe in the presence of the sublime. A third, sometimes an ally of the other two but potentially a subversive diversion (hence the most essentially “modernist”) was sensuality.

What were the intensified means? One involved the two dimensions in which musical works exist, the temporal and the sonorous, both of them already maximalized to a degree by Wagner. Turning musical works into awe-inspiring mountains—by extending their length, amplifying their volume, and complicating their texture—became an obsession. Another way of amplifying the sense of musical space, as Wagner had also demonstrated, was to increase the range and maneuverability of “tonal navigation,” that is, the range of key relationships. Yet another area in which Wagner had set a benchmark to be emulated and, if possible, exceeded, was the sheer level of tolerable (or at least tolerated) dissonance, and even more important, the postponement of its resolution. The former maximized the representation of emotional tension, the latter maximized the listener’s participation in it.

The “Brahms line” could also be maximized. Here the benchmark could be described as “motivic saturation”—the loading of the texture with significant motifs to be kaleidoscopically recombined. By thus maximizing its “introversive reference”—the profusion and density of significant internal relationships—the musical texture was made ever more pregnant with potential meaning. That meaning could be harvested either in the domain of transcendence (in which nothing was specified, the imagination left free to organize the received impressions according to its own subjective criteria of relevance) or in the domain of “extroversive reference,” where motifs are invested (as in the case of leitmotives) with paraphrasable connotations.

At its peak, the maximalizing tendency in *fin-de-siècle* or early modernist music gave rise to a body of works to which the German music historian Rudolf Stephan gave the name *Weltanschauungsmusik*⁵—roughly, “music expressive of a world outlook,” or even “philosophy-music.” Such works, always of hugely ambitious dimensions, attempted, through all the devices broached in the foregoing paragraphs, to deal with and resolve the metaphysical issues—questions that cannot be answered on the sole basis of sensory experience or rational thought—that had preoccupied philosophers (especially German philosophers) throughout the nineteenth century. The belief that music, in its word-transcending expressivity, was the only medium through which eschatological matters—matters of “ultimate reality”—could be adequately contemplated impelled the early modernists on their quest for new horizons.

Notes:

(5) Cited in Harmann Danuser, *Die Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1984), p. 24.

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Gustav Mahler

Symphony: 19th century

MAHLER: MAXIMALIZING THE SYMPHONY

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The quintessential representative of *Weltanschauungsmusik* and the man whose work most justifies the coining of the term was the composer who professed as his aim the writing of a symphony “so great that the whole world is actually reflected therein—so that one is, so to speak, only an instrument upon which the universe plays.”⁶ The author of these words was Gustav Mahler, whose ten finished symphonies (the next-to-last disguised as an orchestral song cycle called *Das Lied von der Erde*, “The Song of the Earth”, composed between 1908 and 1909), plus a fragmentary eleventh called the Tenth, left unfinished at his death in 1911, brought the line of Austro-German symphonic composition to a climax—and conclusion. After Mahler, as we shall see, there has been no German-speaking symphonist of comparable prominence; the important twentieth-century “schools” of symphony writers have been Scandinavian, Russian, and Anglo-American.

Mahler’s career was one of the great success stories of music history. He was born in a small town in what is now the Czech Republic, into the large family of a Jewish distiller and tavern keeper: of his thirteen siblings only six survived into maturity, leaving him the eldest. He first showed talent as a pianist, gave a public recital at the age of ten, and (having landed a sponsor) was sent to the Vienna Conservatory, where he was drawn toward theory and composition and, finally, conducting. At the age of seventeen (having been one of the few to sit out the first performance to its end) he was given the task of preparing the piano-duet reduction of Bruckner’s Third Symphony for publication. He also audited a few of Bruckner’s lectures at the University of Vienna, but was careful to insist that he was never a pupil of Bruckner’s in composition.

Mahler did not begin to make a reputation as a composer until he was already a famous conductor, especially of opera. To scan a resumé of his conducting posts is to witness an astounding, truly meteoric rise to the pinnacle of his profession. It began with an appointment, in the summer of 1880, to direct operettas at a vacation resort. The next summer he was employed at the provincial opera house in Laibach (now Ljubljana in Slovenia) where he conducted his first opera (Verdi’s *Il trovatore*). In 1883 he was appointed a staff conductor in another provincial city, Olmütz (now Olomouc in the Czech district of Moravia). From there he went to the central German town of Kassel, a provincial capital, where he served until 1885.

From now on it would be only big cities and major posts: Prague (the German theater, 1885–86); Leipzig (1886–88), where he conducted Wagner’s *Ring* for the first time; the Royal Opera at Budapest (1888–91), where he conducted a *Don Giovanni* that aroused the admiration and support of Brahms; the Municipal Theater of Hamburg (1891–97), where he conducted Chaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* in its non-Russian debut, much to the composer’s delight, and from where he began to tour internationally, first in England, later in Russia.

Finally, in 1897, aged thirty-six, Mahler was offered the plum of plums: the directorship of the Vienna court opera, the empire’s top musical organization. To take this job he had to accept pro forma baptism in the Catholic faith, but it nevertheless seems extraordinary that a Jew, however emancipated and assimilated, could have been thought as indispensable to the glory of Austrian music-making as Mahler’s talent and drive had made him in the eyes of the Viennese arts establishment. (It was not in fact quite as extraordinary as it

might seem: the highest aristocratic circles, secure in their supremacy, are relatively tolerant as a rule; Mahler, who certainly knew that he was in for it, was dependably subjected to anti-Semitic attacks in the bourgeois press, the domain of the upwardly mobile—see Fig. 1-2 where, as a “hypermodern conductor,” he is caricatured as a “typical” wildly gesticulating Jew.)



fig. 1-2 “A hypermodern conductor,” caricature by Hans Schliessmann in *Fliegende Blätter*, March 1901. The caption, “Kapellmeister [Conductor] Kappelmann conducts his *Symphonie diabolica*,” makes unmistakable reference to Mahler’s Jewishness.

Mahler held this post for a decade, leaving it only for an even more prestigious joint appointment at the helm of both of New York’s leading musical institutions, the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic orchestra. The record he compiled in Vienna made Mahler, by common consent, the world’s greatest conductor. It was a record of authoritarian intransigence and perfectionism, in which heavy demands were made not only on singers but on audiences as well (the new kapellmeister zealously reinstating all the customary cuts in Wagner for example). Identifying as a composer with composers rather than as a

performer with performers, Mahler made a fetish of textual fidelity at the expense of singerly display. Yet at the same time he allowed himself the creative liberty to improve Schumann's orchestration and modernize Beethoven's. To adopt a Wagnerian analogy, he made sure that the relationship between the author of the score and the effectors of the performance paralleled that of the gods and the Nibelungs. Since he himself, the composer-conductor (and yet a Jewish outsider in the eyes of many), claimed godlike power within his interpretive domain, Mahler was widely regarded as a sort of Alberich, the upstart world-destroyer of the *Ring*.

Yet his authoritarian purism set an example, however controversial in his own day, that became the norm in twentieth-century performance practice, and as such another benchmark of modernism. Also prescient was the literalism with which Mahler construed the idea of textual fidelity. He found abhorrent the idea of unwritten performance conventions, such as *appoggiaturas* in Mozart (something Mozart never dreamed of dispensing with), and tried to stamp them out. His battle cry against performers who insisted on maintaining such conventions in the name of tradition—"Tradition ist Schlamperei!" (Tradition is just sloppiness!)—has become a watchword among conductors in the twentieth century, who in the name of an imagined "historical authenticity" have actually produced a style of performing that is radically new in its amnesiac divorce from historical precedent.

Despite his lifelong association with the opera house, Mahler never wrote an opera. His one attempt, *Rübezahl*, was begun in 1879 and abandoned in 1883. Five years later he undertook to complete Weber's last opera, *Die drei Pintos*—a task Meyerbeer had previously undertaken but failed to complete, and which Mahler, then working in Leipzig, accepted as a love-offering to the wife of Weber's grandson, with whom he was having an affair. That is the extent of Mahler's creative contribution to the musical genre in which he excelled recreatively.

His domain was and—as he claimed—had to be the symphony: the maximalized, philosophical symphony of early modernism. In a letter to Max Marschalk, a friend and colleague, Mahler declared that "we are now standing—I am sure of it—at the great crossroads that will soon separate forever the two diverging paths of symphonic and dramatic music," and, he added, like any truly *contemporary* musician, he was casting his lot on the symphonic side.⁷ These statements are often viewed as paradoxical. As we shall see, no composer ever appropriated so many dramatic and otherwise vocally or textually oriented means toward symphonic ends. But Mahler himself acknowledged this apparent contradiction in the letter's very next sentence. "Wagner," he admitted, "appropriated the means of expression of symphonic music, just as now in his turn the symphonist will be justified in helping himself to the new possibilities of expression opened to music by Wagner's efforts and in using them for his own means." And yet he went right on insisting on the categorical generic divide.

The insurmountable difference between the genres, for Mahler or any other practitioner of *Weltanschauungsmusik*, was that one could not truly express a *weltanschauung*—a world outlook, or as Mahler would say, a world reflection—through anything so limited as a narrative plot or a dramatic scenario, no matter how metaphorical. One needed the unlimited interpretive space that "absolute music" provided. Then one could load the symphony with as much introversive and extroversive sign-language as one wished, confident that its application would be infinitely extensible, bound only by the listener's powers of imagination.

Notes:

(6) Gustav Mahler to Anna von Mildenburg, 18 July 1896 (on his Third Symphony), *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Knud Martner, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p. 190.

(7) Mahler to Max Marschalk, 26 March 1896; Piero Weiss, *Letters of Composers Through Six Centuries* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1967), p. 393.

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IS THERE OR ISN'T THERE? (NOT EVEN THE COMPOSER KNOWS FOR SURE)

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Perhaps the best possible illustration of these points, and the most vivid model of symphonic maximalism, would be Mahler's Symphony no. 2 in C minor, the actual subject of the letter from which the foregoing quotes were extracted. Composed over a six-year period beginning in 1888, the symphony received its first complete performance under the composer's baton at Berlin in December 1895. On that occasion it bore the subtitle "Auferstehung" ("Resurrection") after the text of its choral finale. Even during Mahler's lifetime the subtitle came and went, betraying an ambivalence that also peeps between the lines of the letter.

Sometimes Mahler acknowledged a programmatic component in the symphony, sometimes he denied it. Sometimes he admitted that he needed some verbal (or "poetic") hook on which to hang the music of a large-scale composition; at other times he claimed that his first two symphonies together recounted the story of his own (inner) life; at still other times he maintained that whatever programmatic content he might agree to describe would be only a sop to the duller members of the audience. "When my style still seems strange and new," he wrote to Marschalk, "the listener should get some road-maps and milestones on the journey—or rather, a map of the stars, that he may comprehend the night sky with its glowing worlds."⁸

What is known for certain is that the programmatic content of the symphony's first movement underwent a metamorphosis. That in itself was nothing new: a well-known precedent was Mily Balakirev's Overture *1000 Years*, which started out simply as the "Second Overture on the Themes of Russian Folk Songs" and ended up as a symphonic poem entitled *Russia*. With Mahler the dynamic went the other way, from more to less detailed, reflecting his eventual commitment to "absolute music," full of intense but undefined (which is to say undelimited) expression.

Under a stimulus chiefly provided by Franz Liszt, the genres of symphony and symphonic poem had begun to converge toward the end of the nineteenth century, so it will not overly surprise us to learn that the symphony's first movement was initially conceived as a symphonic poem and existed in that form for several years before acquiring its companion movements. (Even more tellingly, what we know as Mahler's First Symphony was given its first performance in 1889 as a "Symphonic poem in five movements" called *Titan* after a novel by the German Romantic author Jean Paul.) The American musicologist Stephen Hefling has established that the Second Symphony's first movement, called *Todtenfeier* ("Funeral Rite") in its symphonic-poem guise, originally followed a scenario adapted from *Dziady* ("Forefathers' eve"), a narrative ballad by the Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz.⁹ One of Mahler's friends had made a German translation of the poem, in which the hero's name happens to be Gustav, and published it under the very title that Mahler would adopt for his symphonic poem.

The fourth part of *Dziady*, the "Gustav poem," is a tale of doomed love and suicide, culminating in the hero's funeral and his soul's subsequent hovering in limbo until his beloved joins him in death. Mahler was attracted to this poem, Hefling suggests, because of the way it paralleled the miserable end of his recent affair with Marion von Weber, for whose sake he had completed *Die drei Pintos*. Hefling has given his hypothesis impressive support by closely reading the music in terms of the poem. But no contemporary

listener had that chance. By the time of the first performance the Mickiewicz program had been suppressed—or rather, sublimated—and replaced by another that consisted mainly of questions of an “ultimate” or eschatological character, designed to put the listener in an appropriately “philosophical” frame of mind and stimulate an appropriately lofty response to the symphony’s “absolute” content—an endeavor more worthy, in its demands, of what Mahler deemed a truly contemporary art.

As Mahler put it, somewhat mendaciously, in his letter to Marschalk, “In conceiving the work I was never concerned with the detailed description of an *event*, but to the highest degree with that of a *feeling*.”¹⁰ The “never” was clearly an exaggeration, but the aim was clear: to transcend what Mahler elsewhere described as “that insipid, erroneous way of composing, which is to choose for oneself a limited, narrowly circumscribed incident, and to follow it programmatically step by step.”¹¹

Here instead is the version of the program that Mahler actually wrote out for publication as a program note at the premiere:

We stand by the coffin of a well-loved person. His life, struggles, passions and aspirations once more, for the last time, pass before our mind’s eye.—And now in this moment of gravity and of emotion which convulses our deepest being, when we lay aside like a covering everything that from day to day perplexes us and drags us down, our heart is gripped by a dreadfully serious voice which always passes us by in the deafening bustle of daily life: What now? What is this life—and this death? Do we have an existence beyond it? Is all this only a confused dream, or do life and this death have a meaning?—And we must answer this question if we are to live on.¹²

In the end he decided against printing even this much; but that did not prevent him from confiding an even more abstract but at the same time even more urgent version of the program to Marschalk in the famous letter:

I have named the first movement “Funeral Rite” (*Todtenfeier*), and, if you are curious, it is the hero of my D major Symphony [that is, the “Titan” of the First] that I am burying here and whose life I am gathering up in a clear mirror, from a higher vantage point. At the same time it is the great question: *Why have you lived? Why have you suffered? Is all this merely a great, horrible jest?—We must resolve these questions somehow or other, if we are to go on living—indeed, even if we are only to go on dying! Once this call has resounded in anyone’s life, he must give an answer; and that answer I give in the last movement.*¹³

And now to the music. In terms of sheer dimensions, its maximalism requires little comment. At more than twenty minutes’ length the *Todtenfeier* was by itself longer than most eighteenth-century symphonies, and was outstripped only by the monumental Adagio from Bruckner’s Eighth Symphony. (Mahler redressed this shortfall in his next symphony, the Third, in which both the first movement and the last exceed a half hour’s duration.) In terms of sonority, a listing of the symphony’s roster—not all of it used in the first movement—can speak for itself, for this was the largest orchestra ever specifically demanded by any composer to date:

- 4 flutes, alternating on 4 piccolos
- 4 oboes, two alternating on English horns
- 3 clarinets, one alternating on bass clarinet
- 2 E \flat clarinets, one alternating on B \flat clarinet, both to be doubled in fortissimos
- 3 bassoons
- contrabassoon

- 10 horns (four for use offstage)
- 8–10 trumpets (4–6 for use offstage)
- 4 trombones
- contrabass tuba

- Percussion (requiring seven players):
 - 7 timpani, 6 (3 players) onstage, one offstage
 - 2 pairs of cymbals, one offstage
 - 2 triangles, one offstage
 - snare drum (more than one if possible)
 - glockenspiel
 - 3 tubular bells
 - 2 bass drums (one offstage, played with a wooden stick)
 - 2 tam-tams (gongs), high and low
 - 2 harps, several players per part if possible
 - Organ
- Largest possible contingent of all strings

At the first performance the instrumentalists numbered 120, which means that there were between sixty and seventy string players. In addition to this, the last two movements require the participation of two solo singers (soprano and alto) and a large mixed choir. Even before the voices are heard, the symphony had made a decidedly operatic, or at least theatrical impression by virtue of the offstage brass band, previously employed outside of the opera house only by Berlioz and Verdi in their highly theatricalized Requiem Masses. But of course Mahler's symphony was also a requiem of sorts, or at least (as the organ proclaims) a quasi-sacred work, even without taking note of the religious texts that will be sung in the two last movements in "answer," as Mahler implied, to the questions propounded in the first.

Another sort of maximalism was expressed through the medium of intertextual reference. Like any composer conscious of his late appearance in a canonical succession—or, to put it another way, like every composer of symphonies since Brahms—Mahler was not only enormously conscious of his heritage and the obligations it imposed, but was also aware of the opportunities it afforded him to "signify." By making deliberate references to the works of his great predecessors (but always regarding them as forerunners to be vied with and if possible surpassed), Mahler was able to communicate wordlessly a good deal of the programmatic content that he declined to paraphrase verbally for fear of the limitations such paraphrase imposed on the audience's subjective response.

Allegro maestoso
Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck

The image shows the first page of the musical score for Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2, I. The score is for a full orchestra. At the top, the tempo is marked 'Allegro maestoso' and the performance instruction is 'Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck'. The instruments listed are Bn. (Bassoon), Cbn. (Contrabassoon), Vln. I and II (Violins), Vla. (Viola), Vc. (Violoncello), and Cb. (Cello). The score begins with a string tremolo in the cellos and basses. The woodwinds enter with a rhythmic pattern. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'ff' and 'a2'.

ex. 1-1 Gustav Mahler, Symphony no. 2, I, first page of the score

The opening page of the score (Ex. 1-1) makes pointed “poetic” reference to no fewer than three Beethoven symphonies—the three that were by tradition the most heavily fraught with meaning. Even before a note is played, of course, reference will have been made to Beethoven’s Ninth: the poetic texts in the program and the physical presence of the singers on stage telegraph Mahler’s determination to revive the infiltration of oratorio into symphony that Wagner had blessed and Brahms had subsequently anathematized. But the opening string tremolo, disclosing neither tempo nor key, was an equally pointed reference to the famously nebulous beginning of Beethoven’s Last.

At the same time the brusque unison motifs given out by the cellos and basses, and the fermata that separates the second of them from what follows, could not help but evoke the peremptory opening of Beethoven’s Fifth; and of course so did the key of C minor, throughout the nineteenth century the most “meaningful” (and obliging) of keys. One of the things the key of C minor obliges is a breakthrough to the major in the finale. But anyone responding to the march tempo and the amplifying direction, *Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck* (“With grave and solemn expression throughout”), would have been reminded of the *Marcia funebre* in Beethoven’s Third Symphony, the *Eroica*—an association that all by itself connotes two of the main components of Mahler’s unstated program involving the funeral of a hero. The *Eroica* association contradicts the one to the Fifth insofar as it places the key of C minor in relation not to its parallel but its relative major. And sure enough, Mahler’s symphony will end as triumphantly as did Beethoven’s Third, Fifth, and Ninth, but in the “Eroica” key of E♭ major.

In Beethoven’s day such a key relationship could be expressed only in the middle of a work, not between the two ends. By Mahler’s day—thanks in part to his own previous work, notably the song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (“Songs of a wayfarer”) in which the wayfarer’s wandering is symbolized by a “progressive tonality” in which every song ends in a key other than the one in which it began—a tonal metamorphosis or modulation over the full course of a work was no longer necessarily regarded as a contradiction of “organic” form. And so Mahler’s symphony both proclaims its loyalty to Beethovenian precedent and announces an advance over it: a perfect testament to the optimistic modernist view of

tradition as perpetually self-renewing and inexhaustible.

Nor is the Beethovenian tradition the only one to which Mahler proclaimed allegiance. By the time of his writing, there was another heroic funeral march in C minor to emulate: the one Wagner wrote for Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung*. As we shall see, Mahler paid it as conspicuous a tribute as he could possibly have done, for this was another reference that elucidated (and enhanced) his own secret program. As traditions continue, the store of available subtext accumulates; as potential reference proliferates, actual reference is "maximized."

But of course the most potent area for maximalism was the actual sound surface—the melodic, harmonic, and tonal events that constitute the "purely musical" content of the score. It was not only the most potent area but, as Pound pointed out, also the most necessary; for if Mahler hoped to equal the impact that his great predecessors had achieved in their time, he would actually have to surpass both its intensity and its sublimity. That is, the sounds themselves would have to outstrip their predecessors in pungency, and they would have to duplicate the fascinated bafflement that Beethoven and Wagner had produced in their audiences—and all of this would have to be achieved, moreover, in a manner that could be directly related to the achievements of old, so that it would look like a valid continuation, worthy of inclusion in the "permanent collection." A tall order, this, amounting to a dilemma.

Notes:

(8) *Ibid.*

(9) See Stephen E. Hefling, "Mahler's 'Totenfeier'" and the Problem of Program Music," *Nineteenth-Century Music* XII (1988–89): 27–53.

(10) Mahler to Max Marschalk, 17 December 1895; *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, p. 172.

(11) *Gustav Mahler in den Erinnerungen von Natalie Bauer-Lechner*, eds. Herbert Killian and Knud Martner (Hamburg, 1984), pp. 170–71; quoted in Hefling, "Mahler's Totenfeier," p. 43.

(12) Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986), p. 183.

(13) Weiss, *Letters of Composers*, p. 394.

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Gustav Mahler

Sonata Form: 19th century

HIGH TENSION COMPOSING

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The best place to look to observe Mahler's response to it is the moment that traditionally carried the highest charge in a symphonic first movement: the "retransition" to the recapitulation, where sufficient "dominant tension" had to be generated to motivate a "double return" commensurate in strength to the length and range of the preceding development. Beethoven had already solved this problem in maximalistic fashion in the first movement of the *Eroica*, with the "premature" horn entry with the opening theme in the tonic against an unbearably prolonged dominant pedal in the violins. Mahler's retransition, which begins five bars before 20 with the arrival of the dominant pedal in the bass, builds on Beethoven's precedent, drawing as well on a related precedent in the Ninth.

Ex. 1-2 shows the spot in question as Mahler sketched it in an early draft for the *Todtenfeier*, amounting to a harmonic reduction. The G tremolo in the bass should be understood as continuing as a pedal up to (but not including) the last measure shown. From the beginning Mahler strives for maximum dissonance against the pedal—a semitone in the first measure, a major second in the second measure, a tritone in the fourth. Beginning at m. 6, harmonies that are normally mutually exclusive (that is, normally sounded in succession) are mixed over the dominant pedal, just as they had been ninety years earlier in the *Eroica*. The first mixture pits what looks like a tonic triad against a diminished seventh spelled with F# as the root, the two chords having two notes in common. It gives way in m. 7 to an even more dissonant combination, consisting of the same tonic triad over a diminished seventh built on B natural, the leading tone, the two chords having no notes in common. They produce, instead, a seven-note cluster.

Connoisseurs of musical horror will recognize this cluster as the very chord Beethoven had used in the finale of the Ninth for the intensified repetition of the *Schreckensfanfaren*, the "horror fanfares" (as Wagner called them) that precede the Ode to Joy and set it in relief. Over the course of the intervening seventy years, this harmony had been regarded as a one-time curiosity to be explained only in terms of its immediate expressive context. Not until Mahler's time did anyone see it as a benchmark to be exceeded; that is evidence both of Mahler's consciousness of continuity with tradition, and of the difference between his early modernist attitude and those of Beethoven's earlier progeny.

But whereas Beethoven's *Schreckensfanfaren* functioned more as a peremptory noise than as a harmony (even if, by moving to the dominant, it acquires a harmonic function retrospectively), Mahler's equally dissonant chord is set in a progression that assigns it an unbearably tense dominant function. Remembering that the bass G continues to sound throughout Ex. 1-2, we may construe the two harmonies in m. 6 as, on the one hand, a tonic, and, on the other, a diminished seventh built on the leading tone to G, hence functioning as a "V of V." In other words, we have a mixture of two chords that in the present context can be assigned the same function—namely, that of "predominant," or dominant preparation. The dissonance produced by the mixture of two chords of similar function intensifies or maximizes the function, lending it an ever greater need for resolution.

The next move is to hold the tonic as a pedal and replace the first diminished seventh chord with another that, because it is built on the leading tone of the tonic scale, now reinforces the function of the dominant

pedal, producing a “dominant ninth.” In Mahler’s version of the *Schreckensfanfare* chord, then, the C and the E \flat , while nominally part of the tonic chord, are actually functioning as a dissonant suspension over a dominant ninth. Since they can be represented in notation as an additional pair of thirds (an “eleventh” and a “thirteenth”) stacked atop the dominant-ninth chord, and since such chords (following Mahler’s precedent and faithfully continuing the tradition in which he participated) became increasingly common during the early modernist period, many musicians trained during or after that period would call the harmony in m. 7 a “dominant- thirteenth” chord, here making what amounts to its symphonic debut.

The image shows a musical score for Gustav Mahler's sketch for *Todtenfeier*. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system contains measures 1 through 5. The second system contains measures 6 through 9. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. The instruments involved are Piccolo, 1. & 2. Horns, Timpani, Horns, Trombone, and Violoncello. The key signature changes to B-flat major in measure 7.

ex. 1-2 Gustav Mahler, sketch for *Todtenfeier*

But unless we remember that two of its members are functional suspensions, we will not appreciate the effect of the harmony in m. 8 of Ex. 1-2, in which the C is palpably resolved to B natural, a chord tone, leaving only the E \flat suspended, hence putting additional pressure on it to resolve and upping the level of “dominant tension” beyond anything previously experienced by the audience who heard the symphony at its premiere. The tonic to which this amplified dominant is cataclysmically resolved—via a bass descent through a full chromatic scale and then some!—in the movement’s most “maximal” single gesture is expressed as a pair of eighths: a Wagnerian double drumbeat that makes absolutely explicit the already implicit reference to Siegfried’s heroic C-minor funeral music.

And yet for all the familiar resonances and the absolute clarity of the cadential function these maximalized harmonies perform, their novelty was widely perceived not merely as a difference in degree of intensity, but as an absolute difference in stylistic kind. This we may learn from the testimony of a highly qualified witness, none other than Guido Adler, who wrote that in the Second Symphony,

the bold power of combination builds up to harmonies previously not to be found in the literature. In this respect [Mahler] oversteps the boundary previously accepted in our time for the purely beautiful. It is not impossible, and not improbable—indeed surmise based on the experience of history suggests—that the progressive artist leads his own age and especially posterity to another way of viewing and understanding sounds. Whether an enduring advance results, only the future can decide.¹⁴

One may suspect that Adler’s question was somewhat disingenuous. His critique was so solidly informed by

the old “New German” insistence on “progressive” art as to remove any doubt that, for Adler (as for any early modernist), Mahler’s “unprecedented cacophonies” were in large part responsible for his value as an artist. Nor would anyone but a “philistine” have insisted by the 1890s that the domain of art was limited to the “purely beautiful.” The whole history of nineteenth-century music was a history of the creeping encroachment of the “great” (or the sublime) upon the traditional domain of the beautiful. To put it another way, composers of “great” music, beginning with Beethoven, had long been sacrificing ingratiating pleasure on the altar of edifying pain. This process, too, was undergoing a maximalizing acceleration as late romanticism shaded into early modernism, and here, too, Mahler was in the vanguard.

Notes:

(14) Guido Adler, *Gustav Mahler* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1916), p. 23.

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HALF-STEPS OVER FIFTHS

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

But moments of dramatic horror must be kept rare so as to retain their potency, and also so that they may lend focus and compelling shape to what otherwise might merely be a sprawling temporal span.

Unprecedented buildups of harmonic tension toward cataclysmic, cacophonous resolution can only occur once or twice per piece. Elsewhere, what made Mahler's harmonic idiom seem new and disorienting was precisely his avoidance of powerful root motions by fifth. Such motions, formerly "tonality's" bread and butter, were now special effects. For purposes of ordinary harmonic navigation, half steps continued their progress toward domination—a progress that can be traced back to Schubert, and that had reached a previous peak in Wagner and Bruckner, Mahler's most immediate mentors.

We can view this process with telling clarity by tracing the modulatory path within the *Todtenfeier's* exposition section. The movement begins, harmonically speaking, in a state of near-immobility. The combination of the dominant pedal, held *tremolando* for nineteen measures (and maintained thereafter, with only momentary interruptions, for another sixteen) and the stark unison writing that only yields to an almost equally stark two-part counterpart after twelve bars, prevent any but the most primitive sense of tonal orientation to emerge. The first complete tonic triad is not sounded until the downbeat of m. 28. (Until then, the predominating "linear" texture had permitted some pretty excruciating part-writing dissonances to occur, like the parallel seconds on the last beat of m. 23.) Not until m. 41 is a tonic triad preceded by a fully expressed dominant, and when it finally happens, its rarity is underscored by a great climactic explosion of brass and percussion.

So far we have been witnessing a maximalization of an effect first encountered in the *Eroica* (although it had had some precedents in Beethoven even by then): the "achievement," through effort and stress, of the first tonic cadence—an effect that in itself enacts or symbolizes a kind of ethically fraught, heroic deed. Once Mahler has achieved the tonic, however, he quits it with equally maximalized dispatch: in a span of eight bars he manages to traverse a virtual light-year of tonal space, to the key of E major, the domain of the "second theme." And in another fifteen bars he has reached the exposition's closing tonality, an equally unexpected, tonally distant E \flat minor.

This passage of harmonic sleight of hand is reduced and summarized in Ex. 1-3. It is all done with half steps. First the tonic C-minor triad is expanded, in the third bar after fig. 2, by half steps in contrary motion: its fifth ascends to A \flat and its root descends to C \flat while the third, held constant, acts as an anchor. The A \flat minor chord thus achieved is inflected two bars later, at 3, by another half-step motion whereby the E \flat in the middle voice (reconceptualized as D \sharp) resolves as a leading tone to the new tonic, E. It is almost as if Mahler had set himself a kind of musical chess problem: white to get from C minor to E major in two moves.



ex. 1-3 Gustav Mahler, *Todtenfeier*, modulatory progression to secondary theme area

Of course the tonic triad of E major has been expressed so far only in the position, which (being a cadential preparation) is more a promise of the new key than a fulfillment. The dominant (B major, preceded by *its* dominant) arrives in confirmation after eight more bars, and is tantalizingly surrounded with chromatic neighbors before sinking back to B \flat while its companion notes, respelled as E \flat and G \flat , join it in a new cadential that promises final resolution not to E but to E \flat . We have been through a passage that could not have been more definitely in E major, yet one in which the tonic had failed to appear even once in stable, cadentially supported form.

Mahler has one more half-step inflection up his sleeve. The G \flat of the E \flat -minor triad, shorn of its companion notes, is peremptorily altered to G natural to prepare a modified repetition of the exposition at fig. 4. As soon as the cellos and basses break in with their explosive recall of the first theme, the G tremolo is retrospectively reconfigured as the fifth of C minor rather than the third of E \flat ; but for a moment Mahler had allowed a direct inflection of a minor triad to its parallel major. And in so doing he set up one of the symphony's most important leitmotifs—one that will resonate in his oeuvre far beyond this symphony, in fact.

The primitive inflection of minor to major or vice versa functions in Mahler as an elemental barometer of moods. The resolute upward inflection of G \flat to G at the exposition repeat is mournfully mirrored at the analogous point at the exposition's close (eleven after fig. 6) by the downward inflection of B natural, the dominant's leading tone, to B \flat (Ex. 1-4a). Even more pointed is the repetition of the mournful mirror in the recapitulation (seventeen after 23), where G \sharp is inflected downward to the same G that had been produced the first time around by an upward inflection (Ex. 1-4b).



ex. 1-4a Gustav Mahler, *Symphony no. 2, I*, mm. 107-108



ex. 1-4b Gustav Mahler, *Symphony no. 2, I*, mm. 381-386

The reversal of direction links the motif with a much older symbolic use of the semitone—the ancient *Seufzer* or “sigh-figure” first described at the beginning of the seventeenth century by Joachim Burmeister, a theorist of musical rhetoric, who had deduced it from the music of Lasso. (Also compare the sigh-figure that takes place within the tonic triad seven measures before the movement’s end, precipitating the *Todtenfeier*’s last shudder.) The sigh-figures before fig. 6 and after fig. 23 serve to trigger the closing sections of the exposition and recapitulation respectively, in which another age-old half-step device, the basso ostinato reiterating a chromaticized descending fourth or *passus duriusculus* (a staple of the earliest operas), is conjured up to perform its appointed task as an emblem of lament. Needless to say, Mahler’s immediate model was no seventeenth-century Venetian like Monteverdi or Cavalli, but rather the exactly analogous spot—the first-movement coda—in Beethoven’s Ninth. And another simultaneous reverberation of ancient and recent pasts occurs in the midst of the development section (e.g., eight before fig. 17), when the *Dies Irae*, evoking not only primeval funerary rites but also the fantastical dream visions of Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), rears up in the horns, marked *sehr bestimmt* (very distinct).

Digging up the most ancient of traditional expressive devices—here, affect-laden semitones and ritual cantus firmus tunes—and displaying them alongside the most modern variations of those same devices was another sort of maximalism, here recalling a maneuver associated with such works as Brahms’s *Haydn Variations*, in which near and remote ancestors are “timelessly” associated and equated. Brahms dug back to the late seventeenth century for his remotest forebears; Mahler digs almost a century further back and juxtaposes his ancient trophies with even more up-to-the-minute modern equivalents. His “tradition” dwarfs Brahms’s at both ends.

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Symphony: 19th century

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky

LYRISCHES INTERMEZZO

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

There remains one more aspect of maximalism to describe, and that is the colossally underscored contrast in mood, tempo, key, and orchestration that sets the *Todtenfeier's* E-major "second theme" off from the first. (The use of scare quotes around "second theme" here signals that the theme so designated is not by any means literally the second melody to be heard, but rather the melody that expresses or embodies the movement's main secondary tonality.) This was a characteristic of late-nineteenth-century symphonic writing that Mahler seems deliberately to have enhanced so as to magnify the impression of a world-encompassing reach, or a reach into the inner world, where *Weltanschauungs* originate.

The history of the nineteenth-century symphony, or at least of one of its major strains, might well be told in terms of the progressive growth of the second theme to the point of virtual elephantiasis, such as now we find in Mahler. Beginning in Haydn as just a little touch-down on the dominant (for which purpose a repetition of the first theme might do just as well, as in Haydn's "London" Symphony, no. 104), the second theme had grown from the time of Schubert to that of Bruckner into a virtual "lyrisches Intermezzo," to put it in poetic terms borrowed from the title of a famous book of poems by Heine: a "lyrical interlude" signaling a retreat into a Schubertian "music trance," a state of subjective reverie in which the quality of time is radically transformed from one of purposeful progress to one of virtual suspension. Rhythm becomes less pulsatile, tempo is usually decreased. But even when the tempo is not explicitly relaxed, recourse to long-sustained notes, legato phrasing, and dilatory harmonic rhythm produce a subjective or psychological relaxation all the same.

Even Mozart's symphonies exhibit this lyrical tendency in distinction to Haydn's; even at the end of the eighteenth century the symphony could be seen as branching off into two strains that contrasted ever more radically over the course of the nineteenth. The previous lyrical benchmark had been set by Chaikovsky, in the first movement of his Sixth Symphony, the "Pathétique," already widely performed by the time Mahler's Second was first heard, and hence received by audiences as a precedent for it, even though Mahler's first movement was composed earlier. Chaikovsky's second theme—an expansive *Andante* displacing a nervous *Allegro non troppo*—takes the form of a fully self-sufficient, potentially detachable composition in its own right, preceded and followed by silence, with its own internal structure (involving subsections and subthemes) and its own fully articulated conclusion, completely dwarfing the rest of the exposition.

Mahler's second theme goes Chaikovsky's one better in that, while it is less fully developed in its initial expository statement, it continues to haunt the movement, lending the form a layer of strophic balladry (shades, after all, of Mickiewicz?) that crosscuts and complicates its linearly progressing "sonata form." Mahler, sketching, called the theme the *Gesang*—"the song" or "the singing"—as if to emphasize its Chaikovskian quality of lyrical intrusion. Its first (E major) appearance is cut off, as we have seen, after a mere fifteen bars. It unexpectedly reappears, having been cut out of the exposition repeat, at fig. 7, a sort of no-man's-land between exposition and development, in the key of C major (foreshadowing Elysium, as someone thinking of Beethoven's Ninth might guess), and lasting twice as long. Unlike most "second themes," it intrudes "dialectically" upon the development section at fig. 13, with a tempo marking (*etwas drängend*, "somewhat hurried") that contradicts its earlier character of respite and therefore seems all the

more oppressively to signal anxiety.

The final appearance of the *Gesang*, ten bars after 22, restores its original character and key, and adds a few plagal cadences reminiscent of the final “redemptive” pages of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*. But the major-minor inflection in Ex. 1-4b, encompassing two voices in imitation (G# to G in the horn, E to Eb in the first violin), dispels all promise of redemption, and the movement ends in a bellow of despair.

What now follows is the most “maximal” moment of all: a command from the composer, “Here there must be a pause of at least five minutes’ duration.” Requiring of the audience that they sit still and contemplate what they have heard for five minutes is explicitly to require that they behave as they would in church. The *Todtenfeier* has stopped being a representation of a solemn rite and has actually become such a rite. Never had the sacralization of art—another process that can be traced over the course of the whole preceding century—been so graphically asserted and enforced.

While in terms of the sheer emphasis accorded it, Mahler’s second theme is comparable to Chaikovsky’s, its mood is quite different. Rather than passionately expressive it is vividly pastoral, even bucolic in quality, owing to the use of such additional stock illustrative “figures” as pedal tones (evocative of drones, hence of bagpipes) and “horn fifths” (evocative of rustic or primitive “natural brass”). In later symphonies like the Sixth (1904) and the Seventh (1905), Mahler reinforced the pastoral imagery of his “second themes” by actually including “cowbells” (*Heerdenglocken*), the bells placed since ancient times around the necks of cattle to prevent straying from the herd, among the percussion instruments in the orchestra.

This obsession with the pastoral and the primitive—and the association of such images with fleeting interludes of lyrical contemplation—is a common feature of early modernist art. It betokens the wistful irony of the thoroughly modern, thoroughly urban spirit, conscious of its separation from the “natural” world and alienated by that consciousness from its own stressful environment. This nostalgic obsession ran like a thread through Mahler’s work over the course of his whole career—alas, a somewhat stunted career, since Mahler was very much the victim of its stresses, succumbing to heart disease shortly before his fifty-first birthday.

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Gustav Mahler

Folk music

FOLKLORE FOR CITY FOLK

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Another manifestation of that perennial obsession was Mahler's infatuation with *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The youth's magic horn"), an anthology of German folk lyrics edited by two early romantic poets—Achim von Arnim (1781–1831) and his brother-in-law Clemens Brentano (1778–1842)—and published in three installments between 1805 and 1808. Between 1887 and 1901 Mahler set some two dozen *Wunderhorn* texts to music, some with full orchestral accompaniments, and even more tellingly, incorporated some of the same songs, and some newly composed ones, into the symphonies composed during the same period, namely the Second, Third, and Fourth.

It is sometimes wondered why no composer before Mahler took a comparable interest in the often exquisite poems in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, given that *Volkstümlichkeit* (folksiness), with its implied wisdom of innocence, was from the beginning such an important value for the German romantics. There are a few pre-Mahler settings of *Wunderhorn* poems—by Carl Maria von Weber, Carl Loewe, Felix Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, and Brahms among others—but Mahler practically specialized in them. To ask the question another way, why did so many composers of lieder, beginning with Franz Schubert or even his "Berlin School" predecessors, so avidly set Goethe's or Herder's artistic imitations of folk balladry and lyricism to music, but not "the real thing"? The answer seems to be that only the heightened sense of distance from the land and from its denizens brought on by the advent of modernism created the demand for an "authenticity" that only the folk original could supply; only modernity's quickened sense of loss (of innocence, of goodness, of well-being and peace) demanded the undiluted restorative powers of actual, rather than artistically adapted, folklore. That demand, sometimes called neoprimitivism, was another aspect of modernity that maximalized the romantic heritage.

Mahler's Second Symphony makes two references to the *Wunderhorn* collection. The third movement, the first of Mahler's famously grotesque scherzos, while an instrumental movement, is based throughout on the song *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt* ("St. Anthony of Padua's sermon to the fishes"), composed in 1893—or rather, on the song's madcap accompaniment (with only scattered references to the sung tune). And between the scherzo and the grandiose choral finale, Mahler interpolated in its entirety an orchestral song from the *Wunderhorn* set entitled *Urlicht* ("Primordial light"), a setting for alto solo that expresses a child's faith in salvation—the first of the promised "answers" to the oppressively urgent philosophical questions propounded by the *Todtenfeier*.

To anticipate a remark made by Claude Debussy, a French contemporary of Mahler's whom we will meet in the next chapter, about a work by Igor Stravinsky, a Russian neoprimitivist of the next generation, Mahler's *Urlicht* is "primitive music with all modern conveniences."¹⁵ The harmony and orchestration that clothe its studied melodic simplicity are of an extreme sophistication, as are the subtly calculated metrical dislocations that lend an air of "spontaneity" to the performance. A piece like this one communicates a deeply ironic double message, proclaiming at once the urgent need for a return to simple values and the utter impossibility, at this late date, of ever achieving simplicity. The theatrical reconstruction of paradise lost contradicts the faith in progress that had led musical style to such a level of technical complexity. The naive sentiments wishfully manifested *in* the choice of text are contradicted by the shameless self-consciousness

manifested *by* the choice. Nostalgia is perhaps the most modern and complicated—or in one word, the most modernist—of all emotions.

The symphony's finale is an all-stops-out attempt to surpass the finale of Beethoven's Ninth in every dimension: in length, in sonorous magnitude, and especially in philosophical depth. After a wild orchestral fantasy standing in lieu of Beethoven's *Schreckensfanfare*, a solo trombone sings a recitative (Ex. 1-5a), like the cellos and basses in the Ninth, that will later be repeated by a singer, with a text. It begins, fittingly enough, with a pair of bare *Seufzern* or sigh-figures.



ex. 1-5a Gustav Mahler, Symphony no. 2, V, trombone solo at fig. 21



ex. 1-5b Gustav Mahler, Symphony no. 2, V, alto solo at fig. 39

After the chorus sings the *geistliche Lied* or sacred hymn—*Aufersteh'n*, “Resurrection”—by the religious poet Friedrich Klopstock (1724–1803), from which the symphony draws its occasional subtitle, the alto soloist returns to re-sing the trombone's recitative to words of Mahler's own (Ex. 1-5b), which begin with an exhortation: “O glaube, mein Herz, o glaube!” (Believe it, my heart, believe it!). The admonition to believe puts Mahler's own verses at a great distance from Beethoven or Klopstock, to say nothing of the anonymous poets in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, who needed no such instruction.

But then they had never been faced with a set of questions like those propounded by the *Todtenfeier*. By the age of early modernism, mankind's lot was doubt. The symphony's apocalyptic conclusion, in which Mahler's verses pass in a steady crescendo from the alto to the soprano, thence to the chorus, and finally to a colossal orchestral tutti augmented by the organ, can be experienced either as an ecstatic renewal of faith in spite of everything or as a desperate effort to drown out doubt. But there can be no innocence. Nothing—least of all style or rhetoric—will ever again be taken for granted. Tradition is aging. It will not age gracefully. Rather, it will become preoccupied with what the great early-modernist novelist Marcel Proust (1871–1922), in the all-encompassing title of a long series of novels, called “la recherche du temps perdu.” Literally the phrase means “the quest for lost time.” What it really amounts to is the doomed attempt to reexperience youth. As well as any single phrase could hope to do, it encapsulates the whole history of music in the twentieth century.

Notes:

(15) Debussy to André Caplet, 29 May 1913; Debussy, *Letters*, eds. François Lesure and Roger Nichols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 270.

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Havergal Brian

Gustav Mahler

WHAT THEN?

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The ultimate failure of maximalism as a means of renewal, however great or valuable its products, was implicit in its very premises. Eventually limits are discovered. The maximalist boundary for symphonies (according to the authority in such matters, the *Guinness Book of World Records*) was set by the English composer Havergal Brian (1876–1972). His Symphony no. 2 (later renumbered as no. 1), the “Gothic,” completed in 1927, lasts somewhere over 100 minutes and requires 55 brass instruments in four antiphonal bands; 31 woodwinds; six kettle-drummers playing 22 drums; additional percussion including wind machine, thunder machine, and rattling chains; four vocal soloists; four large mixed choruses; a children’s chorus; and an organ. The last movement is an oratorio in itself—a complete setting of the Te Deum, the Christian hymn of victory. It was not performed until 1961, when the composer was eighty-five, and has had only two performances since then, which already suggests one of the pitfalls of maximalism.

Mahler himself exceeded his Second Symphony in length only once, in the Third, which requires a boys’ choir (the very symbol of “lost time”!) on top of everything else and lasts more than ninety minutes (the first movement alone clocking over three-quarters of an hour). His Eighth Symphony (1906), known as the “Symphony of a Thousand,” was the biggest in terms of performing medium. An oratorio in all but name, scored for a full complement of vocal soloists, plus chorus and orchestra, it contains no purely instrumental music at all. Rather, its two movements consist respectively of a setting of the medieval Latin hymn *Veni, creator spiritus* and a setting of the mystical closing pages of the second part of Goethe’s *Faust*. But even before composing it, Mahler had called off the maximalist quest, at least in terms of dimensions. His Fourth Symphony, lasting about fifty minutes and requiring only a soprano soloist in addition to the orchestra, was by Mahlerian standards a miniature. Except for the Eighth, it was also his last numbered symphony to employ voices.

There were, however, many ways of being maximalist, and some of them could not be so easily called off. Maximalism of emotional intensity, the aspect that exercised Pound, continued to preoccupy Mahler to the end. Consider the Tenth Symphony in F# major, his last. It was left unfinished at his death, with only the first movement, a lengthy Adagio, fully scored. Often interpreted, owing in part to its pervadingly homophonic texture (and to some marginalia discovered by its posthumous editors), as a love song to the composer’s wife, the movement alternates between dulcet and agonized extremes—as did the marriage, apparently: as much a part of the Mahler legend as his walk with Brahms was a later walk he took in Amsterdam with Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, in which his marital problems were the main topic of conversation.

The most turbulent interlude is one near the end, in A \flat minor. In itself the key is not as outlandish as it may seem: it is just the ordinary supertonic of F# major spelled enharmonically. The passage that links this episode with the movement’s last section, in the original tonic, functions as a “retransition,” which means that it must provide a modulatory link between ii and I.

That link is obviously going to be V—but what a V! The passage is given in Ex. 1-6a in orchestral score. Ex. 1-6b is nothing but a single-staff transcription of the functional dominant chord, presented as Mahler

presents it, in two stages, with all the parts for transposing instruments rendered “in C” for ease of reading. The bottom five notes consist of an ordinary “dominant ninth” on C#, the ordinary fifth degree. But to convey an affect sufficient to the composer’s expressive needs, a thirteenth (spelled A natural), a “diminished fifteenth” (C natural), a “diminished seventeenth” (E b) and even a “diminished nineteenth” (G natural) are piled atop the chord, producing a searingly dissonant dominant harmony containing nine different pitches. Who knows what Guido Adler, for whom the Second and Third Symphonies already contained “unprecedented cacophonies,” might have called it?

The image displays a page of a musical score, likely for a symphony, featuring multiple staves for various instruments. The instruments listed include Flutes (Fl.), Oboes (Ob.), Clarinets (Cl.), Bassoon (Ba.), Horns (Hn.), Trumpets (Tp.), Trombones (Tbn.), Violins I and II (Vln. I, Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Cb.). The score is written in C major and shows a complex, dissonant chord structure. The bottom five notes of the chord are described in the text as an ordinary dominant ninth on C#, an ordinary fifth degree, a thirteenth (spelled A natural), a diminished fifteenth (C natural), a diminished seventeenth (E b), and a diminished nineteenth (G natural). The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *f*, and *sf*, and articulation marks like accents and slurs. The notation is dense, with many notes and rests across the staves.

ex. 1-6a Gustav Mahler, Symphony no. 10, Adagio, fig. 27 to fig. 29

ex. 1-6b Gustav Mahler, Symphony no. 10, Adagio, fig. 27 to fig. 29 analytical reduction

Even within Mahler's own output, then, we can observe the pressure to maximalize, to exceed all limits and precedents. Where a "dominant thirteenth" had sufficed as a point of maximum tension in the Second

Symphony, the Tenth required a “dominant nineteenth.” How much further could this procedure go? In one sense the answer is easy: three more notes can be added to the chord before all the available pitches (or “pitch classes”) in the tuning system of Western classical music will have been used up. Then what?

Moreover, as Mahler’s omissions from his “V₁₉” suggest, the remaining three pitches might not have produced any further maximalization of the dominant function within the key of F# major. Omitted (along with E) are F# itself and A#, the essential definers of the tonic triad; include them in the preceding chord and there can be no sense of progression to them, whether by fifth or by semitone. In the event, of course, the actual progression linking the maximalized dominant chord with the tonic turns on a semitone —A (the “thirteenth”) to A#—rather than a fifth. We can say “of course” because we have seen its like before, in the first movement of the Second Symphony, the *Todtenfeier*. There, too, we recall, the V–I progressions, few and far between, were mainly reserved for big rhetorical effects, or to provide formal signposts. The real harmonic work was done by semitone progressions.

So we are not surprised to find that, having made its rhetorical and form-defining point, the gigantic V₁₉ in the Tenth Symphony is gradually “liquidated,” leaving only the A in the trumpet and a D natural in the cellos (nominally the ninth of the chord) to resolve outward in contrary motion to a tonic that returns along with the main theme in the violins to signify tonal relaxation. This is hardly a conventional usage for a chord, and tonal relaxation has a way to go before the piece can end. But the truly effective and *functional* harmonic move has been the one executed by semitones, not fifths. Fifths, by now, have had their day.

The A–A# link is all the more efficacious because it is “motivic.” Ex. 1-7 shows the very beginning of the Adagio, an enigmatically chromatic “recitative” for the violas ending on the same A natural, which then resolves cadentially into the A# with which the first violins’ “aria” begins. Comparison with Mahler’s *particell* draft (Fig. 1-3) shows that the editor who prepared the Adagio for posthumous publication, thinking primarily of the players’ ease in reading, failed to respect Mahler’s fastidious orthography, according to which both the A natural and the G natural that precedes it are notated as “tendency tones,” namely the sixth and seventh degrees (F and G) of a putative “melodic minor” scale on A#.

The image displays a page of a musical score for a symphony, featuring several instrumental parts. The top section is for the Viola (Vla.), marked *Andante* and *tristemente*, with a dynamic marking of *pp e sotto voce sempre*. Below this is a section for the Clarinet (Cl.) and Horns (Hr.), marked *Adagio*. The Horns part includes parts for Horns in E-flat (Hr. Eb) and Horns in F (Hr. F). The Trumpets (Tbn.) part includes parts for Trumpets in B-flat (Tbn. Bb) and Trumpets in C (Tbn. C). The bottom section is for the Violins (Vln. I and Vln. II), Viola (Vla. div.), Violoncello (Vc. div.), and Contrabass (Cb.), marked *Adagio*. The Violins part includes the instruction *ma con molto calore*. The score is written in a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. The page is numbered 5/8 in the bottom left corner and has a date of 2011.03.10. 20:12 in the bottom right corner.

The image shows a page of a musical score for Gustav Mahler's Symphony no. 10, Adagio, measures 1-24. The score is arranged in systems for woodwinds, brass, and strings. The woodwind section includes Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bn.), Horn (Hn.), and Trombone (Tbn.). The brass section includes Trumpet (Tbn.) and Trombone (Tba.). The string section includes Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The score features various musical notations such as dynamics (poco cresc., molto cresc., unis., esp.), articulation (poco d'arco), and performance instructions (change to Cl. in A).

ex. 1-7 Gustav Mahler, *Symphony no. 10*, Adagio, mm. 1-24

The long-held A natural that makes cadential resolution to A# in Ex. 1-6 is likewise conceptually a G. Throughout the score, and cumulatively over the course of his career, Mahler had been executing a retreat from the circle of fifths toward the unmediated chromatic scale as the generator and governor of harmonic functions. With that move went a concomitant one that located essential harmonic relations on the melodic surface rather than assigning them to the bass. These moves were not Mahler's alone. They were pervasive among Germanic composers of "emotional" music (to recall Pound's terminology). German composers increasingly became "semitone composers," fascinated to the point of obsession with what the critic Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno called the "smallest link."¹⁶



fig. 1-3 Adagio from Mahler's Tenth Symphony, first page of *particell* or sketch score.

The heightened subjective expressivity that these harmonic devices were developed to serve—a maximalized romanticism that would eventually be dubbed “expressionism”—led to one more stylistic feature of which Mahler was a pioneer. That is the lyric or “singing” line that transcends the human singing range by means of huge melodic leaps to tensely expressive appoggiaturas—that is, “tendency tones” in need of resolution by semitone. The violin “aria” in Mahler's Adagio, shown in both Ex. 1-7 and Fig. 1-3, is an epitome of the technique. Listeners had never before encountered so thoroughly disjunct a melody, nor such large leaps to “nonharmonic” tones (or the complementary move, resolutions accompanied by octave displacements). This is the familiar “yearning” (*Sehnsucht*) of romanticism, long associated with Schubert, already given a famous maximalization by Wagner, and now, in Mahler and his contemporaries, entering a phase that was widely described as “decadent.”

Notes:

(16) Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, trans. Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). (Originally published in 1968 as *Alban Berg: Der Meister des kleinsten Übergangs*).

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Richard Strauss

Arnold Schoenberg

DECADENCE

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The novel use of semitonal adjacencies gave easy access to (formerly) exotic or recondite harmonies and tonal relations. Ultimately they became commonplace, hence no longer exotic or recondite: the extraordinary, so to speak, became ordinary. And that is a fine way of approaching musically the notoriously slippery term and concept of “decadence.”

It was introduced in the mid-1880s into discussions of art and life and their interrelationship, most notably in the novel *À rebours* (“Against the grain”, sometimes translated as “Against Nature”, 1884) by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), a French writer of Dutch descent, whose sickly aristocratic artist-hero Des Esseintes was the very embodiment of rarefied, artificial, esoteric, exacting taste. His favorite music, we learn in one revealing aside, was the “emaciated” Gregorian chant, from which everything afterward (excepting only Schubert’s lieder, or some few of them) has been a comedown, an “impurity.” There was something of the “Brahmin” in him, too, as that term was used during the fin de siècle to denote snobbishly discriminating taste, recalling as it did both the ultra-sophisticated music of Brahms and the highest caste of Hindu society. Des Esseintes avoided secular music because it was

a promiscuous art, in that you cannot enjoy it at home, by yourself, as you can a book; to savor it he would have had to join the mob of inveterate theater-goers that fills the Cirque d’Hiver, where under a broiling sun and in a stifling atmosphere you can see a hulking brute of a man waving his arms about and massacring disconnected snatches of Wagner to the huge delight of an ignorant crowd. He had never had the courage to plunge into this mob-bath.¹⁷

But compared with him a mere Brahmin was incorrigibly bourgeois and conventional. Fatally jaded and misanthropic, Des Esseintes is repelled by anything “natural” (meaning anything vigorous or “normally” healthy) and fatally attracted to risky behavior of all kinds—“substance abuse” (as we would call it now), including nightly expurgation with enemas; nightmarish sexual encounters (“unnatural loves and perverse pleasures”); defiance of conventional (“bourgeois”) hygiene. In 1886 the German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, in a famous treatise called *Psychopathia Sexualis* (“Mental illness related to sex”), coined the term *masochism* from the name of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836–95), a popular novelist whose characters exhibit many “inversions,” including the inversion of hedonism to which the medical term referred: like Des Esseintes, Masoch’s characters experience pleasure or sexual arousal on being subjected to pain or humiliation, which they therefore seek out.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who described himself intermittently as a decadent, defined the condition in 1888 as that of “instinctively choosing what is harmful for oneself.”¹⁸ But of course he was jesting; instinct had nothing to do with it. To be decadent was to revel in artificiality and affectation, in “learned behavior” and “acquired taste,” in doing things “on purpose” and fastidiously avoiding anything that was immediately pleasurable or popular.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, a novella by the Irish esthete Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), contains a tribute to an unnamed *À rebours* and the effect it made on its readers. As the title character describes it, “it seemed to him

that in exquisite raiment and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him: things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him; things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed.”¹⁹ The book, formerly passed from hand to hand in rarefied artistic circles, became scandalously famous when Wilde was forced by the prosecutor to identify it during his 1895 trial for homosexuality. It was then that “decadent” subject matter became a selling point for artworks appealing to the broad “bourgeois” public. Decadence was opened up, so to speak, for the tourist trade, and that is where the musicians came in.

For preliminary—mild and pretty—illustrations we can turn to two very early works by Strauss and Schoenberg respectively. They are tiny pieces, showing that maximalism, in the form of concentrated effect, can coexist perfectly well with brevity—indeed, as we will see later, there was eventually a race toward the limits of compression, just as there had previously been one toward the limits of extension. Maximalism is above all a highly competitive phenomenon, as was decadence once it went public. As to compression, Wilde said it best when describing a cigarette as “the perfect pleasure: it is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied.”²⁰ Strauss’s little *Rêverie* (or *Träumerei*) for piano, op. 9, no. 4 (Ex. 1-8), comes from a set of pieces called *Stimmungsbilder* (“Mood pictures”), composed between 1882 and 1884, when the precociously gifted composer was in his late teens. It would be his last published work for piano. Except for lieder, which he produced abundantly throughout his career, Strauss’s primary media were the largest: first the symphonic poem (which he rechristened *Tondichtung*, “tone poem,” a term that has taken firm hold in English), of which he wrote ten between 1886 and 1915; and later opera, of which he wrote fifteen between 1892 and 1941.

Andantino

dolo *mf*

sempre con corda

rit.

rit.

3

ex. 1-8 Richard Strauss, *Rêverie*, Op. 9, no. 4

The main thematic substance of the *Rêverie* consists not of a tune but of a chord progression, announced at the very beginning of the piece and endlessly repeated until it sounds “normal.” It is an oscillation between an arpeggiated tonic triad and a chord consisting entirely of semitonal adjacencies—“chromatic neighbors”—over a tonic pedal. As a “vertical” entity the chord cannot be classified, but as a contrapuntal event its function (which means its immediate future) could not be clearer: it’s got to go back where it came from, and nowhere else.

As the Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov once told a disciple who asked him the name of a similarly unclassifiable chromatic chord in one of his works, “I don’t actually know what kind of chord this is exactly; I only know that it has three resolutions....”²¹ Harmony is as harmony does. It has become contextual rather than strictly functional. It governs only immediate connections, not overall coherence (which must be supplied, if desired, by other means). Imagine a harmonic texture in which all or most of the connections are like the one at the beginning of Strauss’s *Rêverie* and you will understand “decadence.” You will have imagined, in fact, the harmonic texture of Strauss’s early operas.

Before turning to them, let us stop to admire Schoenberg's *Erwartung* ("Anticipation"), op. 2, no. 1 (Ex. 1-9), written in 1899 (when the composer was twenty-three) to a poem by Richard Dehmel (1863–1920), a writer who by virtue of his risqué subject matter and extravagant imagery also enjoyed a reputation as a "decadent." The poem Schoenberg selected depicts a man, hoping for a sexual encounter, standing amid an exotic, possibly "oriental," landscape; his senses are quickened in anticipation, strangely alive to shifting lights and colors, darting movements, tactile sensations. The poem's explicit play of complementary colors—green against red, the implied black of a dead oak against the implied white of the moon—stimulates the reader's own sensory awareness, fulfilling the poet's aim to "make poetic technique more sensuous by incorporating painterly and musical effects."²² The strategy for capturing a sensually charged moment of erotic arousal like the one evoked in *Erwartung* was to "associate a color word with a particularly strong upwelling of a psychological state."

To achieve a comparably sensual effect in his music Schoenberg resorts to a technique almost identical to the one Strauss had used in his *Rêverie* (which Schoenberg almost certainly knew), but in a slightly more radical (yes, maximalized) manner. The first two colors named in the poem are accompanied by an ear-tingling "color-chord"—an unclassifiable, mildly dissonant, but still triadic harmony consisting of semitonal neighbors to the tones of the initial E \flat -major tonic triad, plus a tonic pedal. In m. 4, where the black/white pair is mentioned, the color-chord is inverted and transposed down a fifth, and cleverly "resolved" to a dominant ninth on G that can function as an applied dominant to a new tonic, so that the whole color-progression can be repeated on C, a Lisztian minor third away (Ex. 1-9).

The play between the purely coloristic (or static) variant of the novel chord and the semi-"functional" (or progressing) one gives the music a restlessness that adds significantly (and beyond the power of words) to the affect of the poem. The whole middle section (mm. 11–17), in which the darting reflections of green and red in the man's opal ring are described, consists musically of a sequence of semifunctional progressions from the color chord to dominant ninths, only some of which are allowed to resolve functionally.

The return to the tonic is made not by way of the dominant, but by way of a seemingly "remote" dominant seventh on B major (enharmonically contained in the color-chord) that resolves in mm. 17–18 by "outward" semitonal resolution in the fashion of an augmented-sixth chord. The long-sustained tonic harmony in mm. 21–22 does not proceed to the tonic by way of the dominant, but by way of the color-chord, which returns unexpectedly in m. 23 to accompany the longed-for apparition at the window of the lover's hand. The music almost palpably tickles.

Sehr langsam (♩)

Aus dem mee - grü - nen Täl - che ne - ben der ro - sen Vil - la

etwas zögernd

un - ter der to - ten Ei - che scheint der Mond.

Wo ihr dank - les Ab - bild durch das Was - ser greift, stehe ein

Mann und streift ei - nen Ring von sei - ner Hand.

The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of four systems of music. Each system has a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The tempo is marked 'Sehr langsam' (Very slow) and the mood is 'etwas zögernd' (slightly hesitating). The lyrics are in German. The first system has the tempo marking and the first line of lyrics. The second system has the mood marking and the second line of lyrics. The third and fourth systems have the remaining lines of lyrics. The piano accompaniment features complex chordal textures and melodic lines, often with arpeggiated figures and sustained notes.

etwas zögernd etwas bewegt

Drei O - pa - le blä - ken; durch die blä - chen Sei - ne schwin - men

etwas zurückhaltend

rot und grü - ne Fan - ken und ver - sin - ken.

stärker zurückhaltend

Und er küßt sie, und sei - ne Au - gen leuch - ten wie der meer - grü - ne

Grund: zert ein Fen - ster auf sich

rit.

ex. 1-9 Arnold Schoenberg, *Erwartung*, Op. 2, no. 1, mm. 1-23

The affect, and the musical techniques that evoke it, are (perhaps needless to say) related to those in *Tristan und Isolde*; but Schoenberg's sensuality, unlike Wagner's, no longer needs the mask (or excuse) of philosophy or religion. Like its sister arts at the fin de siècle, music has begun to shed its shame over sex. The world is sexy, it seems to imply, as did the creators of a highly decorative and curvaceous pictorial approach called *Jugendstil* or "youth style" (named after *Jugend*, a Munich arts magazine—see Fig. 1-4). That sexiness, *Jugendstil* implied, need not carry a heavy burden of passion or spirituality. Delight in it, as modern psychologists now say, can be "polymorphously perverse"—unrestricted to those sexual functions and acts that straightforwardly promote procreation, just as chords do not have to connect in ways that straightforwardly produce a functional cadence, so long as their succession gives pleasure.

A lessening of shame and an acceptance of perversity together constituted another definition of "decadence," of course, especially popular with the many who equated it then and since with moral (or in extreme cases, with genetic) degeneracy. We might approach an understanding of decadence—or at least perversity—by imagining a child at play with an "erector set." For a while, if intelligent and interested, or at least

well-behaved, the child will follow the instruction book and connect the pieces “structurally,” producing the expected buildings and bridges. Later, however, in order to maintain interest, the child might start connecting the pieces with one another in ways the instruction book does not prescribe, creating weird shapes that have no practical application, but give pleasure (to the maker, at least). Really curious children might even stick the pieces in places their mothers might not care to hear about.



fig. 1-4 *Jugendstil*: Theodor Thomas Heine, *Serpententänzerin* (Dancing Girl Doing Wavy Figures, 1900). The dancer depicted is the American Loie Fuller, who made a specialty of “serpentine dancing” and created a sensation in fin-de-siècle Europe.

And so it was with harmonic connections. Where the instruction books continued to prescribe the circle of fifths, composers happily experimented with semitones or other “interval cycles,” producing progressions that evoked sensations, as one composer proudly put it, of “iridescent silk”²³ (shades of Dehmel’s opals!), or as his father complained, of having “your trousers full of crawling June bugs.”

Notes:

- (17) Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 204.
- (18) Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagners* (1888); in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 165.
- (19) Richard Aldington, ed. *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1947), p. 280.
- (20) Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, 1891), Chap. 6.
- (21) Vasilii Yastrebtsev, *Nikolai Andreyevich Rimskiy-Korsakov: Vospominaniya, 1886–1908*, Vol. II (Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1960), p. 468.
- (22) Richard Dehmel, *Bekentnisse* (1926); quoted in Walter Frisch, *The Early Works of Arnold Schoenberg, 1893–1908* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 93.
- (23) Richard Strauss, *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*, ed. Willi Schuh (Zürich, 1949), p. 184; trans. Piero Weiss in P. Weiss and R. Taruskin, *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* (2nd ed., Belmont, CA: Thomson/Schirmer, 2007), pp. 353–54.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Richard Strauss

Salome

STRAUSS: MAXIMALIZING OPERA

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The composer was Richard Strauss, describing the music of his one-act (but full-evening) opera *Salome* (1905), a verbatim setting of a preexisting play by Oscar Wilde (1893), originally written in French and published in Paris. That the play, and consequently the music, had a lot to do with perverse sex—and that the task of representing sexual perversity motivated the musical innovations—can go practically without saying. Wilde’s play—one of many representations of the celebrated dancing princess in many artistic media that cropped up at the fin de siècle—was already a benchmark of decadence by the time Strauss set it. That is precisely what attracted the composer, whether in the disinterested pursuit of new musical beauties or (as many insinuated) in pursuit of reichsmarks. (But of course, and as usual, the only evidence of his venality was his commercial success.) The basis of the play, ironically enough, was the Holy Bible. Two of the Gospels contain the story of Herod the king and John the Baptist, given here in the somewhat shorter version of Matthew (14:3–12), according to the New English Bible:

Now Herod had arrested John, put him in chains, and thrown him into prison, on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife [whom he desired for himself]; for John had told him: “You have no right to her.” Herod would have liked to put him to death, but he was afraid of the people, in whose eyes John was a prophet. But at his birthday celebrations the daughter of Herodias danced before the guests, and Herod was so delighted that he took an oath to give her anything she cared to ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a dish the head of John the Baptist.” The king was distressed when he heard it; but out of regard for his oath and for his guests, he ordered the request to be granted, and had John beheaded in prison. The head was brought in on a dish and given to the girl; and she carried it to her mother.

The name Salome (in history Herod’s daughter-in-law) was attached by tradition to his dancing niece. In Wilde’s version she is a breathtakingly beautiful maiden over whom desperate men are shown committing suicide, but who cares for no one—that is, until she spies the filthy, emaciated John the Baptist in his cell and conceives an enormous desire for him. She asks for a kiss and is angrily rebuffed. After her “Dance of the Seven Veils” (that is, her striptease) before the king she asks for the prophet’s head not so much to avenge her mother’s honor (or her own) as to slake her passion. She dances orgiastically with the bloody severed head and, delirious with desire, kisses it on the mouth (Fig. 1-6); upon which Herod, scandalized and nauseated by her necrophilia, has her put straightaway to death.



fig. 1-5 Richard Strauss working on his opera *Die schweigsame Frau* (The Silent Woman) at his villa outside Munich, 1932.

Strauss's music raised eyebrows even higher than the play, both for the obvious ways in which it intensified the play's challenge to conventional morality, and for the novelty of its technical procedures—at once inscrutable and yet uncannily effective, hence (like *Tristan*) disquieting but (unlike *Tristan*) depicting a passion no one in the audience could admit to identifying with applied for permission to give the premiere in Vienna, but was refused by the city fathers in the name of public morals. (The actual premiere took place on 9 December 1905 in Dresden.) Mahler made Schoenberg the gift of the vocal score, and one of Schoenberg's pupils, Egon Wellesz, happened in on him while he was taking his first look at the opening pages (Ex. 1-10), and heard him marveling that it would be twenty years before anyone would be able to figure out by what principle they were composed.²⁴

In all likelihood Schoenberg figured out what we are about to discover in twenty minutes, not twenty years, but by then Wellesz had left and the story stood. On the face of it, the chord progressions seem altogether arbitrary, though sensuously alluring in the extreme, suitably expressing the first lines of the text: first the lovesick Narraboth's exclamation, "How fair is the princess Salome tonight," immediately juxtaposed with the Page's comparison of the pale moon (shades of Richard Dehmel!) with a woman rising from a tomb, a vision a true decadent—but only a true decadent—would surely find voluptuous.



fig. 1-6 Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), *The Climax*, illustration for Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1893).

The four-sharps signature defines the key as C# minor, and that is indeed the first harmony we hear; but in m. 2 a sixth is added and in m. 3—lo!—both the third and the sixth are transformed (“like iridescent silk”) into the major to accompany Narraboth’s rapture. In m. 4, the top note of the chord pushes up to a seventh, creating a need for resolution; but the next measure evades the expected closure with a curious deceptive cadence in which not only the root and fifth but also the seventh(!) move up a semitone in parallel motion. At the same time, the E# in m. 4 moves down to E natural, providing the new chord with a ninth. A semitonal expansion in the outer voices of m. 6—top up to C#, bottom down to A \flat —produces a dissonant harmony with no traditional classification but definitely with somewhere to go (that is, with a “function”): resolving by a further outward expansion, the augmented third moves to a perfect fifth, and G is established as the chord root.

First Scene.
Ziemlich fließendes Zeitmass. M. ♩ = 52

NARRABOTH.
Andante mosso
Wie schön—

Nar. — ist die Prin-zes - sin Sa - lo-me heu - te Nacht!

PAGE.
Sieh' die Mond - schei - be, wie sie selt - sam aus - sicht.

P. Wie ei - ne Frau, die auf - steigt aus dem Grab.

ex. 1-10a Richard Strauss, *Salome*, mm. 1-16

By the downbeat of m. 8, that chord has been replaced by a rootless augmented triad (albeit with the seventh of the G chord hanging on to produce a sort of whole-tone cluster, and the fifth continuing as a sort of pedal). Measure 9 brings a strange surprise: resolution to B minor, perhaps the last destination anyone could have expected, but justified (or at least made consistent with the rest) by the voice leading—a semitonal expansion hidden among the inner voices: F to F# vs. E \flat to D. Nor could anyone have expected the arrival of F major in m. 11, but its root is the result of an ascending semitone, and the D \flat in the highest part, while ostensibly not a chord tone, is approached via a complementary descending semitone, from D. So while anyone attempting to relate the ostensible triadic root progression thus far—C#–D–G–B–F—to the tonic of C# minor will inevitably end up as bewildered as Schoenberg apparently was when Wellesz discovered him, there is indeed a consistent principle of voice leading driving the harmonic succession.

That principle is “semitonal expansion/contraction” as we may somewhat clumsily dub it, and it operates in other places on the first page as well, including the voice parts. Note Narraboth’s ostensible A-minor arpeggio

on a rather significant word (“Salome!”) in m. 5, proceeding to a rising sixth (“heute Nacht”) from A \flat to F—that is, from a semitone below to a semitone above the limits of the triad. And now look at mm. 13–16, where the Page’s image of the woman rising from the tomb is accompanied by a harmonic progression proceeding in the opposite direction, from F minor (subsuming the A \flat and the F from above) to A minor. We have witnessed the derivation of a leitmotif, in fact: a chord progression that will accompany future associations of “sex object” and “death.” The first such explicit association comes shortly afterward when the Page compares Salome’s pale complexion to that of a corpse, and the orchestra obliges with the F minor/A minor progression (Ex. 1-10b).

The opening harmonies are also a leitmotif. They return to accompany Salome’s first entrance (Ex. 1-11a), at a quicker harmonic rhythm that exposes even more clearly the chromatic lines in contrary motion that generate the harmony: on successive downbeats, the top voice in the orchestra part proceeds E \sharp –E–E \flat –D–C \sharp and the bass proceeds C \sharp –D–E \flat –E, lacking only a concluding E \sharp to produce a complete and literal criss-cross (or in fancy terminology, a “chiasmus,” from the Greek). A complementary representation of the chiasmus (complete in the bass, lacking one member in the soprano) comes at the point where the teasing Salome inveigles the lovesick Narraboth to produce the imprisoned John the Baptist for her inspection (Ex. 1-11b). Counting by pairs of measures, the tops of the sustained orchestral chords yield E \sharp –E–E \flat –D (the last note notated in the vocal score under an F \sharp coming from an orchestral countermelody), and the bass goes the full distance: C \sharp –D–E \flat –E–E \sharp (F).

The image shows a musical score for Richard Strauss's *Salome*, measures 24-26. The top staff is the vocal line for Narraboth (Nar.), with the lyrics "Wie eine Frau, die tot ist." The bottom staves are the piano accompaniment. The score is marked with "PAGE." and the number "3". The piano part features a chromatic line in the right hand (E \sharp -E-E \flat -D-C \sharp) and a chromatic line in the left hand (C \sharp -D-E \flat -E-E \sharp (F)). The score is marked with "pp" (pianissimo) and "S" (sustained).

ex. 1-10b Richard Strauss, *Salome*, mm. 24-26

The image displays three systems of musical notation for Richard Strauss's *Salome*. The first system features a vocal line for P. (Pilate) and a vocal line for Nar. (Narrator). The P. line has the lyrics "Ich bit - te dich, sieh sie nicht" and includes the instruction "accelerando" above a triplet. The Nar. line has the lyrics "Ja, sie kommt auf uns zu. Yes, she comes to - wars us." and includes the instruction "accelerando" above a triplet. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves with various markings including "P", "L.H. 5", "cresc.", and "5". The second system continues the vocal lines with lyrics "an! Sie ist wie ei - ne ver - irr - te" and includes the instruction "accelerando" above a triplet. The piano accompaniment continues with similar markings. The third system is titled "Second scene Presto" and "Äusserst schnell" (Extremely fast), with the vocal line for Nar. starting with the word "Tau" and a long dash. The piano accompaniment includes a triplet marking.

ex. 1-11a Richard Strauss, *Salome*, Salome's first entrance (fig. 20)

Sal.
kann sein, ich wer-de dir zu-lä-cheln.

Sal.
Sieh mich an, Nar-ra-both,

Sal.
sieh mich an. Ah, wie gut du weisst, dass du

Sal.
tun wirst, um was ich dich bit-te. Wie du es weisst!

ex. 1-11b Richard Strauss, *Salome*, Salome teases Narraboth (two before fig. 57)

The longest semitonal chiasmus in the score (Ex. 1-12a) goes through nine progressions out of a possible twelve. It takes place during the scene of flirtation between Herod and Salome leading up to her dance. The intervals here expand rather than contract (so that the chiasmus goes in the opposite direction), and it begins and ends on intervals we have not yet observed in such a context. But beginning with the second chord it reproduces in reversed order all the “simultaneities” we have already witnessed: E/D, E^b/E^b, D/E, D^b/F (=C[#]/E[#]). In short, it is an especially long segment of what we might take hypothetically to be the “master array” of intervals, all linked by semitonal expansion/contraction, that served Strauss as a harmonic blueprint for constructing this masterpiece of maximalized decadence (Ex. 1-12b).

Herodes

Nur ein we - nig von die - ser
but a lit - tle of this sweet

Herodes

Frucht _____ dann _____
fruit _____ then _____

179

ex. 1-12a Richard Strauss, *Salome*, Herod flirts with Salome (4 before fig. 179)

cf. Ex. 47-12a

cf. Ex. 47-11a-b

ex. 1-12b Harmonic abstract of semitonal chiasmus (the “master array”)

Minute analysis of the score will confirm the hypothesis: our “master array” is indeed the opera’s harmonic plan, one that owes nothing at all to the circle of fifths, but that, while maintaining the “phonology” or sound-vocabulary of triadic functional harmony, connects the chords in polymorphously perverse fashion by variously “filling in” the semitonally linked intervals in the array. Authentic (“V–I”) cadences in *Salome* are in fact exceedingly rare, and mainly serve a “ceremonial” function—as a symbol for decisive action, for example, or of resoluteness or rectitude in contrast to the pervading lasciviousness. (Needless to say, Saint John the Baptist gets most of them.) The As and Ebs in Ex. 1-12b are represented as “whole notes” as opposed to the black note-heads otherwise employed, because they are the points at which the master array “resolves” to perfect consonances (unisons or octaves). The intervals formed between the voices on either side of the Eb are precisely the same, but the relationship between the voices is inverted and the order is reversed. Thus the two octave pitches form a potential tonal axis (or axis of symmetry) at the tritone, the exact midpoint of the chromatic scale. Strauss does not exploit this feature to any very appreciable degree in *Salome*, but he will exploit it to the hilt in his next opera, which is therefore, and to that precise extent, a more radical or maximalistic work than its predecessor. The race to the patent office continues. Modernists and maximalists

compete not only with each other but with themselves. Each work must show “progress.”

Notes:

(24) Willi Reich, *Schoenberg: A Critical Biography*, trans. Leo Black (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 25.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Richard Strauss

Salome

CONSUMMATION

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

What little there is of “axis music” in *Salome* is found, of course, in the last scene. “Of course,” because the music for this scene, in which the title character gets her man—or at any rate the desired part of him—and gets to consummate her “unnatural love” and reap “perverse pleasure” to the full, will have to reach its own maximum in musical perversity, which is to say in illicit but pleasurable connections. It all reaches a head in the last half-dozen pages of the score, Salome’s perverted *Liebestod*.

The image shows the beginning of Salome's dance from Richard Strauss's opera. It consists of two systems of piano and bass staves. The piano part features a series of glissandos (marked 'gliss.') and dynamic changes from *pp* to *f*. The bass part includes glissandos and triplet markings (marked '3').

ex. 1-13a Richard Strauss, *Salome*, Salome’s dance, beginning

The image shows the first violin part from Richard Strauss's opera. It consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Vln. I' and features a melodic line with a slur and a fermata. The bottom staff is labeled '(John the Baptist motif)' and features a rhythmic pattern with a slur and a fermata. The motif is marked with 'a' and 'b' above it.

ex. 1-13b Richard Strauss, *Salome*, Salome’s dance, first violins at 3 before [L]



ex. 1-13c Richard Strauss, *Salome*, Salome's dance, first violins at 3 after [R]

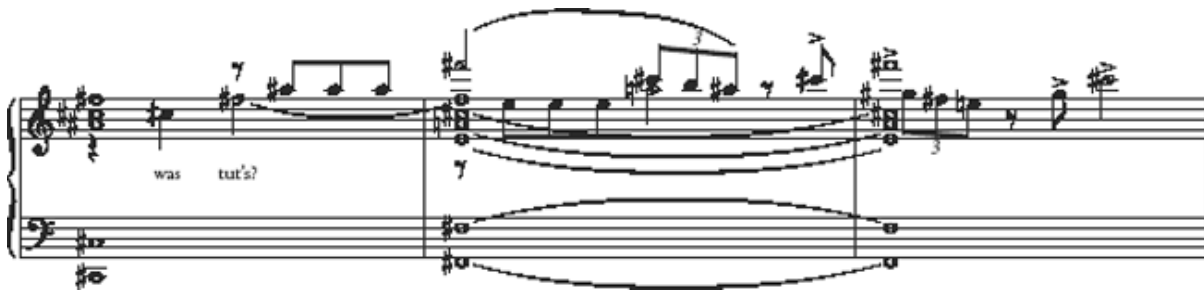
The music we are about to examine consists almost entirely of material drawn from the “Dance of the Seven Veils,” presented in a maximalistically distorted form, even as the parent material had itself been an “orientalist” distortion of a few significant leitmotifs, some of them by now familiar. The harmonic background to the oboe’s “snake-charmer” tune at the beginning of the Dance, for example, recalls the A minor/F minor oscillation that we have been taught to associate with linked thoughts of sex and death; but the F-minor component has been transformed into a voluptuous four-note whole-tone cluster (the augmented triad G-B-E \flat hovering over an octave-doubled bass F) that straddles the ground between a dominant ninth and a French sixth (Ex. 1-13a). Thereafter the Dance consists of a number of linked sections at increasingly fast tempos, each initiated by the dropping of another layer of clothing. Three motifs, derived from the themes of two of these sections, are slated for recapitulation in the climactic scene (Exx. 1-13b, 1-13c).

The first place to look, perhaps, to see what Strauss is up to in the final pages, is the exchange (a typical “mad scene” exchange, redolent of familiar precedents in favorite Italian operas like Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*) between Salome and the high woodwinds in Ex. 1-14a. Both phrases are derived from motif “c” in Ex. 1-13. They are pitched a tritone apart, according to an axis of symmetry like the one illustrated in Ex. 1-12b. If we take them to be arpeggios, the roots of the triads they describe are B \flat and E, respectively.

And now compare the accompanying harmony: as notated in the organ part, on which Ex. 1-14a is based, the basic harmony is C# minor, significant for two reasons. First, because it was the tonality that opened the opera, showing Strauss to be still sensitive, perhaps surprisingly, to the requirement for traditional tonal closure. But second (and in local terms perhaps more important), C# is equidistant from E and B \flat , the two axis tones. It bisects their difference, just as the tritone itself bisects the octave. And the two remaining tones in the organ part, F and A#, though camouflaged here as an appoggiatura and an “added sixth” respectively, can be read as the root and third of a G-minor triad, standing at the tritone from, and thus challenging, the “basic harmony,” and also bisecting the E-B \flat “axis tritone” on the other side, as it were.

 A musical score for the final scene of *Salome*. It features a vocal line for Salome and an organ accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and includes the lyrics "SALOME auf dein-en Lip - pen" and the English translation " ("upon thy lips")". The organ part is in the same time signature and features a complex harmonic texture with many accidentals. Above the organ part, there is a notation for "(Ob, Picc.)" with a long horizontal line indicating a sustained or tremolo effect.

ex. 1-14a Richard Strauss, *Salome*, final scene, adaptation of organ part at “Auf deinen Lippen”



ex. 1-14b Richard Strauss, *Salome*, final scene, “Was tut’s?”

The four roots, E–G–B \flat –C \sharp , could be said to describe a diminished seventh chord; perhaps more pertinently, they describe a symmetrically apportioned division of the octave of a kind that will become exceedingly prevalent in the music of the “maximalist” or early modernist period, challenging and (in the work of quite a few composers) eventually supplanting diatonic scales and circles of fifths as primary avenues of harmonic navigation. To the ear, especially when its components are distinguished, as here, by timbres, symmetrical arrays can present themselves as mixtures of conventional harmonies, a device now often referred to as “polytonality” (although the term was not coined until the 1920s). Such mixtures can either clash, to produce violent effects, or blend, to produce effects of uncanny bittersweetness.

Strauss employs both kinds of mixture in the final pages of *Salome*. When, in her necrophiliac ecstasy, she actually sings of the bitter taste of love on the sweet lips of the severed head, Strauss actually pits motif “b” from Ex. 1-13 in imitation with itself at the tritone (on D \sharp [E \flat] and A, the original axis pair!) over an F \sharp root, against which the pitches of the three-note pickups (A \sharp [B \flat] and E, the other axis pair) are heard as the third and seventh respectively. The combination (Ex. 1-14b) produces a sort of F \sharp seventh chord that bears a lot of affect-laden freight reminiscent of the opera’s opening: a double-inflected (major/minor) third and an added sixth. Whether it is “truly” a polychord, or a contrapuntal relationship colored by a pedal, is not something that can be (or need be) decided. Both readings of the harmony isolate particular elements that only in their unique conjunction (or *Gestaltung*, “configuration,” to use the word Strauss might have used) create the weird affect of perversity in which the listener is being invited to participate.

The strongest stuff comes last. After Salome’s final line (“I’ve kissed you on your mouth”), as she stands in a passion-trance with the bloody head pressed to her lips (and, according to the stage directions, with the moon lighting up her pale cadaverous form with a greater intensity than ever of white light, the sex-death color), the orchestra screams out motif “a” from Ex. 1-13b in a final orgiastic cadence. It reaches its earsplitting dynamic peak immediately before the unmistakable resolution to C \sharp major at 361, on a chord about which more ink has been spilled than about any other single harmony in the opera. What has made it so seemingly inscrutable (yet compelling!) can be immediately apprehended by looking at the bottom two staves of the full score (Ex. 1-15a) and noting the A \sharp in the cellos, playing the melody (doubled at the octave by the violins and various winds and brass), and the A natural in the double basses (also massively doubled by tuba, bass trombone, contrabassoon) against which it so violently clashes.



A full orchestral score for the ending of Richard Strauss's opera *Salome*. The score is arranged in a traditional format with multiple staves for each instrument. The woodwinds, strings, and brass sections are clearly visible, with various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score concludes with a final chord and a fermata over the last measure.

ex. 1-15a Richard Strauss,
Salome, ending in full score



A piano reduction of the ending of Richard Strauss's opera *Salome*. The score is written for piano, showing the right and left hand parts. The right hand features a melodic line with a fermata and a triplet of notes. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and a triplet of notes. Dynamic markings such as *ff* and *sfs* are present, along with a *rit.* marking. The score ends with a final chord and a fermata.

ex. 1-15b Richard Strauss, *Salome*, ending in piano reduction

Here the piano reduction (Ex. 1-15b) will tell us more than the full score, or at least tell us more quickly, because it represents the harmony the way in which Strauss's hands on the keyboard probably discovered it: F# major in the right hand against an incomplete dominant seventh on A in the left. These chords can be related to one another by invoking the "master array" in Ex. 1-12b. The F# bisects the distance between the "whole notes" (A and Eb). But such an analysis, while certainly demonstrable, may in this case be gratuitous; for it does not take the obvious and powerful cadential function of the chord into account. Applied to the tonic to which it proceeds, the F# major triad is IV, the ordinary subdominant. If the harmony were unmixed, we would call the cadence "plagal."

And maybe we should call it plagal anyway, since the left-hand component also has a time-honored cadential relationship to C# major: respell the G as F and we are dealing with an "Italian" augmented sixth chord, whose normal cadential function would be registered as \flat VI. Both IV and \flat VI normally move to V; they are "predominants" in authentic cadences. Since they have the same tonal function, since (to put it another way) they are functionally interchangeable in preparing an authentic cadence, then their mixture can be understood, just like the mixed harmonies in Mahler's Second Symphony, as an intensification of the function in question. Thus Strauss's mixed harmony, like Mahler's, is no "polytonal" configuration but rather a maximalized cadence that achieves the appropriate syntactical purpose—and does so with greater power than ever before. In effect it provides the opera with its orgiastic Tristanesque (or Isoldesque) final cadence, after which the quick killing of Salome is a tonally insignificant (though dramatically shattering) appendage. But Strauss's climax does full justice to the difference between the spiritual sublimation of Isolde's sex drive and the kinky gratification of Salome's.

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Richard Strauss

Elektra

ANOTHER MADWOMAN

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

In Strauss's next opera, *Elektra* (1908), these harmonic mixtures are more the rule than the climactic exception. The story is again an ancient one that embodies in its plot the transgression of age-old taboos, namely matricide and incestuous love (to which the opera added a scene of lesbian seduction between the title character and a sister unknown to Greek mythology). Elektra (or Electra, as the name is rendered in English) was the daughter of Agamemnon, the victorious commander in the Trojan War, who was murdered by Clytemnestra, his wife and the mother of Electra, with the help of Clytemnestra's lover Aegisthus. Electra longs for the return from exile of her brother Orestes, who alone can avenge the crime. He appears incognito; she recognizes him; they rejoice in their love and plot vengeance. He kills their mother as she looks on in ecstasy.

This gruesome tale had been dramatized by all three of the great Greek tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The version that Strauss set was the one "rewritten for the German stage," chiefly after Sophocles, by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), a distinguished poet and playwright who collaborated enthusiastically with Strauss on the adaptation of his play, and went on to create five more operas with the composer, right up to the end of his life. This hugely cultured and aristocratic gentleman, whom the composer, though ten years older, came to regard as something of a mentor, undoubtedly played a part in eventually moderating Strauss's modernist zeal.

The grisly *Elektra*, at the very beginning of their collaboration, was Strauss's maximalist extreme. Their next work, *Der Rosenkavalier* ("The cavalier of the rose," 1911) was a romantic comedy set in eighteenth-century Vienna. There is still a fair share of fin-de-siècle kinkiness in the treatment of the plot—the opera opens with two women in bed (one of them playing a boy), the music before curtain having graphically portrayed his/her ejaculation—but the music has begun to substitute extremes of virtuosity in handling traditional assignments (an ideal often described as "classicism") for extremes of innovation.



fig. 1-7 Strauss, *Der Rosenkavalier*; photo from act II of a performance by the Königlische Oper, Berlin, 1911, with Elisabeth Boehm van Endert as Oktavian and Erna Denera as Sophie.

By the time of his death at the age of eighty-five, Strauss was stylistically perhaps the most conservative European composer of major stature. He certainly regarded himself as such: most of his late works were self-conscious valedictories or farewells to older, supposedly better, times. And yet the fact that by the mid-twentieth century stylistic conservatism was as conscious a stance, and as deliberate a choice, as stylistic radicalism is powerful testimony to the triumph of modernism as the dominant worldview for twentieth-century artists. The only choice was to be modernist or antimodernist, just as for a time one could only be Communist or anti-Communist. (Another testimony is the way in which Strauss's career has often been described by twentieth-century historians. Extreme but not untypical is the remark by one writer that the composer's development "from a historical point of view, must be viewed as 'backward,'" ²⁵ rendering all of Strauss's music after *Elektra* "curiously 'unhistorical.'" ²⁶ It would be an excellent exercise to deduce the very special philosophy—or definition—of "history" that informs this assessment.)

At the time of *Elektra*, though, Strauss was still an ardent modernist, which inevitably meant a maximalist. And his own former achievements were the ones he now had to maximalize. He began exactly where *Salome* left off. Indeed, the two operas had so much in common in plot and even in dramatic structure, and the two title characters were so similar in disposition and behavior, that the possibility of “continuing” *Salome* into *Elektra* must have been a paramount consideration in the choice of subject, one plainly dictated by the maximalist ideal.

The opera begins with a D-minor arpeggio motif that fairly bles the name “AgaMEMnon!” (Ex. 1-16), as Elektra will confirm when she appropriates it in her first monologue. And the opening motif seems to be followed in mm. 7–8 by a corresponding arpeggio on the dominant. But before the implied cadence can close, at m. 10 (coinciding with the title character’s first appearance on stage) Strauss begins surrounding D with chords remote from it according to the circle of fifths, but closely related to it in the parallel universe (the symmetrical circle of minor thirds) that he had begun exploring in the last scene of *Salome*. For fully five bars triads on B minor (a minor third below D) alternate with triads on F minor (a minor third above), describing the “axis” relationship of a tritone.

Mäßig langsam. Metr. ♩ = 80
Moderato assai.

FIRST MAID SERVANT

Wo bleibt E - lek-tra?

SECOND MAID SERVANT.

Ist doch ih - re Stun - de,

Piano

ff *dim.*

2nd MS.

die Stun-de, wo sie um den Va - ter heult, daß al - le Wän - de schal - len.

p *dim.* *pp* *p*

Schnell. $\text{♩} = \text{♩ of the } 3/4 \text{ des}$
Vivo

cresc. *ff*

sfz ff sfz sfz

molto espressivo

sfz sfz f sf

ex. 1-16 Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, mm. 1-18 in vocal score

The strange chord at m. 15 will eventually become Elektra's "leitharmonie": it inhabits another circle of minor thirds, being a mixture of major triads on E and D \flat (C \sharp), with A \flat (G \sharp), the melody note, doing double duty as fifth of one and third of the other. When the chord returns to accompany Elektra's first monologue (Ex. 1-17a), it will take on additional freight: a B \flat major triad, complementing E on the other side of D \flat (C \sharp) and describing another tritone-axis of harmonic symmetry. As for the triads on B and F, they too return in maximalized (i.e., mixed) form to launch the first scene between Elektra and her sister Chrysothemis (Ex. 1-17b).

Breit. $\text{♩} = 66$
Largamente

ELEKTRA. 35

Al-lein! Weh,

f p ff

ex. 1-17a Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, Elektra's first lines

In addition to the circle of minor thirds, Strauss continues to exploit “arrays” of semitones in contrary motion like the ones we observed in *Salome*. Ex. 1-16 already contains a telling example: the progression in the last bar from a segment of the “*Elektra* chord” (B-D \flat -F) “outward” to an augmented triad (B \flat -D-F \sharp). The use of semitonal arrays will reach its zenith in the final scene (consisting—again like *Salome*!—of the heroine’s triumphant dance in celebration of a murder), where the semitone progressions will entirely preempt the circle of fifths as the director of the harmony.

Ex. 1-18a shows how Strauss gets from E \flat major to E major along a semitonal matrix that has one of its octave-points on C, the tonality that will eventually end the opera. More conventional keys are occasionally adumbrated—but never by full cadence, only the sounding of a chord that suffices to imply the rest of a cadence that never comes. In Ex. 1-18b, a descending semitone progression in the bass that had covered more than an octave finally zeroes in (in the fifth measure of the example) on F \sharp , harmonized as the bass of a chord whose root, B, promises a cadence in that key. Unlike most of Strauss’s chords, this one is followed by its expected dominant. But at the point of expected arrival on the tonic, Strauss substitutes another chord (falsely promising G), and a new semitone progression, ascending this time, gets underway in the bass.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system is for Chrysothemis, with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "E - lek - tra!". The piano part includes dynamics like *f dim.*, *p*, and *pp*. The second system is for Elektra, with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "Ah, das Gesicht!". The piano part includes dynamics like *sfz* and *sfz*.

ex. 1-17b Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, Chrysothemis calls Elektra

The very end of the opera deserves comment, since it appears to end in two keys at once. Ex. 1-19 shows the last thirty-six measures of the opera, beginning with the tail end of the last appearance of the semitonal array shown in Ex. 1-18a. Contrary motion in the outer voices has produced a juxtaposition of E \flat against A, the sort of tritonal opposition that had generated so much of the opera’s harmony. The harmony that accompanies this last tritonal confluence, a diminished seventh, is liquidated, leaving only the E \flat , tremolando and still *fortississimo*, which finally picks up another harmony, the minor triad of which it is the root, when Elektra finishes her dance in a heap.

That E \flat is now subjected to a tug of war between the E \flat minor triad (henceforth played softly) and bellowing reminiscences of the “Agamemnon” leitmotif in which it is the highest note, so that the other notes of the arpeggio associate it with the implied tonic of C minor. Even the final measure fails to resolve this deadlock, merely giving out both putative tonics at a renewed *fortississimo*.

This deadlocked ending of course implies that the tragedy of the house of Agamemnon has not come to an end. (Classicists will know why—Orestes, called upon in vain by Chrysothemis, is already being pursued by the Furies!) It replays the famous ending device in Strauss's most grandiose tone poem, *Also sprach Zarathustra* ("Thus spake Zarathustra," 1896) after Nietzsche, his most impressive contribution to the heady literature of *Weltanschauungsmusik*. To conclude on a properly speculative note, or in acknowledgment that the last questions will never be answered, the final word never said, Strauss contrived an ending that seemed to die away on an oscillation between tonics on B and C, with C (as in *Elektra*) getting the last word (Ex. 1-20).

The image displays a musical score for Richard Strauss's *Elektra*. It consists of four systems of music. The first two systems are piano accompaniment, with the first system marked *ff* and the second marked *cresc.*. The third system includes the tempo marking "bereits sehr lebhaft $\text{♩} = 76$ animato assai" and features piano accompaniment with *ff* and *p cresc.* markings. The fourth system is a single staff labeled "Array" with a circled ending.

ex. 1-18a Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, another intervallic "array"

Elek.
glück-lich ist wie wir, dem ziemt nur eins:

f *cresc.*

Elek.
schwei gen und tan zen...

pp *cresc.*

f *ff* L.H.

ex. 1-18b Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, Elektra tells Chrysothemis to “Shut up and dance!”

Had B been given the last word, or were the extreme registers reversed, the ploy would not have worked. It would then have been obvious that the C (though placed many octaves lower than its rival, in a register the ear is used to associating with the fundamental bass) was, in functional terms, making a *descent* to the tonic B as part of a “French sixth” chord (itself a decorative substitute for a very plain “Phrygian” cadence that normally identifies a dominant, not a tonic). Rather than an ending in two keys, we are dealing with a registrally distorted, interrupted, yet functionally viable cadence on B.

All right. A lot of philosophical music (like a lot of philosophy) may look like flimflam when subjected to a close grammatical analysis. But that is a logical objection, not an “esthetic” one. The effect of “polytonality,” artificial though it may be, gives the music an uncanny—that is, a “sublime”—aura in keeping with advanced contemporary views of art and its value in life. That is the effect achieved at the end of *Elektra* as well—a suitable atmosphere for the modern revival of a myth. There can’t be anything wrong with artifice in art.

Schr schnell. $\text{♩} = 108$
Allegro molto.

marcatissimo

trem.

[$\text{♩} = 92$]

p

pp

Chry. CHRYSOTHEMIS.

allmählich breiter
allargando a poco

ritard. molto

Chry. *O - rest!* *O - rest!*

[♩ = 60]

langsam [♩ = 80]
lento

Chry.

molto cresc. *ff* *ff* *fff*

mf *dim.* *f* *p*

ex. 1-19 Richard Strauss, *Elektra*, end

8m

pp

Harmonic (voice-leading) reduction

Fr 6 I ♭VI (iv₆) V

ex. 1-20 Richard Strauss, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, ending (with harmonic reduction)

Notes:

(25) Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music* (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 33.

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 35.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Richard Strauss

Elektra

HYSTERIA

Chapter: CHAPTER 1 Reaching (for) Limits

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

But now we are broaching a far more important reason why the end of *Elektra* deserves comment—one that has little or nothing to do with the artifices of musical maximalism per se, but lots to do with their pretext. Within the modernist narrative itself, the pretext of artistic innovation is always progress, liberation, and the authentic value that only the renewal of methods and resources can confer. In the case of *Elektra*, and perhaps even more in that of *Salome*, the destructive power the title characters wield over the men in their lives, read in the context of the contemporaneous social emancipation of women, is nowadays often read as a feminist allegory as well.

Yet both of Strauss's maximalist operas end with the deaths of their title characters; and in both cases these deaths were imported deaths, the product of their fin-de-siècle adaptations, not the original stories. In the Bible we do not learn of Salome's fate. It was Wilde and Wilde alone who had Herod turn to Herodias and say, "She is a monster, that daughter of yours, a monster!" before ordering his soldiers to "Kill that woman!" In Greek mythology, Electra, having expiated her father's death, married Orestes's friend Pylades and bore him two sons. It was Hofmannsthal, and Hofmannsthal alone, who had her dance so strenuously in triumph as to split a gut (or something) and fall dead in a heap. It is hard not to see these alterations as the modern authors' commentary on feminine monstrosity, and the deaths as a modern male vengeance on the threatening effigy of the emancipated—that is, newly empowered—modern female.

Voyeuristic fantasies of feminine evil were so rampant in fin-de-siècle culture that Bram Dijkstra, a professor of comparative literature, had no trouble filling a four-hundred-page book, to which he gave the title *Idols of Perversity*, with dozens of pictorial reproductions, verses, and plot summaries suggesting the extent to which the artistic maximalism of the period may have been a vicariously violent male response to the earliest stirrings of female emancipation.²⁷ The last exhibit in the book, after countless Judiths, Jezebels, and Turandots, is of course Salome, the ultimate "headhuntress," the subject (by Dijkstra's count) of ten scandalous pictures and a dozen bloodcurdling works of literature produced between 1876 and 1901. Needless to say, Des Esseintes, the outlandish hero of Huysmans's *À rebours*, found Salome as irresistible as she found John the Baptist. Contemplating the famous picture of Salome's dance by the eerie decadent painter Gustave Moreau (1826–98), he exults at seeing at last

the Salomé, weird and superhuman, he had dreamed of. No longer was she merely the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and concupiscence from an old man by the lascivious contortions of her body; who breaks the will, masters the mind of a King by the spectacle of her quivering bosoms, heaving belly and tossing thighs; she was now revealed in a sense as the symbolic incarnation of world-old Vice, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, the Curse of Beauty supreme above all other beauties by the cataleptic spasm that stirs her flesh and steels her muscles,—a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like Helen of Troy of the old Classic fables, all who come near her, all who see her, all who touch her.²⁸

Critics had already diagnosed a degree of misogyny in the operas of Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) with their wilting heroines suffering their protracted agonies. Conventional music historiography might attribute the

difference between Puccini's relatively gentle, noninnovative style, which no one would ever call maximalistic, and the furious modernistic frenzy of Strauss/Wilde and Strauss/Hofmannsthal to a difference in kind—modernist (boldly progressive, historically significant) vs. traditional (timidly backward, “unhistorical”). Yet from the point of view we are now exploring the difference might appear to be more one of degree, perhaps conditioned less by factors intrinsic to artistic media and more by matters of public and social currency.

Surely it is significant that Dijkstra's gallery of horrors contains virtually nothing by Italians. It was in the economically developed and (except for France) largely Protestant countries of northern Europe and America that the “new woman” posed the greater threat to male security and aroused the greater backlash. Consequently, it was the English, French, and German artists who invested their response to her with what Des Esseintes pinpointed as *hysteria*—a marvelously ironic term to use in this context, since its root is the Greek for uterus, so that aggressive male behavior is cast as stereotypically female. The greater social ferment produced a misogynistic response of greater vehemence, greater spite, greater ugliness, and in stylistic terms, greater novelty. Did that make it greater art?

Notes:

(27) Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

(28) Huysmans, *Against Nature*, pp. 65–66.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Satie, Debussy, Fauré, Ravel, Lili Boulanger

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

DENATURING DESIRE

*Who amongst us has not, in his ambitious days, dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose—musical without meter and without rhyme, flexible enough and sufficiently accented to correspond to the lyrical impulses of the spirit and to the undulations of the world of dreams?*¹

—Charles Baudelaire (1862)

*As to the kind of music I want to make, I would like it to be flexible enough and sufficiently accented to correspond to the lyrical impulses of the spirit and to the capriciousness of dreams.*²

—Claude Debussy (1886)

Ars gallica, the “truly French” art promised in 1871 by the Société Nationale de Musique in reaction to military humiliation at the hands of the Prussians, finally began rather bashfully to show its face toward the end of the next decade. Rather than attempt to vie with the Germans in loftiness and profundity, which merely encouraged “epigonism,” the newer French impulses were at first modest and unthreatening. They aimed at the deflation of rhetoric—an especially pointed gesture in the face of German expressive maximalism—and placed a renewed premium on immediate physical sensation.

The French composers of Strauss’s and Mahler’s generation no longer sought (or no longer said they sought) musically to embody “the Will,” as Arthur Schopenhauer would have said. Rather than use their music to represent and stimulate strong desire—for sexual union, for union with God, or for that mixture of the two known as the “erotic sublime” (less reverently, as “sacroporn”)—they sought to restore “decorative” values to a place of honor. They revived “applied” or utilitarian genres; or rather, they sought to recultivate and reanimate esthetic genres that were based on the utilitarian genres of the past. Rather than a source of power, they sought in music a source of pleasure; rather than the sublime, they sought beauty.

In short, stimulated in part by antagonism toward Germany, in part by an interest in neglected indigenous traditions, and in part by concurrent literary and painterly movements, French musicians began to cultivate a very different sort of modernism from the Germans, and a very different musical technique for embodying it. Like all modernisms, the French version was characterized by a suddenly accelerated rate of stylistic change and innovation. Like all modernisms, it was highly self-conscious, reflective, ironic, and urbane. But where the Germans sought a maximalized emotional or psychological content—which implies a maximum human and expressive “presence”—and would go on seeking it far beyond the point to which we have traced their quest so far, the French modernism that began stirring in the 1880s sought to minimize, and ideally to eliminate, everything the Germans were trying to maximize. To use a term coined around 1925 by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) to describe it in retrospect, the French modernists whom we are about to survey sought “the dehumanization of art.”³

The term can sound rather frightening at the other end of a century so full of social alienation and inhuman deeds. But as Ortega intended it, it had nothing to do with robots or concentration camps. Rather, it stood for

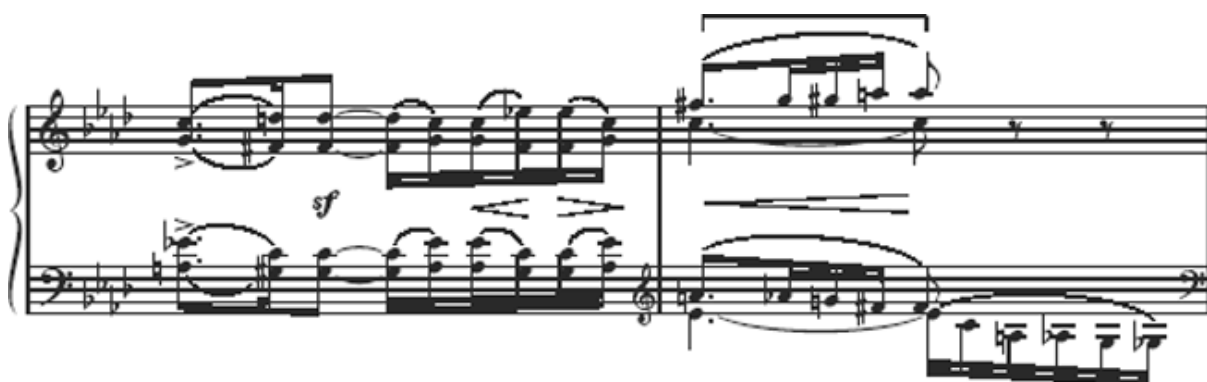
an effort to purge art of all those “human, all too human”⁴ concerns that threaten to turn it into a sweaty, warty human document of only ephemeral value (since emotions are fleeting and desire can be satiated) instead of an elegant or exquisite object of pleasure. “Frivolous!” comes the German retort; to which the French, unperturbed, come right back: “Pretentious!”

To view the opposition as a battle of frivolity vs. pretension is of course to trivialize both positions, as ideological antagonists usually manage to do. Another way of trivializing it, at once more objectionable and more illuminating because it is more alert to the underlying social issues, would be Ortega’s own way. He called the esthetic controversies he was diagnosing in retrospect a war between “two different varieties of the human species,” which he further characterized as “a privileged aristocracy of finer senses” and “the masses.”⁵ Even more contentiously, he cast the split as one between an art that denied its status as art in the name of irrelevant social ambitions or obligations and an art purified of such impertinences: “an art which can be comprehended only by people possessed of the peculiar gift of artistic sensibility—an art for artists and not for the masses, for ‘quality’ and not for *hoi polloi*.”⁶ Or as Anatoliy Lyadov, a Russian composer of the fin de siècle, put it, “Everyone is born with a stomach, but with a soul—one in a thousand.”⁷

That is going way beyond “Brahminism,” which was a staunchly bourgeois snobbery of education, into “estheticism,” a snobbery of sensibility, ultimately of breeding. The strong manner in which Ortega expressed it reflected the right-wing political attitudes of the 1920s, with their violent recoil against democratic politics. To that extent Ortega’s diagnosis can be criticized as anachronistic. But in milder, less overtly politicized terms the accuracy of Ortega’s diagnosis can be confirmed at the very earliest stages of French modernism: in particular, in a trivial musical genre that did indeed fight pretension with frivolity, and from which French modernism can fairly be said to have taken its bearings.

That genre was the Wagner satire, practiced as a conscious resistance to the dread mage of Bayreuth, even as a sort of exorcism, by a generation of French composers who were, many of them, helplessly in thrall to him in their serious work. In some cases one can juxtapose passages of serious (helpless) Wagner-imitation and frivolous (conscious) Wagner-mockery in the work of a single composer. Take Alexis-Emmanuel Chabrier (1841–94), a founding member of the Société Nationale (hence a proponent of ARS GALLICA) who nevertheless made regular pilgrimages to Bayreuth, worshipped *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, and could never get out from under Wagner’s thumb as an operatic composer. As a result, his operas have largely vanished from the stage, leaving Chabrier to be represented in active repertoire by a few piano pieces and a single orchestral work, a brilliantly scored exotic “rhapsody” called *España* (1883).

Example 2-1a, from the Entr’acte before the third act of his comic opera *Le roi malgré lui* (King in spite of Himself) shows one of the many unconscious—or even worse, perhaps, obsessive—plagiarisms from the *Tristan* prelude that haunt Chabrier’s work as they do the work of so many of his contemporaries, like César Franck (who, perhaps for this reason, stuck a “poison” label on his *Tristan* score), Vincent d’Indy (whose opera *Fervaal* became known as “the French *Parsifal*”), or Ernest Chausson. Example 2-1b/c, by contrast, show a couple of hilarious spots from Chabrier’s *Souvenirs de Munich*, a quadrille or suite of ballroom dances for piano four-hands on themes from *Tristan und Isolde*, composed in 1885–86 after one of his Wagnerian pilgrimages.



ex. 2-1a Emmanuel Chabrier, *Le roi malgré lui*, III (Entr'acte)

The image shows a musical score for Emmanuel Chabrier's *Le roi malgré lui*, III (Entr'acte). The score is for piano and is divided into two parts: Primo and Secondo. The Primo part is marked "8va" and "Primo" and features a complex, rhythmic melody in the right hand with a forte dynamic. The Secondo part is marked "Secondo" and features a more melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, also marked "f".

The image shows a musical score for the refrain of 'Souvenirs de Munich, Ecstasies' by Emmanuel Chabrier. The score is written for piano and consists of four staves. The top staff is marked '(8va)' with a dashed line, indicating an octave transposition. The music is in the key of D major and 3/4 time. The first two staves are grouped by a brace on the left, as are the last two staves. The score is divided into two measures by a vertical bar line. The first measure contains a series of chords and single notes, while the second measure features a more complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes.

ex. 2-1b Emmanuel Chabrier, *Souvenirs de Munich*, refrain (*Ecstasies*)

The image displays a musical score for Emmanuel Chabrier's "Souvenirs de Munich, Death Song". It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system features a treble clef with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking and a long, sweeping melodic line in the right hand, while the left hand plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second system continues the piece, with a dynamic marking of *8va* (octave) indicated above the treble clef, suggesting a shift in register or a specific performance instruction. The score is written in a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature.

ex. 2-1c Emmanuel Chabrier, *Souvenirs de Munich*, "Death Song"

Wagner spoofs in a similar vein were composed by Gabriel (Urbain) Fauré (1845–1924), André Messager (1853–1929), and others. They always took the form of utilitarian dance pieces, in maximum contradiction to Wagner's completely "emancipated" and "autonomous" art, and always forced Wagner's "endless melody" into incongruous clunky cadences after the standard eight or sixteen bars required by the dance figure. The sheer vengeful satisfaction of doing violence to a composer whose music takes such violent possession of one's responses no doubt contributed to the pleasure of the joke; but perhaps more significant was the reminder that even Wagner's music is, after all, just music. Putting Wagner's powerful symbols of desire into contexts where they remain recognizable but are prevented from achieving their uncanny effects reassuringly denatured them, put them in their place. And by extension, art is put in its place—as an enhancer of the quality of life, neither a vicarious lived experience nor a substitute for religion.

That may seem a heavy load of philosophical freight to read into such trifling pieces, and nothing so completely ruins a joke as an explanation, but the same homely genres and the same implicit philosophy (or antiphilosophy) surface in French music around the same time in contexts less directly attached to Wagner. Many French composers, not by conscious collusion but by a shared sense of mission, became preoccupied with similar technical concerns, amounting to a common technical project. That project can be described as one of neutralizing (or perhaps just "neutering") the Wagnerian desire-symbolism then entering its decadent phase in Germany. The overt Wagner-spoofing was only the jesting public face of a more serious job of exorcism.

To see the project in a more pristine guise we can turn to another set of dances for piano, composed the year

after Chabrier's *Souvenirs*. Erik Satie (1866–1925) was a twenty-one-year-old Paris Conservatory dropout when he wrote his *Trois sarabandes*, of which the first is sampled in Ex. 2-2. He was pursuing *la vie de Bohème*, the “Bohemian life,” in Montmartre (Martyrs' Hill), the highest point in Paris, then a semirural district where (on account of the steep slopes that had to be climbed on foot) rents were cheap and struggling artists could afford to live. The district's main industry was its nightlife, and Satie earned his living as the second-string pianist at Le Chat Noir (the Black Cat), a local pub.



fig. 2-1 Erik Satie ca. 1892, by Suzanne Valadon (1867–1938).

A complete nobody as far as the musical establishment was concerned, dubbed “the laziest student in the Conservatoire”⁸ by his exasperated piano teacher, Satie maintained some small notoriety by applying repeatedly (upon learning of the deaths of distinguished members like Charles Gounod or Ambroise Thomas, the Conservatory's director) for membership in the Académie des Beaux Arts, France's most prestigious artistic honor society, just as a way of riling the surviving members. He was, in short, a “countercultural” type. Eighty years later he might have been called a hippie.

ex. 2-2a Erik Satie, first *Sarabande* for Piano, mm. 1–21

ex. 2-2b Erik Satie, first *Sarabande* for Piano, mm. 100–end

Satie was not the first French post-Wagnerian to write a sarabande. Proclaiming one's disaffection for the "music of the future" by making an end run around the recent past was already a time-honored—even a shopworn—strategy among the would-be Wagner resisters of the Société Nationale. The Society's very first concert in 1871 had included a suite for piano by Alexis de Castillon (1838–73), the organization's first secretary, called *Cinq pièces dans le style ancien* ("Five pieces in the olden style"). By the end of the century just about every French composer had a work "dans le style ancien" in his or her portfolio: *Le roi s'amuse, six airs de danse dans le style ancien* for orchestra by Delibes (1882); *Suite dans le style ancien*, in D, for wind septet by d'Indy (1886); *Diège dans le style ancien* for piano (1893) by Cécile Chaminade (1857–1944), to

name just a few. The most famous composition of this type was Saint-Saëns's Septet for trumpet, string quintet, and piano (1881). It did not carry the explicit "olden style" label, but its contents were ostentatiously archaic: "Prélude," "Menuet," and so on, and, to conclude, a "Gavotte en final" that contained a bit of fugato, and sported a theme that parodied the sort of leaping, "string-crossing" melodies one found in old violin music (Ex. 2-3).

ex. 2-3 Camille Saint-Saëns, Septet for trumpet, string quintet, and piano, "Gavotte en final"

Satie's *Trois sarabandes* differed from these efforts, however. While faithfully cast in old "baroque" dance forms (two or three repeated "strains," with repetitions fully if needlessly written out rather than marked with repeat signs), their musical style was at once more up-to-date and more pseudoarchaic, showing how notions of the ancient and the ultranovel had been joined in an anti-Wagnerian amalgam. The latest novelty in French music was the "consonant" seventh or ninth chord, in which tones normally treated as dissonances in need of resolution functioned instead as sensuous enrichments of an ordinary triad. Chabrier's music, especially, luxuriated in this effect. A passage from the prelude to *Le roi malgré lui* (Ex. 2-4), first performed in May 1887, echoes clearly in the opening phrases of Satie's first Sarabande, composed four months later.

ex. 2-4 Emmanuel Chabrier, *Le roi malgré lui*, Prelude

The second chord in the Chabrier passage contains a ninth that is both approached and quitted by leaps, and a seventh that is approached and quitted by chromatic inflection rather than actual resolution to a different scale degree. In the fourth measure, a dominant-ninth chord on C# moves in strict parallel motion to another chord of identical structure, showing the sevenths and ninths to be (functionally speaking) every bit as consonant as the thirds and fifths; and the insouciance with which Chabrier continues the parallel fifths and sevenths through another progression shows to what extent he conceived of his harmonies as sheer "sonorities," altogether apart from any vestige of linear voice leading.

The chords themselves may be regarded as "Wagnerian"; the love music from *Tristan und Isolde*, to pick

only the most obvious example, is saturated with them. But the whole point of Wagnerian harmony was the prolongation of dissonance to the point of pain—a pain arising precisely out of the thwarted need for resolution. Moving such chords in parallel à la Chabrier, or leaping from ninth to ninth, denies and eventually neutralizes this need. As formerly dissonant chords become consonant through such uses (or abuses, as any conservatory professor would contend), the “cadential imperative” is weakened—and with it, the power of music to represent desire.

The closest antecedent to Chabrier’s passage was not in Wagner but in the Coronation bells from Modest Musorgsky’s opera *Boris Godunov*, where the oscillation of two dominant-seventh chords with roots a tritone apart effectively cancelled the need for that tritone to resolve. It is altogether likely that Chabrier’s harmonic fancy had been stimulated by Musorgsky’s experiments. Saint-Saëns had brought back a vocal score of *Boris Godunov* from a Russian tour in 1874, and thinking it no more than a curiosity, showed it around to his friends, some of whom it unexpectedly captivated with its revelation that there could still be music that was neither Wagnerian nor anti-Wagnerian, but simply a-Wagnerian. Satie stands in this line of reception. Every chord in the first seven measures of Ex. 2-2a contains at least a seventh, and five of them contain a ninth as well. But not one of these intervals resolves according to traditional rules of voice leading. They are harmonically stable, making the music they inhabit harmonically static.

The B $\flat\flat$ major chord in m. 8 is the first unsullied triad in the Sarabande. That must be what gives it its cadential quality. Surely it is not the progression that leads to it that marks it so. The bass moves by fifth, all right, but the leading tone—it would have been A \flat rather than A $\flat\flat$ —has been suppressed. At a time when German composers were making a fetish out of half-step relations, and when (in the sarcastic words of a Russian critic) a character in an opera “cannot ask for a glass of water without using a fistful of sharps or flats,”⁹ this French composer was purging his music of functional semitones. In effect, he was ridding his music of its harmonic glue.

Of course, sharps and flats remained in use: depending on the key, they are needed for diatonic as well as chromatic music. And as sheer notational features—rather than emblems of emotional intensity, as the Russian critic implied—they proliferated outlandishly in these early works of Satie. Satie’s penchant for overly complicated note-spellings is probably best viewed as an aspect of the preference for the esoteric and the *recherché* that we have already learned to associate with “decadence.”

But the truly subversive aspect of the Sarabande was not the superficial outlandishness of its appearance. The truly ticklish thing about it was that all of its important cadential functions have been tonally denatured. The dominant triad in m. 20, the normal “binary” half-cadence, is preceded by a B \flat -minor triad: merely a “ii” chord rather than a “V of V.” The final cadence in the piece (Ex. 2-2b) very demonstratively replaces the leading tone (G in m. 100) with a “flat seventh” (G \flat in m. 101, held over in the next bar as the third of a minor-seventh chord on the fifth degree) that maintains the ban on leading-tone resolutions (and hence the suppression of a true dominant function) to the bitter end.

This kind of harmony was often described as “modal” and compared with that of the French music of the sixteenth century and earlier—a music that just then, and not at all by coincidence, was starting to be published in quantity, especially by Satie’s contemporary the nationalistic antiquarian Henry Expert (1863–1952) in a huge series called *Les maîtres musiciens de la Renaissance* (“The master musicians of the Renaissance”). In fact, however, it was only a pseudomodal style and it was altogether modern. (It, too, had a Russian counterpart in the folk song harmonizations of Balakirev and other Russian nationalists; what Balakirev sought among the peasantry the French were seeking in their musical past—namely, novelty that could claim the pedigreed authority of “authenticity.”) In actual practice, even when the “medieval” or “church” mode in which a piece of old polyphonic music was written contained no leading tone, the leading tone was nevertheless supplied at cadences, just as it is in the modern “harmonic minor,” by applying the rules of what was known as *musica ficta*. The chaste, charmingly antiquated cadences of Balakirev and Satie conformed to no ancient model. They were a classic case indeed (or, as it came to be called, a “neoclassic” case) of the new passing itself off as old. And for a final irony, this newly manufactured “modal” harmony was quickly and widely adopted as the “authentic” French manner of harmonizing the newly revived and nonularized Gregorian chant

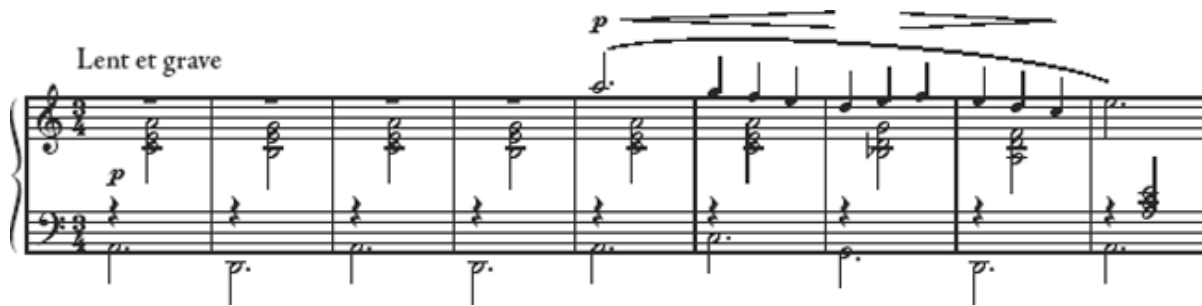
The stable sevenths and ninths and the “modal” cadences in Satie’s Sarabande were two aspects of a single effect, that of purging the music of desire. The leading-tone progressions that filled German music with emotional strain, and that were proliferating like kudzu in the music of Mahler and Strauss, were inhibited in the new French music just as the harmonic texture was being enriched. Where the maximalism of Mahler and Strauss gave one a case—as Strauss’s father complained, according to his son’s famous boast—of bugs in one’s pants, the sonorously opulent yet harmonically inert atmosphere of the Sarabandes “imbue the music,” in the well-chosen words of Alan M. Gillmor, Satie’s biographer, “with a timeless calm.”¹⁰

Satie’s next step was to purge the music of that rich harmonic texture and rely on the suppression of leading tones to make possible a “new diatonicism”—music that despite (or even because of) the virtual absence of sharps and flats seemed not merely artless but strangely fresh and rare, as if stripped of memory. What became Satie’s most famous composition, the *Trois gymnopédies* for piano (1888), was of this type. The curious name was another pseudoclassical affectation. Satie probably found it in a popular music dictionary of the time, such as Dominique Mondo’s *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris, 1839), which defined *gymnopédie* (from the Greek *gymnopaídia*) as “a nude dance, accompanied by song, which youthful Spartan maidens danced on specific occasions.” (The definition has been traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Dictionnaire de musique* of 1768.) The slow waltzes that Satie came up with in response to this description surely bore scant resemblance to any ancient model, but they bequeathed a minor genre to later composers (Peggy Glanville-Hicks and John Adams, to name two) who have occasionally written “gymnopédies” on the Satie model.

All three *Gymnopédies* begin with “vamps”—accompaniments awaiting their tunes—consisting of a pair of chords in a simple alternation suggesting tonic and dominant (Ex. 2-5). In all three cases, however, the tonal “functionality” of the progression is attenuated. In the first, the two harmonies are both “major-seventh” chords, so that a constant level of mild “stable dissonance” is maintained. In the second, the ostensible “I” chord has a sixth (E) in place of its fifth (D), and the ostensible “V” is a minor seventh, stripped of its leading tone (hence of its potency as a dominant). In the third, if the first chord is taken as the tonic, the second can only be construed as some sort of weird “minor (hence not a true dominant), devoid of a leading tone and with its seventh in the bass.

ex. 2-5a Erik Satie, *Trois gymnopédies*, no. 1, mm. 1–8

ex. 2-5b Erik Satie, *Trois gymnopédies*, no. 2, mm. 1–8



ex. 2-5c Erik Satie, *Trois gymnopédies*, no. 3, mm. 1–8

By the time the tune enters in the third *Gymnopédie*, the second vamping chord is abandoned, to return only at other vamping spots (one in the middle, the other at the end). It is thus exposed as a completely arbitrary sonority without any “inherent” or mandated tonal function. Just as arbitrary is the occasional light chromaticism that impinges from time to time on the strictly diatonic melody. And so, the composer seems to suggest, so are all of our familiar chords, even the ones we consider basic to our “tonal system.” We respond to their functional relationships only because we are conditioned so to do. But we could free ourselves from that conditioning if we wished, and view the field of harmony afresh. Gentle and pretty—and innocuous—though they seemed, Satie’s little dances for piano were radical stuff. They already fully exemplified the esthetic position that Ortega, the later theorist of the avant-garde, would spell out in the 1920s in his famous “seven points.”¹¹ Rather than attempting to provide its audience with a vicarious emotional or spiritual life, the ascetic “new artistic sensibility” Ortega described tended:

- 1. to dehumanize art
- 2. to avoid living forms
- 3. to see to it that the work of art is nothing but a work of art
- 4. to consider art as play and nothing else
- 5. to be essentially ironical
- 6. to beware of sham and hence to aspire to scrupulous realization
- 7. to regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence.

When one considers that these early benchmarks of anti-Teutonic modernism were written ten years before the death of Brahms, Satie’s little *Sarabandes* and *Gymnopédies* can seem, despite their primitive innocence bordering on infantilism, positively amazing.

Notes:

(1) Charles Baudelaire to Arsène Houssaye; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Pléiade, 1956), p. 291.

(2) Claude Debussy to Eugène Vasnier, 19 October 1885; quoted in Stefan Jarocinski, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism*, trans. Rollo Myers (London: Eulenburg Books, 1976), p. 172n50.

(3) Cf. José Ortega y Gasset, *La Deshumanización del arte e Ideas sobre la novela* (Madrid: Revista del Occidente, 1925).

(4) Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*, trans. Helene Weyl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 12

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

(7) Quoted in Andrey Nikolayevich Rimsky-Korsakov, "Lichnost' Lyadova," *Muzikal'nïy sovremennik*, Vol. II, no. 1 (September 1916), p. 33.

(8) Alan M. Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 10.

(9) Vladimir F. Odoyevsky, *Literaturno-muzikal' noye naslediyе* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1956), p. 343.

(10) Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, p. 37.

(11) Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*, p. 14.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Erik Satie

Claude Debussy

Prelude: From 1800

HALF-STEPLESSNESS

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

But that is mainly because we know now how influential Satie's subversive message eventually became, and what an important role these seemingly dehistoricized pieces eventually played in history. It took them a long time, though, to infiltrate the thinking of any but a narrow circle of the composer's friends. Although written in 1887, the Sarabandes were not published until 1911. The *Gymnopédies* were issued in a tiny edition by a friend of the composer in the year of their composition, but were not effectively placed on the market until 1898; and when they were finally published for actual market distribution, they were accompanied by a pair of orchestrations (of nos. 1 and 3) by a friend of the composer who had in the meantime become famous and fashionable, and who thereby became the chief conduit through which the implications of Satie's somewhat awkward "counterculturalisms" made fruitful contact with the established culture.

It was a situation comparable in its way to the one three hundred years earlier, when a band of Florentine aristocrats theorized about the revival of Greek drama, and even tried putting their ideas into practice at a few royal weddings, but only made a real dent in the history of music when they won a major professional composer, Claudio Monteverdi, to their cause and midwived the birth of opera. In a like manner, had Satie not managed to impress and creatively affect the work and thinking of his friend Claude Debussy (1862–1918), a composer of prodigiously honed technique who had finished the Conservatory course with distinction and won every prize in sight, and who (though he never taught) occupied a place of real and increasing cultural authority in French musical life, his work might never have been taken seriously at all.



fig. 2-2 Claude Debussy at the piano in the home of the composer Ernest Chausson, Luzancy, August 1892.

It was Debussy whose 1896 orchestrations of the *Gymnopédies* put their composer on the map. And a *Sarabande* that he composed in 1894, later published as part of the *Suite: Pour le piano 1894–1901* (1901), shows that he knew Satie's *Trois sarabandes* at a time when only a personal friend of the composer could have known them. Their friendship dates from 1891, though an earlier acquaintanceship has often been speculated on, since they had so much background in common. Both of them were living in penury in Montmartre, Debussy having returned a few years earlier from Italy, where he had been sent by the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1885 as the recipient of the prestigious Prix de Rome. He began playing the rebel, refusing to supply a conventional overture for the concert at which his *envois* (things sent back), the creative fruits of his Roman sojourn, were to have been performed, as a result of which the concert was canceled and he was officially reprimanded. He found in the somewhat younger Satie a natural ally and, at first, something of a preceptor.

Debussy, who had spent several summers in Russia as music tutor to the children of Mme von Meck, Chaikovsky's patron, began to declare his allegiance to Russian music, especially that of Musorgsky, as representing in its unschooled (and therefore liberated) primitivism a countercultural ideal. (As late as 1911 he would tell an interviewer that Musorgsky, uncouth as he was, was "something of a god in music."¹²) In conversations with a sympathetic former professor from the Conservatory that took place in 1889 and 1890 and were transcribed stenographically by an eavesdropping Conservatory pupil, Debussy delivered himself of a brash countercultural credo: "There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law!"¹³ He illustrated the point at the keyboard with some desultory chord progressions (Ex. 2-6) that used some of the same parallelisms he would shortly discover in the work of Satie, plus a passage of whole-tone harmony of a sort that he may well have discovered first in Russian music (most likely Glinka or Rimsky-Korsakov), where it had by 1889 nearly half a century's worth of precedents. (It is worth noting by the way that, precisely in

1889, Rimsky-Korsakov had conducted a pair of concerts of the newest Russian music at the World Exposition held in Paris to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution.)



ex. 2-6 “Debussy at the piano strikes these chords” (comment by Maurice Emmanuel, the stenographer)

When his interlocutor, Ernest Guiraud (best known for the recitatives he composed for Bizet’s *Carmen* so that it could be performed as a grand opera), commented that “It’s all very meandering,” Debussy at first responded with patronizing indignation. But then, as if remembering Ortega’s last three points above, he broke down and laughed at his own pretension, admitting in effect that esthetic edicts like the ones he was issuing were as often spouted by fools as by geniuses. “I feel free because I have been through the mill,” he admitted to his former teacher, “and I don’t write in the fugal style because I know it.”

The 1894 Sarabande (Ex. 2-7), composed when he had a model in view (Satie’s), shows how Debussy was attempting to discipline his vision and subject his rule of pleasure to a bit of theoretical scrutiny. The piece does not meander. Like Satie’s, it abides by the formal and tonal conventions of its genre, but does so in the same novel, tonally attenuated fashion that Satie had pioneered, if with far greater technical finesse.

From the point of view of Wagner exorcism, the first measure of Debussy’s Sarabande would be hard to beat. Its very first chord, a half-diminished seventh, is aurally tantamount to a *Tristan*-chord; but its dissonances are not treated as something to be resolved. Instead, the chord is moved up a minor third in strict diatonic parallel motion to a minor-seventh chord, whose dissonances are treated similarly. In effect, both chords have been treated as consonances, floating freely in musical space, liberated from the constraints of voice leading. There is no sense that the necessary resolution of the dissonance is being deferred, and consequently there is no provocation of desire. In Ortega’s terms, the chords are drained of their “human” content. The harmony no longer analogizes or incites emotion, save the emotion of delight in sheer sensuous gratification. Debussy has “seen to it that the work of art is nothing but a work of art,” because he “considers art as play and nothing else.” Beauty, in short, has made a comeback.

Thereafter, one will look in vain for the dominant of C# minor—which is to say, one will look in vain for a B# acting as a leading tone. That half-step relation, being the sort of harmonic “glue” that arouses desire, is everywhere avoided. In mm. 2 and 4 the “minor v” is invoked. In m. 8 a triad on B natural fairly trumpets the

fact that B# has been banished. In mm. 20–22 harmony is avoided altogether, and the cadential approach to C# is made by way of a “plagal” F#. At the very end (Ex. 2-7b), a chord that would normally be prepared and resolved as a suspension dissonance—its intervals, counted up from the bottom in figured-bass style, could be represented as 7/5/4—is thrice transposed up a third in strict parallel motion, so as to reach a highly demonstrative B natural (i.e., *not* a B#) in the soprano, which then moves in Satie-esque “pseudomodal” fashion to the tonic.

Ex. 2-7c shows the only fully expressed authentic cadence in the piece, replete with resolving leading tone (and hence the emotional climax). Needless to say, it is not applied to the tonic but to G# minor, the antidominant.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The key signature is G# minor (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The first system (mm. 20-22) shows chords with triplets and a dynamic marking of 'p'. The second system (mm. 23-25) features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, with a dynamic marking of 'p'. The third system (mm. 26-28) continues the melodic and harmonic development, ending with a cadence in G# minor, marked with a dynamic of 'p'.

ex. 2-7a Claude Debussy, Sarabande from *Pour le piano*, mm. 1–22

ex. 2-7b Claude Debussy, Sarabande from *Pour le piano*, mm. 67–72

ex. 2-7c Claude Debussy, Sarabande from *Pour le piano*, mm. 54–57

For a “maximalized” version of the harmonic idiom exemplified by Satie’s and Debussy’s Sarabandes, a good place to look would be a celebrated piano piece of Debussy’s composed a decade and a half later: “Voiles” (1909), the second in a set of twelve *Préludes* for piano published in 1910 (Ex. 2-8). The idea of a set of freestanding preludes, independent aphoristic compositions for the keyboard, obviously stems from Chopin, a composer Debussy worshipped and claimed as a forerunner. Unlike Chopin’s, Debussy’s preludes carry descriptive subtitles; but unlike most titles, Debussy’s are given not at the heads of the pieces, but at the

ends, modestly enclosed in parentheses, and preceded by dots of ellipsis, as if to demote them to the rank of whispered interpretive suggestions or “teasers,” rather than explicit prescriptions. In the case of “Voiles,” the teasing is exaggerated by the ambiguity of the word. “Le voile,” with masculine article, means “veil” or “mask”; “la voile,” with feminine article, means “sail” or “sailboat.” In the plural, the word can mean either.

Modéré (♩ = 88)
(Dans un rythme sans rigueur et caressant.)

p très doux

pp expressif

pp toujours *pp*

très doux

ex. 2-8a Claude Debussy, “Voiles” (Préludes, Book I), mm. 1–13

Leaving the implications of the title aside for the moment, we are struck by a different sort of ambiguity. The first forty-one measures of the piece are composed entirely out of the notes of a whole-tone scale, which excludes half-steps by definition (except for a single tiny whiff of decorative chromaticism shown in Ex. 2-8b), and which therefore has no degree functions at all. (It cannot have them: the degree functions in diatonic music are identified by the placement of the half-steps; when all the step intervals are of equal size, degrees cannot be meaningfully differentiated.) Previously to this piece, whole-tone harmony had functioned in Debussy’s music the way it had in Russian music: that is, in interaction with diatonic harmony, creating momentary blurs. Now it is the sole point of reference.



ex. 2-8b Claude Debussy, “Voiles” (*Préludes*, Book I), m. 31

As long as all the notes in play are derived from a single whole-tone scale (or “collection,” which just means a referential set of pitches whether or not they are played in a particular order), there can be no sense at all of harmonic progression. There is nothing to establish “attraction” between the harmonic elements: neither circle-of-fifth progressions nor leading tones are possible, since the collection contains neither perfect intervals (except the octave) nor half steps. Instead, everything coexists in relative harmoniousness, and in what seems a single extended instant of time. Debussy accentuates the static quality of the harmony, and at the same time gives it an anchor of sorts, by accompanying the whole piece (from m. 5 on) with a B \flat pedal. A sense of unfolding is achieved not through harmonic variety (which is unavailable) but by an accumulation of melodic ideas (or motifs) in counterpoint.

Slightly past the middle a radical change takes place (Ex. 2-8c): a key signature of five flats suddenly appears, and the whole-tone collection gives way to a “pentatonic” one, the familiar scale on the piano’s black keys. The ear is refreshed. Since the pentatonic scale, like the diatonic scale, has intervals of two different sizes (whole steps and minor thirds), the harmony seems to come into sharper focus. But harmonic functions nevertheless remain in abeyance, since the pentatonic collection has the crucial element of “half-steplessness” in common with its whole-tone counterpart: in more formal terminology, both scales are *anhemitonic*, lacking in semitones. The two collections have three tones in common—evidently the criterion governing their choice—and the B \flat pedal sounds right on through the new section. Sensuous values have been varied; functional or syntactical matters remain more or less as they were.

ex. 2-8c Claude Debussy, “Voiles” (*Préludes*, Book I), mm. 41–48

When the whole-tone collection is reasserted (see the last measure of Ex. 2-8c), a new motif is introduced that imitates the foregoing black-key glissandos and provides a sort of synthesis to mediate and soften the contrast between the two previous sections of the piece. The melodic content of the first section is recapitulated, but in a new registral disposition: whole-tone counterpoint is inherently “invertible.” The very end of the piece is somewhat enigmatic. The B \flat pedal falls out three bars before the end, and the closing harmony (the dyad C/E, first heard in m. 5), while perhaps not predictable, and while impossible to justify as a conventional tonic, nevertheless seems right. Why? Possibly because of the way it had ended the first melodic statement, before the pedal had been introduced; or possibly because it provided the midpoint (that is, the axis of symmetry) in the initial scalar descent through which the whole-tone collection had been introduced at the very outset (mm. 1–2). In an altogether new and literal sense, the dyad C/E may be said to act as a *tone center*.

That is probably the best explanation—or at least the “right” one in terms of the composer’s actual technique. Increasingly drawn to symmetrical pitch collections (that is, collections that may be represented, as in Ex. 2-9, by scales that are intervallically identical when inverted), Debussy came increasingly to regard the middle of such an array as its most stable element. We will confirm this observation in a moment by examining another piece, but first let us return to the curious title of Debussy’s prelude and its implications.

Notes:

(19) “La Musique Russe et les Compositeurs Français,” *Excelsior* (9 March 1911); quoted in Malcolm H

Brown, "Modest Petrovich Musorgsky, 1881–1981," in *Musorgsky: In Memoriam 1881–1981*, ed. M. H. Brown (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 4.

(13) Quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, Vol. I (London: Cassell, 1962), p. 208.

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Claude Debussy

Impressionism

IMPRESSIONISM

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

If *voiles* is taken to mean “sails,” Debussy’s music can seem “painterly”—that is, concerned in its subtly calibrated timbres (=colors) and blurry harmony with depictions of outdoor scenes or, more generally, with establishing correspondences between the aural and the visual. That is how many viewed him during his lifetime. As early as 1887, the term “Impressionism” was applied to his music, on an analogy with the famous school of French painters that had begun to flourish somewhat earlier, and which took its name from a painting by Claude Monet (1840–1926) called *Impression: Sunrise*, first exhibited in 1872 (Fig. 2-3).

The image displays four musical staves, each illustrating a different symmetrical scale. The first staff shows a whole tone scale with intervals of M2. The second staff shows a pentatonic scale with intervals of M2 and m3. The third staff shows a scale with alternating M2 and m3 intervals. The fourth staff shows a scale with intervals of M2 and a final (b) interval.

ex. 2-9 Whole tone and pentatonic collections represented as symmetrical scales



fig. 2-3 Claude Monet, *Impression: Sunrise* (1872), the painting that gave impressionism its name.

Like many style-identifying terms in the history of the arts (such as “baroque,” to pick the most widely accepted example), “impressionism” was at first a pejorative label. Certainly the critic who coined the term in response to Monet’s painting meant it as no compliment. Misunderstanding the intention, which was to capture transitory visual impressions (such as the play of light on a surface) naturalistically and with extreme precision, the critic implied that the broken colors and indistinct outlines in Monet’s painting were the result of sloppy technique. Similarly, the secretary of the Académie des Beaux Arts, who first applied the term to Debussy in evaluating the latter’s second *envoi* from Rome (a suite called *Le Printemps* or “Springtime,” for a wordlessly humming women’s chorus and orchestra), used it as a synonym for what he took to be the young Debussy’s chief liability: “a strong feeling for color in music which, when exaggerated, causes him to forget the importance of clarity in design and form.”¹⁴ Not surprisingly, Debussy found the word annoying, “a convenient term of abuse,”¹⁵ or at least (like any stereotype) a term of confinement. One did not use it to his face. But as in the case of the artists, the term “stuck” despite their resistance, and eventually lost its disapproving connotation. Instead, it came to name a quality that did seem to link the expressive aims of the new styles in French painting and music, and (perhaps even more important at the time) that strongly distinguished them from contemporaneous trends in Germany. The common ingredients, which critics have always found hard to specify in words however keenly they are “felt,” might be said to include such things as calculated effects of spontaneity; fascination with subtle gradations in color and texture that produced a nebulous, highly suggestive surface; and a greater interest in sensuousness than in psychology or strongly declared emotion. (Naturally, all of these traits could be easily translated into failings by German or Germanophile critics: vagueness, confusion, lack of expressivity.)

Even the strikingly static effect of Debussy’s harmony—the absence of “progression” or forward drive that we have already observed—could be viewed as “painterly,” an effort to lessen the discrepancy between an art that unfolds in time and one that extends in space. His frequent use of visually-oriented titles like “Voiles”—its

companions in the first book of *Préludes* include “Les collines d’Anacapri” (“The Hills of Anacapri”) and “Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest” (“What the West Wind Saw”)—confirm the parallel. The second book of *Préludes* (published 1913) include a couple—“Bruyères” (“Mists”) and “Feuilles mortes” (“Dead Leaves”)—that almost seem to parody the titles of typical “impressionist” paintings.

Most revealing of all, perhaps, is the absence of people, or rather of personalities, among Debussy’s subjects. One finds representations aplenty in his music of the sea, of the wind, of gardens in the rain and balconies in the moonlight, but of humans few unless viewed *en masse* and from afar (“Fêtes,” or festivals, one of three *Nocturnes* for orchestra completed in 1899), or unless mythical (fauns, sirens), artificial (“Golliwogg,” his daughter’s Negro doll, portrayed in his *Childrens’ Corner* suite for piano), or already embodied in art (“Danseuses de Delphes” or Delphic dancers, the first of the *Préludes*, which title evokes not the dancers themselves but the Greek vase on which they are painted). His landscapes are uninhabited, even if they bear traces of former habitation, as in “Des pas sur la neige” (“Footprints in the snow,” yet another *Prélude*). In sum, like impressionist painting, Debussy’s art was not an art of empathy. Music, he felt, was “not the expression of feeling but the feeling itself.”

He scoffed at “expressive” art like Italian opera, comparing it with the cheap music one heard in the streets. “There you can have your emotions-in-melody for a couple of sous!”¹⁶ he exclaimed in 1902, while his own sole completed opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, was being readied for the stage. Instead, like the painter Elstir, the fictional stand-in for Monet in Marcel Proust’s massive retrospective novel *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–20), Debussy aspired “to accustom his eyes not to recognize any fixed frontier, or absolute division between earth and ocean on a day when light had, as it were, destroyed reality,” thus to capture “boats [i.e., *voiles*] as if vaporized by an effect of sunlight,” or “churches that, seen from afar in a shimmering haze of sunlight and waves, seem to rise out of the water, as if molded in alabaster or foam, and enclosed within the arc of a multicolored rainbow, forming a picture of mysterious unreality.”¹⁷ Amazingly enough (or so it would seem had Proust not known it all along), Debussy actually called one of his *Préludes* “La cathédrale engloutie” (“The submerged cathedral”).

This side of Debussy is epitomized in *Nuages* (“Clouds”), the first of the orchestral *Nocturnes*. To speak of illustration would be futile: what do clouds sound like? Everything is suggestion, analogy, *impression*—of shifting shapes, darkening or lightening, perhaps at the very end some distant thunder in the timpani (in homage, no doubt, to the middle movement of Berlioz’s seventy-year-old *Symphonie fantastique*).

As is often the case with Debussy, the overall musical shape is simple and conventional: an ordinary ABA, articulated by a modulation (from two to six sharps and back again). Tonally, however, the music is as unconventional as can be. The only “normally” (if weakly) articulated cadence in it is the one between the first and second measures (Ex. 2-10a), in which a leading tone (A#) is applied to B to establish it at the outset as the tonic. The fact that only two voices (doubled pairs of clarinets and bassoons) are in play eliminates the possibility of full triads here: thus the single unambiguous tonal gesture is characteristically attenuated, stripped down to a minimum (or what some might consider not even the minimum), reduced, in short, to a fleeting “impression.”



ex. 2-10a Claude Debussy, *Nuages*, mm. 1–3

ex. 2-10b Claude Debussy, *Nuages*, mm. 5–10

Beginning in m. 5 (Ex. 2-10b), the tonic note is given two mysterious shadows: first a G that sounds continuously, albeit in fluctuating colors (clarinet/bassoon, flute/horn, violins *divisi*) over the next four measures, and then an F that is introduced by an arching phrase in the English horn that falls back to B (mm. 5–8), but that is later reinforced by the two bassoons at the octave (mm. 7–8). Under normal “tonal” conditions, the three notes thus implicated, G-B-F, would constitute a dissonant harmony (“incomplete dominant seventh”) in need of resolution. Here, factors of timbre and register conspire to promote a sense of unperturbable calm that overrides the impulse to resolve. Parts of the configuration come and go. On the downbeat of m. 7 all three notes are present (plus a C#—notated, of course, as G#—in the English horn to provide a momentary whiff of “French sixth”).

The kettledrum has stolen in to reinforce the tonic B in the bass, however; and the first violins have stolen in with the same note at the opposite registral extreme. B thus dominates the chord, even though it is not, by standard reckoning, the functional root. After the downbeat of m. 8 the F is “cleared” from the chord; and on the next downbeat the G cleared, not by removing it altogether, but by nudging it up to G#. That is obviously no cadential half-step, just an inflection or “tilt” away from G-ness so that B can be left to continue undisturbed in m. 10. There has been no “tonal motion” at all—just a sort of tonal inertia or lethargy that

pulls everything back to B.

Following the English horn part through the entire composition will put another kind of Debussyan inertia on display. The English horn's second entrance is identical to the first. And so is the third, except that the C# has been replaced by a grace-note D. That is all the variation that will be allowed, however: the next time it comes in, the English horn will repeat the same pair of variants: just as the second solo exactly reproduced the first, so the fifth exactly reproduces the fourth. Toward the end, the English horn plays a series of "petites reprises" (as French composers had been calling them since the seventeenth century) of the last three (cadential?) notes of its characteristic phrase. And its last solo exactly reproduces its whole vocabulary—two variants, *petites reprises*, and all.

The English horn music, in other words, has been *hypostatized*, to use a term (from the Greek *hypostasis*, "substance" or "essence") that music analysts sometimes employ to call attention to an unchanging association of pitch, register, and timbre that remains constant throughout a piece. To put the matter more in structural terms, one could also say that the tritone F-B has been hypostatized in the English horn music, thus freezing into a constant one of the "shadow" pitches noted near the beginning of the piece. That shadowing effect, which became increasingly prominent in early-twentieth-century music, often involved the tritone, the interval that exactly bisects the octave. It is the "first cut," so to speak, if one wishes to apportion the notes of the chromatic scale into a symmetrical, rather than a tonally functional, distribution. The notes in a bare tritone (which when inverted remains a tritone) cannot be functionally differentiated. What gives B its de facto priority in the texture of *Nuages* is not its tonal function but its registral and timbral predominance.

Eventually, B is given a sort of functional priority as well, but it is the new kind of functional priority foreshadowed in our discussion of "Voiles," above. Right before the "B" section, Debussy allows the harmonic focus to go "soft," first by interpolating a string of parallel chords, and then by calling in the whole-tone scale, expressed "maximalistically" as a six-note chord (also describable as a pair of simultaneous augmented triads) that exhausts the whole collection. The effect might be compared with that of a little breeze that nudges the sonic clouds into a new region of the aural sky.

That region (Ex. 2-10c) is D# minor, the key whose tonic lies the same distance from B (a major third) as did G, its "shadow" in the first section of the piece, but in the opposite "direction." Like the C/E dyad at the end of "Voiles," B has been located at the center of a symmetrically apportioned tonal space. Counting by semitones, that apportionment could be represented abstractly as 0 4 8. Any of the three functional tones—B, G, D#—could be conceptualized as "zero," in which case the other two will occupy the remaining positions. The reasons for regarding B as the "zero pitch" or "center tone" include (once again) its timbral and registral prominence; the fact that it was established first (and also—to peek at the end—sounded last), and is frequently held out in lengthy pedal points; and the fact that it participates in two symmetrical apportionments: the 0 4 8/with G and D# just traced, and the /0 6 octave-bisecting tritone relationship with F, periodically invoked by the English horn (and frequently seconded by the horns).

Fl. *Un peu animé*
1

Cl. *très expressif*

Bsn. *pp*

Hp. *pp*

Vln. I *pp*

Vln. II *pp*

Vla. *pp*

Vc. *pp*

Cb. *pp*

ex. 2-10c Claude Debussy, *Nuages*, mm. 64–68

p *più p* *pp*

ex. 2-10d Claude Debussy, *Nuages*, mm. 82–83 (third horn); mm. 86–87 (oboe)

An especially subtle touch is the oboe part in Ex. 2-10d. Clearly an imitation (or transposition) of the horn tritones in mm. 82–83, it has the effect of surrounding B with D and G \sharp , pitches a minor third away on either side. In other words, the major-third shadowing of B (with D \sharp and G) has been shrunk by a semitone, but with B still located at the center, as if “zeroing in.” Rather than a strong progression toward B, in which B is perceived as an object of active desire, the zeroing-in technique establishes B as the fulcrum of a static tonal

equilibrium, evocative not of the high-strung striving of contemporary German music, but of a sublime immobility (Ex. 2-11).

English horn throughout

Oboe at m.86

"shadow"

axis

tonic at m.64

Intervals from B: 6 4 3 | 3 4 6
(expressed in semitones)

ex. 2-11 Zeroing in on the tone center in Claude Debussy *Nuages*

The tonality of the middle section (Ex. 2-10c) is colored by the use of pentatonic melody—or (as mentioned in connection with “Voiles”) a melody drawn from an “anhemitonic” pitch collection, to call it by a name that keeps in mind its status as a “half-stepless” counterpart to (and tonal coconspirator with) the whole-tone scale—and also by the use of “modal” chord progressions. The minor triad heard at the outset is qualified as the tonic of “D# Dorian” at the end of the third measure, when it proceeds to a major subdominant chord containing B#, the “raised sixth degree.” Later on the tonic reappears in the major (respelled as E \flat in the strings), but alternates with B \flat minor (the “minor v”), which invokes the “Mixolydian” seventh degree in place of the too-focused (or too-focusing) leading tone. Harmonic focus is also avoided at the end of the piece, where no real cadence takes place, just a “liquidation” whereby significant harmony notes (the shadow G and tritone F at m. 99, plus the third of the tonic triad) simply drop out one by one, leaving B alone onstage when the curtain falls.

Notes:

(14) Report by the Permanent Secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, 1887; quoted in Jarocinski, *Debussy*, p. 11.

(15) Debussy, *Monsieur Croche Antidilettante*, trans. B. N. Langdon Davies; in *Three Classics in the Aesthetics of Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 8.

(16) Debussy, “Why I Wrote Pelléas” (1902); in *Debussy on Music*, ed. François Lesure, trans. Richard Langham Smith (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 75.

(17) Quoted in Jarocinski, *Debussy*, p. 8.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Symbolism: Numbers and music (from 1900)

Synaesthesia

Stéphane Mallarmé

Pelléas et Mélisande

SYMBOLISM

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

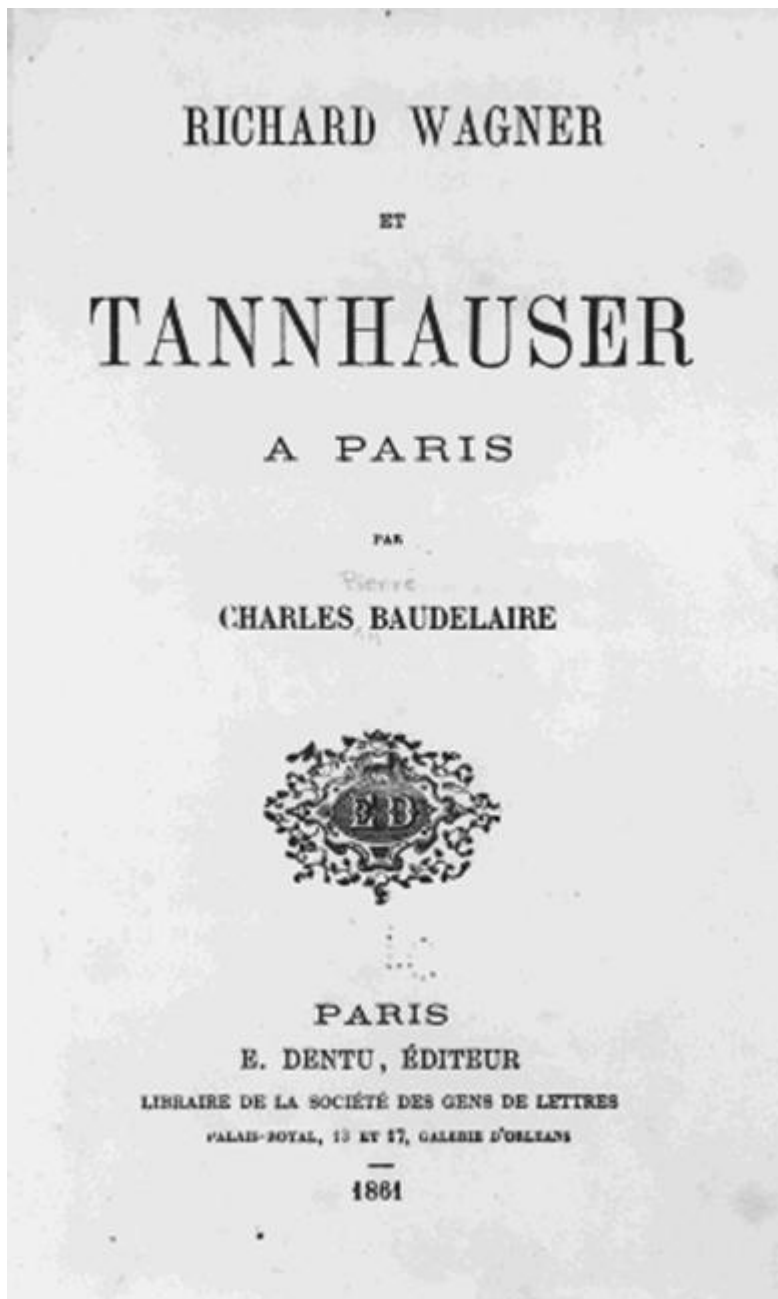


fig. 2-4 Title page of Charles Baudelaire's *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* (1861).

If, on the other hand, the word *voiles* in the title of Debussy's piano prelude is taken to mean "veils," connoting mystery and concealment, Debussy's music can seem "literary"—concerned, that is, in its reluctance to draw explicit connections or maintain a strongly linear narrative thrust, with issues being raised in the literary domain by the poets and other "littérateurs" (literary hangers-on) who belonged to the "Symbolist" school. "Symbolism" was a somewhat older movement than "impressionism" in painting. It goes back to the work of the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), the first of the "decadents" and one of the obvious models for Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans's *À rebours*, discussed in the previous chapter. Baudelaire claimed to derive his artistic ideas on the one hand from the music and writings of Richard Wagner, and on the other from the American poet and literary theorist Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49). He lived the role of decadent to the tragic hilt, dying penniless in drug-induced insanity.

All literary Symbolists agreed in tracing their movement to a specific poem of Baudelaire's, the sonnet "Correspondances," published in 1857 in a collection called *Les fleurs du mal* ("Flowers of evil," sometimes translated "Poison blossoms"):

- La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
- Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles:
- L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
- Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

- Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
- Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité
- Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
- Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se
- répondent.

- Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
- Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
- —Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

- Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
- Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
- Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

[Nature is a temple where living pillars at times send out muddled words: There, man passes through forests of symbols that watch him with familiar looks. Like long echoes that blend from afar in a deep penumbral wholeness as vast as the night and the light, aromas, colors and sounds give answer. There are aromas, cool as baby flesh, sweet as oboes, green as the fields—and others, tainted, rich and thriving, having the power of infinite expansion, like amber, musk, balsam and incense—that sing of the transports of spirit and sense.]

The crucial ideas here are two: *synesthesia*, the equivalence and interchangeability of sense experiences (the whole poem being a sort of gloss on Baudelaire's avowal that "my soul travels through scents the way the souls of others do through music"¹⁸); and the *occult* knowledge that synesthesia imparts. To see symbols in all things is to lend them a hidden meaning and (as the initial comparison of nature to a temple suggests) to approach the sensory as if it were the spiritual and vice versa. In part, Symbolism was a revival of what modern historians call the "premodern" or magical world view, an outlook that sought the hidden resemblances of all in all. As summarized by the French intellectual historian Michel Foucault, the premodern worldview and its ways of knowing

tell us how the world must fold in upon itself, duplicate itself, reflect itself, or form a chain with itself so that things can resemble one another. They tell us what the paths of similitude are and the directions they take; but not where it is, how one sees it, or by what mark it may be recognized. These buried similitudes must be indicated on the surface of things; there must be visible marks for the invisible analogies. There are no resemblances without signatures. The world of similarity can only be a world of signs¹⁹

—which is to say, of symbols. And hence the virtual obsession among symbolist artists with medieval or pseudo-medieval subjects and settings. They not only enabled but positively demanded the adoption of a magical worldview that regarded nature as a gateway to a superior reality.

Factoring Wagner (and what he had come to mean to his numberless enthusiasts) into the equation turned symbolism into a universal “musicalization” of experience, for the relationship between the sensory and the spiritual was strongest in music, where the presence of conceptual objects (concrete “things”) was less of an impediment to free association than in any other art, and where the experience of “objectless desire,” especially strong in Wagner, had accustomed artists to the idea that all objects of desire were interchangeable. An enthusiastic French Wagnerian, the mystical writer Edouard Schuré (1841–1929), in a typically slanted history of the “music drama” published in 1882, made the strongest case that music, by its very nature, was the art of symbolism par excellence:

If from the world of visible forms and ideas peculiar to poetry and the plastic arts we enter the world of sounds and harmony, our first impression is that of a man passing suddenly from the light into deepest darkness. In the former everything can be explained, follows logically and creates an image; in the latter everything seems to spring from unplumbed depths where darkness and mystery reign. In the one we find fixed outlines and the inflexible logic of immutable forms; in the other the flux and re-flux of a liquid element, perpetually in motion and metamorphosis, and containing an infinity of possible forms. In this impenetrable night-darkness into which music plunges us, we feel strongly the vibrations of life, but it is impossible for us to see or distinguish anything. But as the soul gradually becomes accustomed to this strange region, it begins to acquire a kind of second sight, rather like a somnambulist who, sinking deeper and deeper into his sleep, becomes submerged in his dream until real objects disappear from sight. But while the outer aspect of things is effaced, their inner content is revealed in a marvelous light.²⁰

At its most extreme and musical, then, Symbolism promised knowledge through the senses of the spiritual, or a way *via* art of seeing past the appearances of the phenomenal world into the higher reality of the *au-delà*, the world “beyond” the senses. Art or literature that drew connections too explicitly—that said what it meant and meant what it said—only set limits on its power of evocation, thus frustrating its highest potential goal, that of occult revelation. “By describing what is [and only what is], the poet degrades himself and is reduced to the rank of schoolmaster,” wrote Baudelaire; “by telling us what is possible he remains faithful to his vocation.”²¹ Or as Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98), the leading Symbolist poet of the next generation, once exclaimed when an editor complimented him on the lucidity of an essay he had just submitted, “Give it back! I need to put in more shadows.”

Now whereas drawing connections between Debussy and the impressionist painters was itself an exercise in impressionism, ringed with caveats (including the composer’s expressed discomfort with the idea), his connections with Symbolism are biographical facts of major import to the conception of many of his most significant works. The orchestral composition that won him his first *réclame*, for example, the *Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune* (Prelude to “The Afternoon of a Faun”), first performed in 1894, was inspired by (and was in some sense an interpretation of) the most famous poem of Mallarmé. Even earlier, he had composed a major song cycle, *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire* (1890), to words by the spiritual father of the Symbolist movement. As the epigraphs at the top of this chapter attest, moreover, Debussy had read his Baudelaire well, and was given to paraphrasing him when talking “esthetics.” His one completed opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, on which he worked from 1893 to 1902, was a practically verbatim setting (only slightly abridged) of what was widely taken to be the quintessential Symbolist drama, the work of Count Maurice

Maeterlinck (1862–1949), a Belgian writer who after Mallarmé's death was regarded as the movement's leader. Two other operatic projects of Debussy's—*Le diable dans le beffroi* ("The devil in the belfry"), on which he worked from 1902 to 1911, and *La chute de la maison Usher* ("The fall of the house of Usher"), on which he worked from 1908 to 1917—were based on works by Poe, Baudelaire's acknowledged mentor. The list of symbolists whose work Debussy set, or on which he contemplated basing orchestral or dramatic projects, could be extended manifold.

Pelléas et Mélisande is not only a Symbolist drama; it is a drama "about" Symbolism; and as Debussy was thrilled to realize, it is a drama about music, as Symbolists like Schuré understood it. Neither Pelléas nor Mélisande, the pair of "operatic lovers" in the title (recalling Tristan and Isolde), is the play's central character. The central character is Golaud, Pelléas's brother and Mélisande's husband, the play's tragic hero. Although left alive at the end of the drama while Pelléas and Mélisande have perished, it is Golaud who is crushed in consequence of a fatal flaw. That flaw is his inability to accept things as they are, in all their infinite mysteriousness and ambiguity, their inaccessibility to reason, their indifference to human designs.



fig. 2-5 *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 4, in the original production (Paris, Opéra Comique, 1902), as printed in the periodical *Le Théâtre*.

Incapable of accepting reality as "the flux and re-flux of a liquid element, perpetually in motion and metamorphosis, and containing an infinity of possible forms," to recall the words of Schuré, insisting rather on a realm of light and sharp outline in which "everything can be explained, follows logically and creates an image," Golaud finds himself alienated from all the other characters, who have "acquired the second sight of a somnambulist who, sinking deeper and deeper into his sleep, becomes submerged in his dream," of which the medium is music. Because of his philistine ("unmusical") insistence that things mean one thing and one thing only, and because he tries to force the world into conformity with his limited vision, Golaud becomes a destroyer, and is destroyed.

Here is a brief synopsis of the action, the paragraphs corresponding roughly to Debussy's five acts:

Out hunting, Golaud, the grandson of Arkel, king of Allemonde (a French/German pun meaning "all the world") comes upon a beautiful young woman weeping by a well. She is lost, having fled a place she will not name. Noticing her gold crown glittering in the well, Golaud makes as if to retrieve it, but she restrains him, saying she would rather die than have it back. She gives her name as Mélisande. She agrees to go with him. They marry against Arkel's wishes, but Arkel bows to the hand of fate and gives his blessing.

Pelléas, Golaud's younger brother, befriends Mélisande. Seeking relief from summer's heat one day, they stray into a shady garden containing a well. He admires her long hair, which has fallen into the well. He asks her how she met Golaud. In answer, Mélisande takes her wedding ring off her finger to show him, but, playfully tossing it in the air, loses it in the well. That night she begins to sob and asks Golaud to take her away from the castle where they live. He notices the ring missing. He questions her. She lies about its whereabouts, saying she left it in a cave. He orders her to go immediately with Pelléas to the cave and retrieve it. While in the cave, she and Pelléas are startled by the sight of a starving family.

Pelléas finds Mélisande sitting in a tower window, combing the hair he so admires and singing. He asks her to lean out so that he can see it. She leans out too far; the hair falls all over the enraptured Pelléas. Golaud discovers them. For reasons unexplained, Golaud leads Pelléas to an abandoned, stinking well in the castle basement. Emerging into the sunlight, Pelléas seeks and finds Mélisande. They sit quietly in the shade. Golaud discovers them again and orders Pelléas to leave his wife alone. Golaud questions Yniold, his son by a former wife, about Pelléas and Mélisande. Yniold's childish answers exasperate him. He squeezes the boy's arm, causing him to cry out in pain. Then he has Yniold spy on the suspected pair. His renewed heated questioning frightens the boy.

Pelléas, having been told by his father (a character who never appears) that he looks like one marked for death, makes ready to leave the castle. He asks Mélisande to meet him one last time by the well where she lost her wedding ring. Golaud enters, is furious, insists (against Arkel's entreaties) that Mélisande's eyes conceal her guilt. He seizes her by the hair and throws her down. Taking his sword he leaves. Mélisande laments to Arkel that she has lost her husband's love. Pelléas and Mélisande keep their rendezvous. They confess their love to one another. Golaud bursts in and kills Pelléas with his sword. Mélisande flees with Golaud in pursuit.

Mélisande (who, we only now find out, has recently given birth) has been only superficially wounded by Golaud's sword. She is undergoing what the doctor foresees will be an uneventful recovery in her bedchamber. Golaud, filled with remorse, asks her forgiveness, but also asks to know the truth. She tells him that she and Pelléas were innocent, but he does not believe her and presses her further. She sinks back in exhaustion. To revive her spirits, Arkel shows her infant daughter. Servants appear. Golaud demands to know why. He is desperate to interrogate Mélisande some more, but Arkel bars the way. Mélisande dies. Golaud sobs. Arkel orders him out of the room for breaking the silence.

The superficial (or maybe not so superficial) parallels between this plot and that of *Tristan und Isolde* are hard to miss: lovers in spite of themselves, Pelléas and Mélisande die (the former directly, the latter indirectly) of wounds inflicted by the heroine's rightful husband. Both Wagner's opera and Debussy's could be viewed as mythic or mystical variants of the prosaic (or at least bourgeois) "eternal triangle" motif—variants that subvert the middle-class moral that usually animates the plot: that if forced to choose, one must sacrifice the gratification of one's desires to the greater good of the social order.

But where Wagner had attempted to muzzle morality, or shout it down with a grand and elemental, self-justifying passion, the voice of morality simply speaks a foreign language in Maeterlinck's play and Debussy's opera. Golaud wants definite and rational answers, but nobody understands his questions. Nor can anyone connect Golaud's actions with their consequences: Arkel's last words to Golaud, ordering him out of

Mélisande's death chamber, are not peremptory but loving: "Don't stay here Golaud. She needs silence now. Come away, come away. It's terrible, but it wasn't your doing. She was such a quiet little creature ..." Loving words, and yet mocking all the same. The playwright mocks Golaud's questions with enigmas of his own in the form of recurring motifs, for which we spectators are at a loss to provide explanations. Why wells, dark holes in the ground, in three scenes? Why the crown, glinting in the shadows? Why the ring, which disappears from view? Do they tell us where Mélisande came from after all? Do they tell us why she married Golaud? Or do they simply mock the questions, ours as well as Golaud's? The only answer that "works" within the confines of the drama seems to be that they are symbols, windows on the *au-delà*. They cannot be understood, except as portents of a destiny we cannot shape. Go with the flow, they warn; the need to know is death. We can live if we only don't connect—or rather, if we connect with everything, not just with what we think will satisfy our needs.

Not surprisingly, Debussy saw in all of this an ideal medium for his music—or rather, perhaps, saw his music as an ideal medium for all of this. But how, exactly, did his music provide that medium, that "liquid element" in which the somnambulistic action of the drama could unfold? Recognizing the affinities between *Pelléas* and *Tristan*, but also recognizing the wide gulf that separated the two operas both as drama and as "philosophy," the Polish musicologist Stefan Jarocinski described Debussy's achievement as one of "de-Wagnerizing" opera by "removing the Teutonic pathos and 'will to power.'"²² On the basis of our previous analyses of Debussy's musical technique we might be tempted to take this observation a step further, and at the same time pinpoint the relationship between Debussy's musical technique and his philosophical or dramaturgical conceptions, by suggesting more concretely that Debussy de-Wagnerized his opera by removing (or "liquidating") the half steps—not every half step, of course, just those that expressed pathos or a "will to power," which is to say the cadential leading tones.

Debussy found the task of composing *Pelléas* exhausting. In fact (just as his hero-worshipped Musorgsky had done in *Boris Godunov*) he wrote the opera twice and never finished another. The first draft took him exactly two years, from August 1893 to August 1895. The apparent aimlessness of the action—or rather, the extreme passivity of all the characters save Golaud—was at first a powerful attraction. "Despite its dream-like atmosphere," he wrote of Maeterlinck's play, "it contains far more humanity than those so-called 'real-life documents'" of *verismo*,²³ the naturalistic melodramas of contemporary Italians like Mascagni and Puccini. In particular, it was bathed in "an evocative language whose sensitivity could be extended into music and into the orchestral ambience." This much was almost a direct paraphrase of Schuré.

But realizing it musically was another story. Debussy's letters, especially those written in 1894, are full of anguish and raillery against what he saw as the limits that his training had placed on his fantasy. "I've spent days trying to capture that 'nothing' that Mélisande is made of," he wrote to one friend.²⁴ To another he wondered whether there was anything left for a composer to do anymore but recycle clichés: "Impossible to count how often since Gluck people have died to the chord of the [Neapolitan] sixth, and now, from [Massenet's] *Manon* to *Isolde*, they do it to the diminished seventh! And as for that idiotic thing called a perfect triad, it's only habit, like going to a cafe!"²⁵ As for old Arkel, he "comes from beyond the grave and has that objective prophetic gentleness of those who are soon to die—all of which has to be expressed with do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do!!! What a profession!"²⁶

Finally, he confided to Ernest Chausson, his closest musical friend after Satie, "I was premature in crying 'success' over *Pelléas et Mélisande*. After a sleepless night (the bringer of truth) I had to admit it wouldn't do at all. It was like the duet by M. So—and—so, or nobody in particular, and worst of all the ghost of old Klingsor, alias R. Wagner, kept appearing in the corner of a bar. So I've torn the whole thing up."²⁷ The scene to which Debussy was referring was the climactic one, the fourth scene of the fourth act, in which Pelléas and Mélisande exchange nocturnal confessions of love in a garden, and Golaud, intruding on them, kills his rival.

This was, of course, the scene that most closely paralleled the plot of *Tristan und Isolde* (act II), and therefore aroused the strongest anxieties in a composer who had declared that it was "time to be post-Wagner (*après Wagner*) rather than merely in the footsteps of Wagner (*d'après Wagner*)."²⁸ In view of its dramatic importance and its heavy emotional charge it is not surprising to learn that this scene was both

the first music in Debussy's opera to be sketched, in the summer of 1893, and the last to be completed, in January 1900. In all, it went through three complete rewrites.

Carolyn Abbate has demonstrated the extent to which the revisions of the scene were a conscious effort to exorcise "the ghost of old Klingsor."²⁹ (Klingsor was the name Wagner gave to the evil sorcerer in the second act of his last opera, *Parsifal*, who is defeated by the pure young title character; by calling Wagner by that name in his letter to Chausson, Debussy was obviously casting both Wagner and himself as characters in what can only too easily remind us of an "Oedipal" drama, a drama of vicarious patricide.) One instance, somewhat trivial but revealing, was the removal of what could be heard as a Tristanesque phrase (Ex. 2-12) at the point where Mélisande, sensing Golaud's approach, sings "Il y a quelqu'un derrière nous" (There is someone behind us). "Symbolically," Abbate comments, "it was Wagner whom Debussy heard standing behind the composition of *Pelléas*," and of course the old man had to go.

compare:

ex. 2-12 From the sketches to *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 4

Elsewhere, however, despite Debussy's apparent search-and-destroy maneuver, conspicuous references to the *Tristan*-chord were allowed to stay, especially at places where the word *triste* (sad), or even the performance direction *tristement* (sadly), appear (Ex. 2-13). At such places, where despite the fraught dramatic situation Debussy was seemingly unable to resist a fairly sophomoric pun, we seem to have a striking confirmation of Ortega's diagnosis of the modern artist's essentially ironic disposition, creating—at a distance, so to speak—an "artistic art" that insisted upon displaying its artifice, not so much in ostentation as in modesty ("to see to it that the work of art is nothing but a work of art, ... a thing of no transcending consequence").

MÉLISANDE:

si, si, je suis heu - reu - se, mais — je suis tri - ste...

pp *p* *espressif*

(Oh yes, I am happy, but I am sad too...)

ex. 2-13 Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Mélisande, “Si, si, je suis heureuse”

The most significant alterations in the scene, however, were the ones that attenuated (or “clouded”) the clarity of the tonal relationships. Unlike Wagner’s, Debussy’s *Tristan*-chords are not harmonically active; like the one in Ex. 2-13, which simply breaks off, they do not form part of any progression to a harmonic goal. Instead, they float free of any tether of voice leading, free of “glue,” and so does the scene as a whole. One is conscious of Debussy’s effort not to impose any abstractly “musical” shape on the scene. Modulations are always unpredictable (hence unpredicted), never telegraphed. The listener is rendered as passive as the characters, borne along by the ill-defined yet incessant harmonic flux, the flux of fate. Still and all, one can discern a tonal plan if one is looking hard enough for it. And while looking for it might not be the best way to approach the opera in the opera house, it is worth doing here, under “laboratory conditions,” just so as to appreciate the ways in which Debussy (recalling Mallarmé) “put in the shadows.”

PELLÉAS
Tu ne sais pas pour-quoi il faut que je mé -

MÉLISANDE
Librement
Je t'aime aus-
-loi - gne - Tu ne sais pas que c'est par-ce que Je t'ai-me.

En retenant
- si
Oh! qu'as-tu dit, Mé-li-san - de! Je ne l'ai pres-que pas en-ten-du!

ex. 2-14 Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 4, mm. 81–87

Both tonally and dramaturgically, the scene can be broken down into three parts. The first culminates in the declaration of love (Ex. 2-14), surely the most resolutely unrhetoical such declaration in all of opera. The second, which begins with the scene's first explicitly notated key signature (F# major), comprises its lyrical core: Pelléas's part slows down to "aria tempo" (halves and quarters rather than quarters, eighths, and sixteenths) as he sings of his love; Mélisande, as ever, is erratic, matter-of-fact, "not all there," and though she reciprocates Pelléas's passion verbally, her music tends to break the mood. (Here Debussy acts as a sort of supreme stage director, controlling the singers' enunciation of Maeterlinck's lines to achieve the characteristically understated interpretation he desires, which may or may not have accorded with the playwright's intent.) The swift third section culminates in the lovers' desperate kiss in expectation of death, and Golaud's attack. Here (Ex. 2-15) even somnambulistic Mélisande manages a fairly long, fairly high note. In this doggedly understated context it comes across as a veritable *Liebestod!*

The entire scene contains only a single strongly articulated authentic cadence, only one spot where a functional “V” and a functional “I” are placed in direct succession. As might be guessed, it leads into the “aria” in F# major (Ex. 2-16). But only in a context like this could such a cadence count as “strongly articulated.” The dominant is presented in second inversion, with the root C# a fleeting melodic presence rather than part of the actual “chord.” True, the C#D♭ region has had some previous exposure—in one spot it seems to function as tonic, in another as dominant—which could be adduced as support for the cadence in Ex. 2-16. A truly determined analyst might even claim that the whole first part of the scene thus acts as a structural pickup to the second part (and might find further support, as Abbate suggests, in the sketches). But to make such a claim is to value an ounce of light over a pound of shadow. That does not accord very well with the Symbolist scale of values.

MÉLISANDE
Tant mieux! tant mieux!

PELLÉAS
Il vient!

cre - - - - - scen - - - - - do

expressif (en dehors)

Ta bou - - - - - che!

ex. 2-15 Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV scene 4, mm. 266–271

Modéré PELLÉAS

On di - rait que ta voix pas -

e molto dim.

p doux et expressif

ex. 2-16 Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 4, mm. 96–98

A similarly selective reading of the harmonic evidence might seek to connect Pelléas's anxiously asserted and sustained dominant seventh on G at the beginning of Ex. 2-17 with his "very expressive" C major at the end of it, and cast it all as an elaborate preparation for the F-minor cadence at the end. This, too, may accord with Debussy's initial harmonic plan. But to select only these circle-of-fifth moments for conceptual linkage is to ignore (for example) the lengthy pedal point on F# (recalling the scene's tonal focal point) that leads up to the climactic kiss. (And here Debussy may have missed an apparition of "old Klingsor," since the pedal point that prepares the cataclysmic climax of Tristan and Isolde's lovemaking—thwarted in act II but triumphant in act III—was also an F#.)

Far more salient to the ear and to the interpreting mind are the elaborately liquidated leading tones that dissolve potential dominants wherever (as Mallarmé might have said) lucidity threatens, as where an infusion of functionally undifferentiated whole-tone harmonies neutralizes the key of Pelléas's little aria (Ex. 2-18a). Another such intervention (Ex. 2-18b) turns the leading tone of F# into the innocuous third of a D-minor triad. At these points the tension that a German composer would have ratcheted up to the point of purposeful agony is allowed—fatalistically, it might seem—to wither.

MÉLISANDE

PELLÉAS Tant mieux! tant mieux!

tard! _____ Tu? _____

en dehors *en dehors*

Cédez un peu sans trop perdre
l'impression du mouv^t animé

— voi-là, voi-là! Ce n'est plus nous qui le vou-lons! Tout est per-du,

expressif

Animez

tout est sau-vé! Tout est sau-vé ce soir! Viens! viens mon cœur bat

comme un fou jus-qu'au fond de ma gor - ge

Modéré Retenu

E - cou - tel mon cœur est sur le

Plus retenu Modéré

point de nié - tran - gler ... Viens! Ah!

molto dim. *très expressif*

ex. 2-17 Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 4, mm. 176–201

Not surprisingly, then, harmonic effects like these rendered *Pelléas* virtually incomprehensible to Richard Strauss (“Richard II,” as he was often called), then regarded (as we learned in the previous chapter) as Germany’s harmonic innovator par excellence. At a performance of Debussy’s opera that he attended in 1907 (two years after *Salome*) as the guest of Romain Rolland (1866–1944), the famous French novelist who was also a prolific writer on music, Strauss turned to his host after the first act and said, “Is it like this all the way through?”³⁰ On being assured that it was, he protested, “But there’s nothing in it. No music. It has nothing consecutive. No musical phrases, no development.” Spoken like Golaud himself, this. For Strauss, as for all the German maximalists, there could be neither intelligible continuity nor “development,” nor even meaningful emotional expression, without semitone connections, or at least powerful expectations based on such connections. Strauss’s perplexity was a tribute to Debussy’s success at getting rid of the Wagnerian glue, relinquishing the harmonic driver’s seat to “fate” rather than the foreordained goals (and the triumphalist esthetics) vouchsafed by the circle of fifths and its half-step surrogates. His quiescence, responsive in a way that German music had not yet become to a new psychological mood, proved far more subversive to traditional practice than Strauss’s hyperactivity.

PELLÉAS

Retenu

terre u-ne fem-me plus bel-le! ... Où es-tu?

ex. 2-18a Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 4, mm. 133–135

MÉLISANDE

Plus lent

Serrez

Je te voy-ais ail-leurs...

PELLÉAS

- leurs ... Tu es dis-trai-te Qu'as-tu donc? Tu ne me sem-bles pas heu-

Plus lent

Si, si, je suis heu-

-reuse ...

ex. 2-18b Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 4, mm. 154–156

Notes:

- (18) Baudelaire, *Petits poèmes en prose* (1862); quoted in Baudelaire, *Pages choisies* (Classiques Larousse, 1934), p. 14n5.
- (19) Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 25–26; quoted in Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 55.
- (20) Edouard Schuré, *Histoire du drame musical* (Paris, 1882); quoted in Jarocinski, *Debussy*, p. 36.
- (21) Baudelaire, *Salon de 1859*; quoted in Jarocinski, *Debussy*, p. 29.
- (22) Jarocinski, *Debussy*, p. 130.
- (23) *Debussy on Music*, p. 75.
- (24) Debussy to Ernest Chausson; *Letters*, eds. François Lesure and Roger Nichols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 62.
- (25) Debussy to Pierre Louÿs, 20 August 1894; *Letters*, ed. Lesure, p. 72.
- (26) Debussy, *Letters*, ed. Lesure, p. 62.
- (27) Debussy to Chausson, 2 October 1893; *Letters*, ed. Lesure, p. 54.
- (28) *Debussy on Music*, p. 74.
- (29) Carolyn Abbate, "Tristan in the Composition of *Pelléas*," *Nineteenth-Century Music* V (1981–82): 117–40.
- (30) Richard Strauss and Romain Rolland, *Correspondance; Fragments de Journal* (1951); quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Mind, Vol. II: 1902–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 88.
- Citation (MLA):** Richard Taruskin. "Chapter 2 Getting Rid of Glue." *The Oxford History of Western Music*. Oxford University Press. New York, USA. n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume4/actrade-9780195384840-div1-002005.xml>>.
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Gabriel Fauré

Paul Dukas

“ESSENTIALLY” (AND INTOLERANTLY) FRENCH

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Perhaps more vividly than any other composition of the period, Fauré’s exquisite *Requiem*, op. 48, painstakingly composed and revised over a span of twenty-three years (1877–1900), illustrates the characteristics that French musicians then wished to cultivate and propagate as “essentially French” as opposed to what was accordingly to be classified as “essentially German,” or stereotypically Italian, or even what was once considered French. A greatly truncated setting of the Requiem Mass, the work does not even contain a *Dies Irae*, the section that inspired a theatrically thrilling hellfire-and-damnation response from Berlioz in 1837 and again from Verdi in 1874. Instead, as the critic Émile Vuillermoz (at one time a composition pupil of Fauré’s) remarked, Fauré’s *Requiem* is “a look toward heaven and not toward hell.”³² This attitude is pointedly confirmed at the end of the Requiem by the final section, a setting of the antiphon *In paradisum deducant te Angeli* (“May the Angels lead you into Paradise”), which is not even part of the Requiem Mass as such, but is sung on the way to the gravesite before burial on those occasions when burial immediately follows the service. This comforting representation of angelic harping is also a representation of a state of heavenly bliss, in which nothing remains to be desired. Therefore, the musical representation of desire, from which Germanic “absolute music” (not to mention all of opera) had drawn its sustenance, is virtually suppressed.

The dominant harmony is sounded only twice, and briefly, both times preceded by the iii_6 , which considerably attenuates its force by seeming to turn the chord seventh (G) into a mere neighbor to an F# from which it proceeds and to which it returns. Other dominant sevenths are usually kept in check by “common-tone” progressions (as in Ex. 2-20a, where the fifth and seventh over B are transformed innocuously into the third and fifth over D instead of resolving functionally). And, having thus alternated with a harmony “down” a minor third, the tonic D is made to alternate a few measures later (Ex. 2-20b) with the complementary flat mediant harmony (F major), “up” the same minor third, lending D the sort of equilibrium at the center that we have already noted in Debussy, and which imparts the “imperturbable calm” that the American composer Aaron Copland (the pupil of a Fauré pupil, Nadia Boulanger), cited as characteristic both of Fauré’s music and of the “French temperament.”³³ (But of course that description, and even the effect, was getting to be a cliché; compare Gillmor on Satie above.)

The image shows a musical score for a soprano and piano. The soprano part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (D major). The tempo/mood marking is *sempre dolce*. The lyrics are: "et per - du - cant - te in ci - vi - ta - tem sanc - tam, Je -". The piano accompaniment consists of two staves: a right-hand treble staff and a left-hand bass staff. The piano part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a simple harmonic accompaniment in the left hand. The score is divided into two systems, each with a repeat sign at the beginning and a fermata at the end of the second system.

ex. 2-20a Gabriel Fauré, *Requiem, In paradisum*, mm. 17–20

ex. 2-20b Gabriel Fauré, *Requiem, In paradisum*, mm. 25–29

Indeed, Fauré was mythologized even before his death, at the venerable age of seventy-nine, as the Frenchest of the French. Vuillermoz, in an appreciation published in 1922, recalling the Société Nationale de Musique (of which the twenty-six-year-old Fauré, as a protégé of Saint-Saëns, had been a founding member), declared that

In the midst of the Wagnerian epidemic, when Saint-Saëns, Franck, Massenet, d'Indy, Chabrier and [Henri] Duparc [1848–1933, a composer of *mélodies*] did not actually succumb, but were all affected by the contagion, he remained refractory toward the virulent romantic microbe, and preserved all his intellectual independence and all his racial sanity. During the epoch when the pupils of César Franck, notwithstanding their demonstrative nationalism, were naively Teutonizing our art, Gabriel Fauré, without professions of faith, without dogmas and without a catechism of industry, was the veritable guardian of our national traditions.³⁴

Of course, those “national traditions” (to say nothing of that “racial sanity”) were an ad hoc construction—a verbally constructed “discourse,” as today’s culture critics say, rather than a tangible reality—and as such could always be revised at a moment’s notice. Take for example *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* (“Ariadne and Bluebeard”; 1907), the single completed opera by Paul Dukas (1865–1935), the fastidious composer of only a dozen published works, who is celebrated for a single one: *L’apprenti sorcier* or “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” (1897), a symphonic scherzo based on a ballad by Goethe (famously “choreographed” by the Walt Disney studios in the animated film *Fantasia* of 1939). Like *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Dukas’s opera was also based directly (without any intervening libretto) on a play by Maurice Maeterlinck, in this case a decidedly “decadent” retelling of a famous folk legend originally committed to literature by the fabulist Charles Perrault in his *Tales of Olden Times* (1697), the original “Mother Goose,” considered a national classic by the French.

In Perrault’s telling, Bluebeard’s seventh wife, Fatima, gives in to curiosity and opens a locked door behind which she discovers the dead bodies of her predecessors. (She is rescued from a like fate by the timely arrival of her brothers.) In Maeterlinck’s version, the discarded wives—one of them named *Mélisande* (so *that’s* where she must have been coming from when Golaud discovered her in Debussy’s opera!)—are not dead. Indeed, they seem to take pleasure, or at least find security, in their secluded condition. They come to Bluebeard’s aid when he is attacked, and finally refuse the freedom offered them in the name of sisterhood by the opener of the door, the tellingly renamed Ariadne (after the Greek mythological heroine who with her famous thread led Theseus out of the darkness of the labyrinth into the light).

Dukas’s brilliantly colored score makes much, both in its orchestration and in its tonal relations, of the play’s many-sided contrasts of darkness and light. The opera’s chief leitmotif is a French (or, more specifically, a Breton) folk song that associates the former wives with “the daughters of Orlamonde,” night-bound creatures in search of daylight (Ex. 2-21). But in the play and the opera daylight is rejected—implicitly undoing one of the “master narratives” defining the Teutonic tradition in music from Haydn and Beethoven all the way to Mahler. It would be hard to get more “French” than that.

Le Chant Souterrain

Les cinq fil - les d'Or-la-mon - de (La fée noire est mor - te)

Les cinq fil - les d'Or-la-mon - de Ont cher-ché les _ por - tes

ex. 2-21 “Artificially” harmonized folk tune from Paul Dukas, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*

Dukas, a conservatory classmate and friend of the slightly older Debussy, paid the latter tribute in *Ariane*—not so much by appropriating whole-tone effects that (while very noticeable) were by then nobody’s property in particular, but by actually quoting snatches from Debussy’s opera whenever the action concerned *Mélisande*, the character their operas have in common. Debussy was at first flattered and gratified by the homage, as a cordial letter to Dukas attests. But he was sorely baffled when a review by Louis Laloy, a very influential critic of the time, sought to polarize the two operas by contrasting their audiences and their critical followings: the “invertebrate descendants of ‘debussyism’” congregating around *Pelléas et Mélisande* (which “must therefore contain unsuspected defects”), vs. the “*Ariane* party” consisting of “those who know how to value the essential qualities of the French spirit and of French art.”³⁵ This invidious comparison must have been motivated at least in part by Dukas’s use of a folk song, a simple, ingenuous (and “modally” diatonic) national artifact to stand out against the artificialities of his personal style, and by the presence in his opera of a “positive heroine” in the person of the light-bearing Ariadne, the would-be liberator. She bore comparison, of course, with Joan of Arc, or with Delacroix’s “Liberty leading the people,” cherished symbols all. Debussy himself drew the political connection (though without naming Dukas’s opera) in a patriotic tirade he published in 1915, while World War I was raging. “Since Rameau,” he lamented, way back in the early eighteenth century,

we have had no purely French tradition. His death severed the thread, Ariadne’s thread, that guided us through the labyrinth of the past. Since then, we have failed to cultivate our garden, but on the other hand we have given a warm welcome to any foreign salesman who cared to come our way. We listened to their patter and bought their worthless wares, and when they laughed at our ways we became ashamed of them. We begged forgiveness of the muses of good taste for having been so light and clear, and we intoned a hymn in praise of heaviness. We adopted ways of writing that were quite contrary to our own nature, and excesses of language far from compatible with our own ways of thinking. We tolerated overblown orchestras, tortuous forms, cheap luxury and clashing colors, and we were about to give the seal of approval to even more suspect naturalizations when the sound of gunfire put a sudden stop to it all.³⁶

The last sentence is chilling, with its reference to “even more suspect naturalizations.” Many commentators have interpreted the phrase as a reference to the Jewishness of Schoenberg (or of Mahler, whom the French loved to jeer as *Malheur*, “misery”), regarded as incompatible with Frenchness. But why, then, the pointed insistence on the loss of Ariadne’s assistance, in view of her recent installation at the center of an opera that had been touted in the press (and to Debussy’s cost) as a monument to the “essential qualities of the French spirit and of French art”? Was the apparent irony the result of envy or spite ... or what?

As Anya Suschitzky, a historian of French opera, has pointed out, there were more dangerous, contemporary, and politically volatile resonances within Dukas’s opera than those we have noted up to now.³⁷ In addition to Joan of Arc or Marianne, Maeterlinck’s and Dukas’s light-bearing Ariadne bore an unmistakable resemblance, as well, to a traditional allegory of “Truth”—a naked woman rising from out of a well and bearing a mirror to catch the sunlight—that had become particularly familiar in fin-de-siècle France owing to its frequent use in press cartoons commenting on the Dreyfus affair, perhaps the most divisive political scandal in the nation’s history. (Captain Alfred Dreyfus, the highest-ranked Jewish officer in the French army, had been convicted on trumped-up charges of treason and exiled; his subsequent exoneration was stridently opposed by self-proclaimed “anti-Semites”—so called for the first time.) And in light of that association, a comment Debussy had made three years earlier in a letter to his publisher takes on a familiar and ugly ring: “You’re right, *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* is a masterpiece,” Debussy wrote, “but it’s not a masterpiece of French music.”³⁸ What could this be but a reference to the fact that, like Schoenberg, like Mahler, and like the unjustly defamed and disgraced Captain Dreyfus, the author of *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* was a Jew?

Debussy’s remark is all the more troubling in view of his previous resistance to chauvinism, so unusual and refreshing amid the raging nationalistic currents that carried Europe from the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War to the onset of World War I (and also considering the fact that Emma Bardac, his second wife and the mother of his only child, was of Jewish ancestry). Listing his hates in a letter of 1895, he included

(alongside the expected “crowds and universal suffrage”) something he called *les phrases tricolores* —“tricolor phrases.”³⁹ The reference, of course, was to the French flag, and the expression could best be translated, perhaps, as “flag-waving.”

But by 1912, even Debussy had been swept up in the inexorable current, giving vent like so many others to a rigorous, arbitrarily privileged notion of what made for authentic French music, inevitably implying a similarly rigid and arbitrary, intransigent notion of what made for an authentic Frenchman. Such notions served the cause of national solidarity by negation and exclusion, producing social division rather than cohesion. Must this always be the price of valuing national identity? Must the notion of nation always be racialized?

Notes:

(32) Émile Vuillermoz, *Gabriel Fauré*, trans. Kenneth Schapin (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1969), p. 75.

(33) Aaron Copland, “Fauré Festival at Harvard” (1945); in *Copland on Music* (New York: Norton, 1963), p. 126.

(34) Vuillermoz, “Gabriel Faure”, *Revue musicale* III, no. 11 (1922): 14.

(35) *Le Temps*, 24 March 1908; quoted in Debussy, *Letters*, eds. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) p. 190.

(36) *Debussy on Music*, pp. 322–23.

(37) See A. Suschitzky, “*Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*: Dukas, the Light and the Well,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* IX (1997): 133–61.

(38) Debussy to Vittorio Gui, 25 February 1912; Debussy, *Letters*, ed. Lesure, p. 256.

(39) Debussy to Henri Lerolle, 17 August 1895; *Letters*, p. 80.

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Maurice Ravel

Exoticism

THE EXOTICIZED SELF

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The case of Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), who for at least a dozen years after Debussy's death was widely regarded as the foremost French composer, gives reassurance that a positive response to these questions need not be a foregone conclusion, and that national character can be pursued and achieved without insane appeals to "racial sanity."

Ravel, a pupil of Fauré, wrote in a colorful and sensuous style marked by a deep affinity for Russian music. He, too, was perfectly capable of platitudinous generalization when asked for it. In an interview published in *The Musical Leader*, a British journal, in 1911, Ravel told a reporter that

The work done in France today is by far more simple than the music by Wagner, his followers, or his greatest disciple, Richard Strauss. It has not the gigantic form of Beethoven and Wagner, but it possesses a sensitiveness which other schools have not. Its great qualities are clearness and order. It is intensely rich in musical matter. There is more musical substance in Debussy's *Après-Midi d'un Faune* than in the wonderfully immense Ninth Symphony by Beethoven. The French composers of today work on small canvases but each stroke of the brush is of vital importance.⁴⁰

But Ravel's remark does not attribute the differences between nations, even when cast invidiously, to biological or spiritual essences, only preferences and practices that can be explained historically or socially rather than "racially." Moreover, when speaking of himself rather than his "school," Ravel blithely contradicted himself, claiming now to "find beauty in all things; the great and the small, the humble and the powerful."

He might have added "all nations." In later interviews, including some that followed the World War, Ravel even admitted to admiring the work of his German contemporaries, albeit with reservations. In one such interview, he called it "curious and a shame that an all but solid wall separates their goals from those of French musicians." Ravel's greater tolerance may have had something to do with his heritage. Born in the Pyrenees to a French father and a Basque mother, he thought of himself as ethnically exotic and was drawn to other manifestations of national or ethnic exoticism, even Jewish ones, which he treated with unusual sympathy. Three of his songs were composed to texts in languages associated with the Jews. This is something one cannot imagine Debussy doing, or even Dukas—for precariously assimilated Jews, as we have already seen, were often reluctant to call attention to, or even to admit, their differences from the surrounding culture.

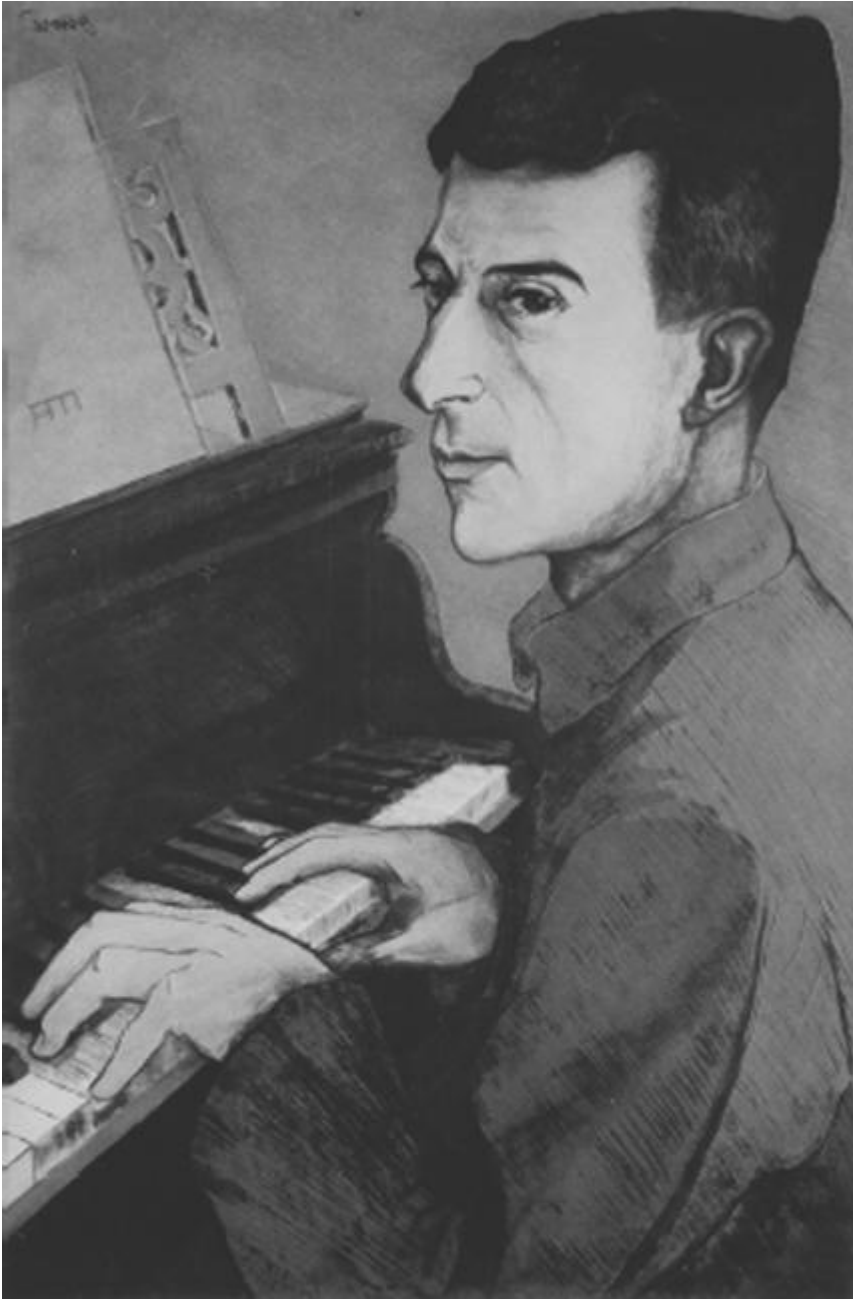


fig. 2-7 Maurice Ravel, by Achille Ouvre (b. 1872).

One of Ravel's *Deux mélodies hébraïques* (1914) was a setting of the kaddish (sanctification), the most hallowed of all Jewish liturgical texts. Its language is Aramaic, the ancient colloquial language of Jews in the Holy Land (hence the language spoken by Jesus). The other song in the 1914 set, and also an earlier "Chanson hébraïque" that formed part of a set of *Chants populaires* (1910), were harmonizations of Yiddish folk songs. These were far more unusual and significant, since they signaled acceptance by a non-Jew not only of the culture of the biblical Hebrews, but also of the recent popular culture of diaspora Jews—the Jews European gentiles encountered in their everyday lives and often despised—as a valid source for serious contemporary art. (Not even all Jewish composers of art music were that tolerant: the most famous of them, Ernest Bloch (1880–1959), was very much a purist on this score, preferring to invent an artificially "biblical," orientalist style of his own rather than draw upon contemporary Yiddish culture.) The 1910 set was written as an invited entry in a folk-song harmonization contest sponsored by a Moscow organization called *Dom pesni* (House of Song). For this purpose the composer was furnished with song melodies, including a Yiddish one that had been collected by the Russian composer and critic Joel Engel in Vilna (now Vilnius, Lithuania),

a large town in Russian Poland that had become a center of Jewish culture. The opportunistic circumstances in which the song was composed might seem to minimize its significance, and that of Jewish culture generally, as a source of inspiration for Ravel.

But the 1914 set was composed on Ravel's own initiative, for which purpose Ravel procured a large collection of Jewish folksong arrangements collected and edited by the Russian-Jewish ethnographer Zinoviy (or Süßman) Kisselgof and published the year before in St. Petersburg by the Society for Jewish Folk Music. Unlike his first attempt, Ravel's second Yiddish song—"L'énigme éternelle" ("The eternal riddle") on its French title page; "Alte kasche" ("Old question") in the original—was sufficiently representative of his personal style to draw censure from Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, an authoritative scholarly historian of Jewish music, for disfiguring the melody by harmonizing it "in ultra-modern style, without regard for its scale and the nature of the mode."

Ex. 2-22a contains roughly half of Ravel's setting, while Ex. 2-22b shows the harmonization made by Alexander Zhitomirsky, a member of the St. Petersburg Society, for Kisselgof's collection, which according to Idelsohn represented a "correct" harmonization of the mode and scale in question. Since artistic harmonizations of monophonic folk songs are based on esthetic rather than scholarly considerations, Idelsohn's strictures against the Jewishness of Ravel's setting were no more legitimate or dispassionate than Debussy's against the Frenchness of Dukas. Both were examples of what is now called "identity politics." Both were motivated by intransigence.

Tranquillo ♩ = 92

Frägt die
Mon - de

pp

Velt die al - te Ca - sche Tra la tra la la la
 tu nous in - ter - ro - gez Tra la tra la la la

la la Tra la tra la la la la la
 la la Tra la tra la la la la la

Ent - fernt men Tra la la la la la
 L'ou ré - pond: Tra la la la la la

la la la Tra la la la la Un az men vill
 la la la la la Si f'ou ne pest'

ex. 2-22a Maurice Ravel, *Deux mélodies hébraïques* (1914), no. 2, *L'énigme éternelle*, mm. 1–26

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system begins with a piano (p) dynamic marking. The second system features a forte (f) dynamic marking, followed by a piano (p) marking and another forte (f) marking. The third system concludes with a piano (p) dynamic marking. The notation includes various rhythmic values, slurs, and accents, with a triplet of eighth notes in the final measure of the second system.

ex. 2-22b Alexander Zhitomirsky's harmonization in "Ahavoh-rabboh" mode

Meanwhile, Ravel's setting of the melody, while as arbitrary as any artistic harmonization of folklore had to be, and dissonant in a manner that no doubt struck the ear of a traditional scholar like Idelsohn as willful, was by no means "without regard for its scale and the nature of the mode." Indeed, the most constant factor in the accompaniment is the distinctive augmented second of the Jewish "Ahavoh rabboh" mode (to adopt Idelsohn's spelling). The augmented second, perpetually oscillating as the lower voice of the piano's "right-hand" staff, seems to illustrate the song's subject: the perpetual imperturbable spinning of the world and its indifference to mankind's concerns. Together with the piano bass, the same augmented second makes up the ostinato whose brief disruption and reinstatement define the song's ABA form.

Behind the decorative harmonic surface, the song's tonal trajectory is a pristine I–V–I in E minor (with V coming at the midpoint, where Ex. 2-22a ends, the song's most plainly articulated cadence). At the beginning, and at the reprise, Ravel cleverly accommodates the "modal" or "Hebraic" A# to the key of E minor by embedding it in a harmonic configuration borrowed from the "octatonic" scale, an eight-note alternation of tones and semitones that can be traced back from Ravel's immediate sources in what was then the latest Russian music, through Liszt, and ultimately to Schubert, all of them composers who at various times Ravel acknowledged as models. This stylistic patrimony somewhat distinguishes Ravel's harmonic idiom from those of his French contemporaries, making it a little more astringent than theirs, a little more dissonant, perhaps a little more accommodating toward semitones, but just as sensuous and luxuriant once a taste for it has been acquired.

The elusive harmonic trajectory of "L'énigme éternelle" can be described as an "octatonic-diatonic interaction," to use a term coined in the 1970s by the American music theorist Pieter van den Toorn.⁴¹ Much of the terminology we now use to describe the style and technique of early-twentieth-century music was coined long after the fact, but so is the terminology we use to describe earlier music; most theoretical generalizations follow practice at a respectful distance, and this has been particularly true in the case of modernist music, which often strove hard on principle to keep its technical bases secret, the better to stay "ahead of its time." Ex. 2-23 shows how the opening chords in Ravel's setting derive from the background scale, and also the well-disguised fact that the two chords are actually a single harmony (one that we will re-encounter many times and eventually give a name to) and its inversion.

The image displays three musical staves. The top staff is a single treble clef staff with notes numbered 1 through 8. The middle-left staff consists of two bass clef staves with notes labeled A and B, and numbers 8/5 and 7/3. The middle-right staff is a single treble clef staff with notes labeled A and B.

ex. 2-23 Octatonic analysis of Maurice Ravel's *L'énigme éternelle*

Ravel was surely drawn to the “Ahavoh rabboh” mode, and to this melody in particular, when he noticed the congruence of its first thirteen bars with the notes of the tone-semitone scale, and devised his harmonic accompaniment accordingly. The first diatonic intrusion in the melody is the B in m. 17. Prefigured from the very beginning in the left hand's off-beat eighth note, it will shortly assert itself cadentially (as we have seen), only to be resuppressed from the melody in m. 30 when the original tune (and words) are reprised. Thus the whole setting takes its shape from the tonal (or “modal”) interaction of octatonic and diatonic scales. Also noteworthy is the manner in which Ravel altogether suppresses the note A natural from the setting until m. 25 (the tail end of the example), when it is suddenly asserted by the melody (and as the apparent root of Ravel's harmony) to form an effective Far Out Point from which a retransition to the opening harmony becomes especially meaningful. In short, all the most distinctive and seemingly personal (or “original”) aspects of the harmonization can be characterized as “deductions” from the borrowed tune, the Hebraic mode, and their perceived harmonic implications.

Notes:

(40) “Maurice Ravel's Opinion of Modern French Music,” *The Musical Leader* (16 March 1911); in *A Ravel Reader*, ed. Arbie Ornstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 410.

(41) See Pieter Van den Toorn, *The Music of Igor Stravinsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Maurice Ravel

THE SENSUAL SURFACE

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Ravel's eclecticism was more innocent and accommodating than Debussy's probably because it proceeded from a more optimistic, even hedonistic, view of art and its purposes. If Debussy's primary poetic counterpart was Mallarmé, and Fauré's was Verlaine, then Ravel's was surely his friend Henri de Régnier (1864–1936), one of the most prominent younger Symbolists, whose verses abound with the imagery of joyful sensuality. Ravel only set one poem of Régnier's to music, *Les grands vents venus d'outremer* ("The great winds that come from over the sea"; 1907); but on two occasions he used lines by Régnier as epigraphs for instrumental pieces. *Jeux d'eau* ("Fountains"; 1901), dedicated "to my dear master, Gabriel Fauré," is prefaced by a quotation from Régnier's *Fête d'eau* ("Water holiday"), entered in the manuscript in the poet's own hand: *Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille*, "A river god laughing at the water that is tickling him." And the piano suite *Valses nobles et sentimentales* ("Noble and sentimental waltzes"; 1911), with its title borrowed from Schubert, is headed by a line from one of Régnier's novels in praise of *le plaisir délicieux et toujours nouveau d'une occupation inutile*, "the delightful and ever-renewed pleasure of a useless occupation."

This last could be taken not only as Ravel's artistic credo, but also—to the extent that it was uttered with bravado, in defiance of Germanic importance (or self-importance)—as that of France itself. The very precocious *Jeux d'eau*, written early in the composer's career (just after leaving the Conservatory, in fact), makes the point clearly, but with an ironic fillip. Seemingly all ear-tickling texture and color, and for that reason often looked upon as a programmatic assertion of Frenchness in the face of all that Germany held dear, the piece is actually hung on a frame that turns out to be as pristine a "sonata form" as any German pedagogue could have required. The title is borrowed from Liszt—the third book of pieces in Liszt's series *Années de pèlerinage* ("Years of pilgrimage") contains a famous fountain piece called "Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este"—and so is the brilliant piano style, slightly "maximalized" by the use of double notes to be played by the thumb, a predilection that the composer could freely indulge within a harmonic idiom that so often treated seconds as stable chord components (in other words, one that treated seventh chords, including inverted ones, as consonant). The form, however, seems to have come right out of a textbook, as comparison with the score will verify.

Exposition:

1st theme m. 1

2nd theme m. 19

Development (mainly of 2nd theme) m. 49

Recapitulation:

1st theme m. 62

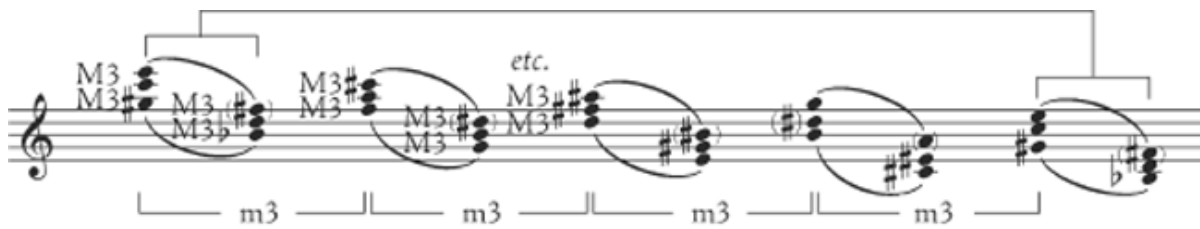
(Cadenza m. 67)

2nd theme m. 77

But as usual, the form diagram leaves out what is most interesting; and as usual (for an up-to-date French composer), what is interesting about the music is its soft tonal focus and the ways in which that softness is achieved. As always, dominant chords and leading tones are rare as hens' teeth. The key seems to be unmistakably E major; yet its leading tone, D#, is most likely to be found (as at the very beginning of the piece) as an ornament to the tonic triad, turning it into a piquant major-seventh chord. The only dominant chord on the first page of the music (Ex. 2-24a), in fact, hence the only cadential confirmation the tonic will ever get, comes on the last eighth-note of m. 6 in the form of a French sixth chord with F in the bass, but with B (presented in the right hand only) arguably functioning as the root. (Typically, however, the chord is filled in by a soft-focus whole-tone scale.)

The image displays the first page of Maurice Ravel's 'Jeux d'eau', measures 1 through 6. The score is written for piano and is in E major. It begins with the tempo marking 'Allegretto' and a quarter note equal to 144 (♩ = 144). The dynamics are marked 'pp' and 'dolcissimo una corda'. The right hand features a melodic line with a wide intervallic leap in the first measure, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. The music is characterized by its soft, shimmering texture and delicate phrasing.

ex. 2-24a Maurice Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, first page



(Accidentals apply only to the immediately following note)

ex. 2-24b Maurice Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, mm. 4–5, reduced

Much more prominent on the surface of the music are symmetrical “rotations” by major and/or minor thirds. It is necessary to use the clumsy “and/or” in describing the phenomenon because the major- and minor-third cycles are often superimposed, as in mm. 4–5 (see Ex. 2-24b). Reducing the second half of m. 4 to four block chords, we may observe a sort of interlocking pair of augmented triads, a construct of major thirds comprising five out of the six notes of the whole-tone scale, transposed four times by descending minor thirds. In conjunction with parallel progressions by whole tones and semitones, these third cycles—/048 (12)/ for major and /0369 (12)/ for minor—will govern much of the short-range harmonic motion. At the short range, circle-of-fifths progressions are a strange special effect.

They remain in effect, however, behind the scenes, and assert their traditional rights over the long-range tonal trajectory, as a comparison of the “second themes” as heard in the exposition and the recapitulation will show. The first time around (Ex. 2-25a), B (=V) dominates the harmonic background (top of the right hand in m. 19, bottom of the left hand in m. 21), but never functions as a triadic chord root for the simple reason that triads have been banished from the scene: the scales in use are pentatonic, and the only intervals sounding as “harmony” are seconds, fourths, and fifths. The melody (left hand in mm. 19–20, right hand in mm. 21–23), while seeming to maintain a sharp tonal focus, in fact cannot come to a cadence in the absence of half steps: none of its notes has clear “priority” over the others. In the recapitulation (Ex. 2-25b), by contrast, the B is first approached by an exceptional circle-of-fifths progression that identifies it unequivocally as a functioning dominant, and, caught by the pedal in m. 77, it anchors the otherwise anhemitonic and ambiguous restatement of the theme that follows like a traditional “organ point.” The explicit subdominant in the bass at mm. 80–81 descends so decisively to the tonic that not even the typical withholding of the leading tone on the last quarter of m. 81 can compromise the clarity of the final cadence. (And then, of course, the fugitive D#, very much in character, reappears as a very stable decoration of the tonic in the last four bars, which take on the character of a coda.)

The image displays a musical score for Maurice Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, measures 19-21. The score is written for piano and is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It is divided into two systems. The first system, marked *una corda*, features a delicate, shimmering texture. The right hand plays a rapid, sixteenth-note pattern, while the left hand provides a more rhythmic accompaniment. The second system, marked *tre corde*, shows a change in texture, with the right hand playing sustained chords and the left hand continuing its rhythmic pattern. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

ex. 2-25a Maurice Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, mm. 19–21

The image shows a page of musical notation for Maurice Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, measures 75 through 82. The score is written for piano and is in G major and 3/4 time. It begins with the tempo marking 'Lento' and the instruction 'espressivo molto'. The right hand features a complex, flowing melody with many slurs and ties, while the left hand provides a more rhythmic accompaniment. A section of the score is marked 'rapido', indicating a change in tempo. The piece concludes with the instruction 'al Fine'.

ex. 2-25b Maurice Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, mm. 75–82

Harmonically the most far-out (or at least the tangiest) moment comes in the “cadenza,” as it is somewhat arbitrarily designated in the little form diagram above—more precisely in m. 72 (Ex. 2-26), which contains a long passage in small notes signaling the equivalent of a fermata or “time-out.” At this vividly climactic moment, surely meant to invite the listener to visualize the spouting, spurting fountain at full disport, the

/06/ tritone relationship that elsewhere governs harmonic successions is telescoped into a “simultaneity.” Triads on F# and C—the former (all on the black keys) consistently confined to the left hand, the latter (on the white keys) to the right—seem to coexist within a six-note “polychord.”

The image shows a musical score for Maurice Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, measure 72. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features a complex texture with multiple layers of sixteenth-note patterns. The left hand plays a series of chords on black keys (F# and C), while the right hand plays chords on white keys. The tempo is marked 'rapido molto'. Dynamics include 'tre corde', 'ppp', 'fff', 'dim.', and 'rall.'

ex. 2-26 Maurice Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, m. 72

There are two ways this chord might be analyzed, both historically and in terms of its functional status. Both involve maximalizations of existing practices. The first, more traditional, explanation would be to regard the harmony as a functional French sixth chord on F#, the supertonic (II) in E major, in which the two thirds that make up the chord (F#–A# and C–E) have each “sprouted a fifth.” This interpretation finds its confirmation at the end of m. 76, when the progression is sorted out into its constituents, the C-major harmony (now sporting a seventh) giving way to the F# (now sporting a ninth) within the circle-of-fifths progression already shown in Ex. 2-25b, the F# proceeding along the same circle of fifths to the dominant pedal on B.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Maurice Ravel

RUSSIAN FANTASY

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The more radical way of interpreting the chord would be to regard it as the product of a symmetrical “interval cycle.” The common practice against which this second interpretation needs to be measured is not the “ordinary” tonal practice based on fifths, but a practice that had only arisen in the very latest Russian music, all of it written within a decade or so of *Jeux d'eau*. In his most recent operas, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in particular had been experimenting zealously with cycles of minor thirds as a way of conjuring up supernatural or magical worlds. As he explained in his autobiography, Rimsky-Korsakov had first observed these cycles, and the octatonic scales that could be derived from them, in Liszt’s first symphonic poem, the so-called Mountain Symphony.⁴² Beginning in the 1890s, Rimsky was himself engaged in a maximalizing quest; he could with considerable justice be called the first Russian modernist.

The reasons for the quest are worth noting. Up to the early 1880s, the dominant genres of Russian opera had been historical dramas and peasant comedies, the former corresponding to the “serious” type of traditional European opera, the latter to the old opera buffa. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 brought in its wake the strictest code of censorship the Russian autocracy ever imposed. Historical dramas were virtually banned, and even peasant comedies were regarded as questionable subjects if they involved Ukrainians (who were suspected of separatism). So Russian composers, hitherto virtually obsessed with realism, were forced into an about-face. “Fantastic” subject matter—folk tales and fairy tales—became about the only type the censors regarded as safe. At first by edict, later as a result of a seriously kindled interest in harmonic novelties, the realm of fantasy became Rimsky-Korsakov’s virtually exclusive domain.

The harmonic novelties in question were overwhelmingly octatonic: that is, they involved progressions based on the harmonies that could be derived from the 0369 “nodes” of the scale, the minor-third cycle that became an octatonic scale when passing tones were added (just as a whole-tone scale resulted from the adding of passing tones to an 048/ major-third cycle, something one finds as early as Schubert). Ex. 2-27 shows the complex of harmonies that may be drawn from an octatonic scale whose nodes correspond to the /0369/ progression Ravel employed in *Jeux d'eau*—that is, the progression that contains the F#-C tritone axis, and Ex. 2-28 is a scene-setting passage that conjures up the fantastic underwater world of the Sea King in Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *Sadko* (1897).

The image displays four musical staves in treble clef, illustrating the relationship between an octatonic scale and various triadic harmonies:

- Scale:** An octatonic scale starting on C4, consisting of the notes C, Bb, B, C#, D, Eb, E, and F.
- Triads:** Four triads are shown, each corresponding to a note in the scale:
 - Bb major triad (Bb, C, D)
 - B minor triad (B, C, D)
 - C# major triad (C#, D, E)
 - Eb major triad (Eb, F, G)
- Sevenths:** Four seventh chords are shown, each corresponding to a note in the scale:
 - Bb7b9 (Bb, C, D, Eb, F)
 - B7b9 (B, C, D, Eb, F)
 - C#7b9 (C#, D, E, F, G)
 - Eb7b9 (Eb, F, G, Ab, Bb)
- French sixths (liaison with whole-tone collection):** Four French sixth chords are shown, each corresponding to a note in the scale:
 - Bb6 (Bb, C, D, E)
 - B6 (B, C, D, E)
 - C#6 (C#, D, E, F)
 - Eb6 (Eb, F, G, Ab)

Arrows labeled "equivalent" indicate the following relationships:

- From the Bb6 chord to the Bb7b9 chord.
- From the B6 chord to the B7b9 chord.
- From the C#6 chord to the C#7b9 chord.
- From the Eb6 chord to the Eb7b9 chord.

ex. 2-27 Triadic harmonies referable to an octatonic collection

ex. 2-28 Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Sadko*, Act I, scene 2, mm. 1–23

The notes circled in Ex. 2-28 are the only ones not found in the scale shown in Ex. 2-27. Chromatic passing tones one and all, they contribute to the smoothness of the part writing but do not register as harmonically significant. Thus Rimsky in *Sadko* was actually doing something a bit more radical than Ravel in *Jeux d'eau*, at least from the “structural” point of view: he was mining the octatonic collection for lengthy passages of “seemingly traditional” harmonies that were nevertheless “without tonal motivation,” in the words of the music theorist Elliott Antokoletz.⁴³ What this means is that there is no way, up to m. 19, of deciding which of the constituent harmonic roots in Ex. 2-27 is the tonic. It is only the dominant of C, which is not part of the scale of reference (and which therefore sounds like an agent acting on the harmony from without), that allows a tonic function to emerge. And when it does, it focuses attention on the title character, Sadko, a human intruder on the magical sea world, who is about to sing, and who inhabits the ordinary world of mortals where fifths, not thirds, prevail.

This opposition of “human” music based on fifth relations and “magic” music based on symmetrical cycles of

thirds was the harmonic novelty that so attracted and influenced the younger composers of Russia and France alike, beginning with Ravel’s generation. The French-Russian affinity will look even stronger in the light of Ex. 2-29, another snatch from the same scene in *Sadko*, where two scales based on symmetrical cycles of thirds (a whole-tone scale in the “soprano,” decorated with trills and chromatic neighbors, and an octatonic scale in the “alto”) are set in motion over a bass that oscillates between E and its tritone counterpart B \flat , the two pitches that (as exhibited in the second part of Ex. 2-29) bisect both scales and furnish the whole progression with a harmonically static axis of symmetry.

ex. 2-29a Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Sadko*, Act I, scene 2

ex. 2-29b The symmetrical scales and their points of intersection

The use of dominant-ninth chords for harmony adds to the symmetry in evidence, since the dominant-ninth chord is intervallically (hence inversionally) symmetrical: its constituent intervals form a palindrome (M3-m3-m3-M3) that by definition remains constant whether counted from the bottom or from the top. Although composed by a Russian born in the 1840s, this passage could easily slide unnoticed into a composition by a Frenchman born in the 1860s (Debussy) or the 1870s (Ravel). The difference—and it was a crucial one—lay in the degree of calculation involved. The scholarly Russian did these things systematically and “theoretically.” The hedonistic “decadent” French did them “by ear.” Rimsky thoroughly disapproved.

The one time he is known to have attended a concert at which Ravel's music (including *Jeux d'eau*) was played, he was asked his opinion and, "after hemming and hawing for a while"⁴⁴ (according to one of his pupils) he said, "As far as the principle of using dissonance with all the rights of consonances is concerned, it's not my cup of tea; although I should hurry right home lest I get used to it and, God forbid, begin to like it." So while he may not have wished to like what Ravel was doing, Rimsky grasped it well, just as he grasped the underlying principle that drove maximalism. He took Liszt's innovations further, but drew a line. Ravel overstepped this line, but (as we shall see) drew another. And yet it could be argued that if Ravel went further than Rimsky in his tolerance for dissonance, Rimsky went further than Ravel in his freedom from the circle of fifths. In any case, Rimsky's witticism about "using dissonance with all the rights of consonances" jibes remarkably with a pseudopolitical slogan ("the emancipation of dissonance") that Arnold Schoenberg would soon be touting in earnest. By then, Ravel would no longer be on board. (To him, Schoenberg's stuff was "laboratory music."⁴⁵)

But Rimsky's dictum applies well to Ravel's novel idea, that of mixing into pungent "polyharmonies" chords that Rimsky used only in succession. Only once, in a work he did not live to complete, did Rimsky ever try it himself: see Ex. 2-30.

Muzyka sfer (music of the spheres) (E♭ minor)

The image shows a musical score for 'Muzyka sfer (music of the spheres)' in E-flat minor. The score is divided into two staves. The top staff contains complex polyharmonic chords, and the bottom staff shows the corresponding notes for the Trombones and Horns. The title and key signature are indicated at the top.

ex. 2-30 Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, sketch for *Heaven and Earth* (1908)

Yet here again the younger composer managed to trump the elder at his own game. In *Rapsodie espagnole* for orchestra (1908), another composition with a Lisztian title but Rimskian content, Ravel saturated his music with brilliant orchestral effects he had learned from the Russian composer. The most general influence came, naturally enough, from Rimsky's *Capriccio espagnol* (1887). One very specific device, glissandos of natural harmonics in the strings, came courtesy of Rimsky's *Christmas Eve* suite (1904), given its first French performance in 1907, shortly before Ravel started work on his *Rapsodie*. The most telling appropriation from Rimsky, perhaps, took the form of woodwind cadenzas over fermatas in the strings, borrowed from Rimsky's most popular orchestral work, *Sheherazade* (1888), a symphonic suite (that is, a suite of symphonic poems) based on tales from the *Arabian Nights*.

Rimsky had played a solo clarinet off against repeated pizzicato chords in the strings (Ex. 2-31). The harmonic progression is drawn once again from the repertoire illustrated in Ex. 2-27: dominant sevenths on A, C, and F#, together with E♭ making up an 0 3 6 9 cycle of minor thirds. Against them, the notes given constant emphasis in the repeated clarinet phrases (E and G), fit in, respectively, as fifth and seventh over A, third and fifth over C, and finally seventh and ninth over F#. Thus "octatonicism" is reconciled with the older technique, also a Russian favorite, of "common tone" progression.

In Ravel's cadenzas (Ex. 2-32), the harmonies, like those in *Jeux d'eau*, are mixed (or superimposed). In the first, a pair of clarinets noodle arpeggios centering on A over a sustained dominant ninth on E♭: a tritone relationship that fills in the gaps, so to speak, between the C and F# in *Jeux d'eau* according to the scheme in Ex. 2-27. In the second, for two bassoons, harmonies built over not two but three roots drawn from a single /0 3 6 9/ matrix are set simultaneously in motion: C# (bassoons), B♭ (cellos and basses), and F (violin

harmonics).⁴⁶ In effect, Ravel has combined the harmonic contents of all three Rimskian cadenzas in Ex. 2-31 into a single (or rather a triple) “polychord.”

The image displays a musical score for Ex. 2-31, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Sheherazade*, II. The score is in 2/4 time and consists of three systems. The first system shows a complex texture with multiple chords and triplets. The second system is marked with a square 'F' and features a prominent polychord in the right hand. The third system continues the texture and ends with a double bar line and the word 'etc.' below it.

ex. 2-31 Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Sheherazade*, II

Cadenza ad lib.

44 Cl. *pp* Cl. Strings + Harp *pp*

ex. 2-32a Maurice Ravel, *Rhapsodie espagnole*, I, Cadenza at fig. 6

54 8

Bassoon

Harp

Ist Violin Solo

Violins Violas

Cello C.B.

glissando

Ad libitum

simile ad lib

(sordines)

etc.

ex. 2-32b Maurice Ravel, *Rhapsodie espagnole*, I, Cadenza at fig. 8

Notes:

(42) Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life*, trans. Judah A. Joffe, ed. Carl Van Vechten (London: Eulenburg Books, 1974), p. 78.

(43) Elliott Antokoletz, Review of Pieter Van den Toorn, *The Music of Igor Stravinsky*, *JAMS* XXXVII (1984): 429.

(44) Mikhail Fabianovich Gnesin, *Misli i vospominaniya o N. A. Rimskom-Korsakove* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1956), p. 207.

(45) Alma Mahler Werfel, *And the Bridge Is Love* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), p. 148.

(46) See Steven Baur, "Ravel's 'Russian' Period: Octatonicism in His Early Works, 1893–1908," *JAMS* LII (1999): 376–77.

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Lili Boulanger

Nadia Boulanger

FEMALE COMPETITION

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 Getting Rid of Glue

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

That kind of emulation—outward homage concealing an effort to surpass—has an ancient history in the literate music of the West, and has often seemed to drive that history, insofar as the history of music is conceived as the history of innovative composing techniques. Early instances of creative emulation include the many polyphonic Mass Ordinary cycles composed in the fifteenth century on shared cantus firmus melodies like *L'Homme armé*, with their dizzying feats of contrapuntal virtuosity.

Friendly (or not so friendly) rivalry among composers has surely undergirded many instances of “mutual influence,” such as that between Mozart and Haydn, particularly in the domains of string quartet and symphony, which contributed greatly to the so-called emancipation of instrumental music—“absolute music”—in the nineteenth century. Beethoven’s semiantagonistic (or at least “agonistic,” contestatory) relationship to his immediate predecessors and contemporaries has become proverbial, and, constantly replayed and reenacted by succeeding generations of agonists, created a crisis in the histories of the same genres.

More recent notions, such as historicism and modernism, were similarly saturated with the principles of emulation, contest, and innovation as a measure of strength, to the point where many historians and critics (in particular the literary theorist Harold Bloom⁴⁷), seizing on Sigmund Freud’s theory of the “Oedipus complex,” the natural rivalry of fathers and sons, have elevated the contest of strength into the essential driving force in the history of the arts. That theory will certainly appear to fit and organize a multitude of facts in the history of twentieth-century music, as we are about to discover them. But is Bloom’s theory a diagnosis of romanticism and its more recent metamorphoses, or is it in itself a symptom of them?

One group of critics who would certainly call it a symptom rather than a diagnosis would be feminist critics, who have tended in recent years to read the history of art as driven primarily by the male ego—“machismo,” as we often call it now (from the Spanish)—with deleterious effects not only on the fate of women artists, but on the content and quality of art itself. In an article provocatively entitled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971), the art historian Linda Nochlin subjected the notion of “greatness” to a cultural analysis and concluded that it rested in part on a foundation of fierce self-assertion—behavior deemed unacceptable in a woman, however talented. In this way the question posed by Nochlin’s title could become a self-fulfilling tautology: There are no great women artists because women are incapable of [read: socially barred from] greatness—unless, that is, they were willing to be looked upon, and vicariously slaughtered, as “idols of perversity” (to recall the conclusion of chapter 1).

Thus the social costs of artistic success for a woman, amounting to virtual ostracism, were literally prohibitive. “The choice for women,” Nochlin wrote, “seems always to be marriage *or* a career, i.e., solitude as the price of success *or* sex and companionship at the price of professional renunciation.”⁴⁸ This unhappy set of alternatives is well illustrated even by the relatively happy career of Amy Beach (1867–1944), a talented American pianist and composer who had to put her performing career “on hold” for the duration of her marriage, and could only reassert herself as a professional after her husband’s death.

France, as it happens, was the one country where the institutional means for artistic success became

available to women toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the ban on feminine participation in the yearly contests for Rome Prizes was lifted, first in painting, then in music. Nochlin rightly points out that this greater democratization of the artistic and musical academies coincided with (and in a way gave recognition to) a drastic lessening of academic prestige, and a no less drastic weakening of the academies' power to act as gatekeepers regulating access to the arts and professions.

Nevertheless, the removal of barriers to feminine participation did seem to create, as if out of nothing, a cadre of female candidates, showing that there had never been a lack of feminine talent or ambition, only of social outlets for their expression. Women were first allowed to compete for the Prix de Rome in 1903. Over the next decade there were four female finalists for the prize, two of them—Nadia and Lili Boulanger—from a single family. In 1913, the younger of the two Boulanger sisters, the tragically short-lived Lili (1893–1918), became the first woman to win it.

In keeping with a pattern to which Nochlin had already called attention in her essay on women in the visual arts, the Boulanger sisters were the daughters (and granddaughters) of successful composers who had taught at the Paris Conservatory. Their father, who was in his seventies when they were born, had won the Prix de Rome himself in 1835. This created a certain amount of good will toward Nadia when she first entered the competition in 1906; but although she tried four times, and although each time a significant number of jurors judged her work to be the best, she never rose beyond the level of “second runner-up” (*Deuxième second grand prix*), the rank already attained by Hélène Fleury in the 1904 competition. As the music historian Annegret Fauser has observed, this was probably by tacit consent the “glass ceiling” for a woman competitor.⁴⁹



fig. 2-8 Lili Boulanger.

Fausser has speculated that Lili Boulanger's success in 1913 was due in part to a strategy she deliberately adopted in the wake of her sister's failure. In 1908, the consensus had been that the large-limbed and robust elder sister would have won the prize had she not committed a minor infraction of the rules, composing the required fugue for string quartet instead of the customary chorus. Playing as it did into the stereotype of the *femme nouvelle*, the aggressive and rebellious "new woman" who threatened traditional family values, Nadia's bold behavior may have inspired a misogynous backlash.

In any case, the slightly built and fair-faced Lili Boulanger presented herself in 1913 not as a *femme nouvelle* but as a *femme fragile*, a tender and submissive maiden, and walked off with the prize. Her enormous talent contributed to her success, no doubt, but as Fausser observes, "Nadia's fate shows that musical talent alone was not sufficient" to overcome prejudice.⁵⁰ Lili's prize cantata, the love scene *Faust et Hélène*, set to a prescribed text drawn from Goethe's *Faust*, part 2, was not dangerously original: a salad of near quotations from *Parsifal* and *Siegfried*, it shows that the "default mode" for young French musicians, the style that

came with least resistance to a harried prize contestant working on a deadline, was still tinged with Wagnermania, and can seem unintentionally amusing to a listener today. But one thing that it surely is not is fragile. However she chose to present herself to the jury, Lili Boulanger was in her creative work as capable of intensely assertive expression and effect as any male member of her generation. (So which was the disguise and which the “real Lili”—the fragile persona or the assertive music? Or is such a framing of the question, like most dichotomies, a double bind?) In several later works she achieved a much greater individuality without loss of directness. There are no “late” Lili Boulanger works, because she became chronically ill shortly after taking up residence in Rome in accordance with her prize, and died, possibly of malaria, in March 1918, at the age of twenty-four. Her most characteristic compositions are choral: several psalm settings, a *Vieille prière bouddhique* (“Old buddhist prayer”), a war elegy called *Pour les funérailles d'un soldat* (“For a soldier's funeral”). At the time of her death she was working on an opera based on yet another play by Maurice Maeterlinck, *La princesse Maleine* (previously fancied by both Satie and Debussy).

Lili Boulanger's last completed composition, *Pie Jesu* for mezzo-soprano (or choirboy), string quartet, harp, and organ, was dictated by the composer to her sister Nadia during her final illness. It bears a clearly emulative (are we still prepared to say “macho” or “Oedipal”?) relationship to Fauré's *Requiem*, which contains a similarly scored setting of *Pie Jesu*, the gentle concluding verse of the otherwise omitted *Dies irae* sequence.

Despite the steady atmospheric murmur of semitones in the ostinato accompaniment, the organizing principles of the music are by now familiar from our survey of the French music of the period. The vocal line is “modal” in the fashion of the restored medieval chant. Where the key signature contains one sharp, cadences are made to E, but the leading tone is conspicuously suppressed in “Dorian” fashion (Ex. 2-33a). In the coda, where the key signature changes to three sharps, the vocal cadences on B display an even more literally Dorian character. Here the meter, changing to common time with steady rhythmic activity at the level of the eighth note, reinforces the allusion to Fauré's setting, which moves similarly. The accompaniment, moreover, is progressively purged of its Wagnerian chromaticism, achieving diatonic purity to accompany the concluding “Amen,” which Marc Blitzstein, one of the many American composers who studied in the 1920s with Nadia Boulanger, aptly characterized as “the essence of affirmation”⁵¹ (Ex. 2-33b).

très expressif

C.
Pi - e Je - su Do - mi - ne Do - na

Vln. I, II

Vla., Vc.

Org.

Ped.

Cédez a Tempo

e - is re - qui - em Do - na e - is re - qui - em,

Cédez a Tempo

ôtez s'grave

R

ex. 2-33a Lili Boulanger, *Pie Jesu*, mm. 3-9

musical score for the last seven measures of "Pie Jesu" by Lili Boulanger. The score includes parts for Violin I and II, Viola and Cello, Harp, Organ, and Pedal. The vocal line is at the top with lyrics "sans couleur très calme" and "men". The instrumental parts include dynamic markings like "ppp" and "p".

ex. 2-33b Lili Boulanger, *Pie Jesu*, last seven measures

musical diagram showing a sequence of chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The right hand chords are marked with fingerings: 8 5 4, 6 3, 8 7 4, and 6 5 2. The left hand has a single note marked "pedal". The word "or" is written above the final chord.

ex. 2-33c Block representation of last harmony

At the same time the harp part begins to emphasize “pentatonic” fourths and major seconds: its ostinato pattern, reduced to block formation in Ex. 2-33c, shows the way in which a “triad” consisting of a fourth plus a second (or, alternatively, two “stacked” perfect fourths) becomes the normative harmony, replacing the chromatically slithering thirds (normally considered a more consonant interval) heard at the opening. The harmonic change, a triumph of “half-steplessness,” signals (or reflects) the triumph of faith over fear that the music is meant to delineate (or inspire). And in view of the common thread linking the many stylistic developments this chapter has traced, it was also a triumph of “gluelessness” and the “essence” of France.

Notes:

(47) The two main texts are Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), and Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

(48) Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971); in Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 167.

(49) Annegret Fauser, “*La Guerre en dentelles: Women and the Prix de Rome in French Cultural Politics*,” *JAMS LI* (1998): 122.

(50) *Ibid.*, p. 127.

(51) Marc Blitzstein, “Music’s Other Boulanger,” *Saturday Review*, 28 May 1960, p. 60.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Ballet From Sixteenth-Century France to Nineteenth-Century Russia; Stravinsky

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

A MISSING GENRE

It is time to confess to a scandalous omission. An entire genre, with a history extending back as far as the sixteenth century, has been virtually missing from this account of European art music, and it is high time to redress the neglect. The slighted genre is that of theatrical dance and the music written to accompany it—in a word, *ballet*. It is no accident that the word is French. Ballet was French in a much realer, more objective way than any of the Frenchnesses described in the preceding chapter, because it was historically, not merely “essentially” French. It was French, that is, in documented fact, not just by nationalistic assertion.

The European tradition of spectacular professional dancing for theatrical display originated at the court of the French king Henry III, whose Italian-born mother, Catherine de Médicis, sponsored the first *ballets de cour*, courtly entertainments in which poetry, music, stage décor, and dance were all combined in a single dramatic action. The first such grand spectacle, *Circé, ou le Balet comique de la Royne* (“Circe, or the Queen’s comic dance spectacle”), was presented at the Petit Bourbon palace on 15 October 1581, under the direction of Balthasar de Beaujoyeulx (ca. 1535–ca. 1587), Catherine’s “master of revels.” Like Jean-Baptiste Lully, his great successor, and like his royal patroness herself, Beaujoyeulx (born Belgioioso) was a naturalized Italian. The early French ballets incorporated many ingredients imported from Italy, intermixed with local traditions of court pantomime and allegory. They arose around the same time as the Italian court spectacles known as *intermedii*, which were among the immediate forerunners of the nascent opera.

The fantastic success of the early opera is what scotched the growth of the ballet. When transferred from the ballroom floor to the stage under Lully in the seventeenth century, the ballet became only one of the ingredients in the *tragédie lyrique*, the French version of opera, in which the chief dramatic burden, as in opera everywhere, was carried not by dancing but by singing, hence by words. Theatrical dancing thus became an accessory, an element not of dramatic substance but of luxurious ornament, and declined both in creative energy and in prestige.

The French court remained its epicenter. Exquisite solo and ensemble dancing remained an obligatory ornament of the French operatic stage as a reminder of the richness of the court that supported it, and of the power of the French autocracy. It was the courtliest of all the courtly arts. Like the political monolith that sustained it, the French ballet was esteemed throughout Europe as an embodiment of everything aristocratic, and its music was imitated wherever the high aristocratic style was aspired to—most conspicuously at the petty German courts, which maintained orchestras for no other purpose than to perform “Overtures,” or suites of French dance music (a genre to which J. S. Bach contributed four specimens in the early eighteenth century, and G. P. Telemann dozens).

But the emphasis on dancing as ornament or diversion rather than action, and the limits that impersonal court convention placed on its expressivity, led to dissatisfaction with the way it functioned within—or rather impeded—the developing French opera. Writing about the way in which French composers had to make way for frequent danced divertissements (*fêtes*), Jean-Jacques Rousseau complained in 1761 that “in every act the action is usually cut off at the most exciting moment by a fête: if the prince is happy, one shares his joy and

one dances; if he is sad, one wants to cheer him up and one dances.”

Rousseau was writing here in the vanguard of romanticism, insisting on naturalness and personal expressivity in place of courtly stylization. Over the course of the eighteenth century, a number of reforms and innovations conspired to undermine the impersonal aristocratic conventions of court dancing and replace them with a new kind of ballet that placed the emphasis on individual characters and their emotional reactions—expressed entirely in supple bodily movements—to an unfolding story line. This kind of ballet, which could be regarded as a self-sufficient “wordless opera,” and which was indeed designed to vie with opera for dominance in the realm of music theater, was known as *ballet d’action* or “plot ballet.”

In a plot ballet, a scenario, or planned sequence of danced “numbers,” took the place of the libretto. The scenarist, who might or might not be the choreographer or ballet master, the designer of the actual danced steps, had a task similar to the librettist’s: that of expressing the content of the plot, often a well-known story, in terms of danceable situations. A method of alternating plot-presentation and emotional reflection, reminiscent of the alternating recitatives and arias in opera and clearly modeled on them, became standard. The equivalent of recitative was “pantomime,” or gestural mimicry, in which elements of plot were “acted out” in a very stylized way to the accompaniment of loosely structured “mimetic” music. The actual dances, often adapted (like operatic arias) from established ballroom genres, expressed in more general terms the characters’ emotional reactions to the events of the plot.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Ballet d'action

Adolphe Adam

Léo Delibes

BALLET D'ACTION

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The choreographer Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1810) claimed to be the sole inventor of this type of highly elaborated dance spectacle. And while all such claims to absolute priority can be debunked—Noverre's by dance historians who have identified forerunners of his *ballets d'action* as early as 1702—Noverre's works were recognized by his contemporaries as an important step toward ballet's "emancipation" from opera (an emancipation ironically achieved by means of emulation). During a stay in London, Noverre studied the techniques of David Garrick, the famous realistic actor, who returned the compliment by calling Noverre "the Shakespeare of the dance."¹

Noverre's first great success was *Le jugement de Paris*, a heroic (i.e., mythological) *ballet d'action* produced at Lyon in 1751. The music, now lost, was probably an assemblage of existing pieces by a variety of composers. The first *ballet d'action* composed as a continuous score by a "name" composer was Gluck's *Don Juan* (Vienna, 1761), choreographed by Gasparo Angiolini (1731–1803), Noverre's great rival. The first specialist composer for the new genre was Joseph Starzer (1726–87), an Austrian who worked first at the Russian court in St. Petersburg, later in Vienna with both Noverre and Angiolini, and logged some three dozen ballet scores over the course of his career.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the *ballet d'action* had begun to incorporate subject matter drawn not only from mythology and ancient history but from the full range of literary prototypes on which opera also drew, including scenes from (admittedly idealized) peasant life. Beginning with the work of Charles Louis Didelot at the King's Theater in London (from 1796), ballets were given spectacular stagings that, in their use of flying machines and the like, rivaled the French operas from which the *ballet d'action* had originally spun off. The nascent romantic ballet was poised to present itself, in short, as a full-fledged alternative to opera.

But how viable an alternative to opera? How great a threat to it? For most of the nineteenth century, not very. For one thing, opera (especially when staged in France) often included ballet, sometimes very spectacularly staged, and could boast a more complete representation of the arts in combination. Nor did the ballet *divertissements* featured in operatic productions encourage spectators to regard the dance as a potential bearer of serious dramatic values. For that there was singing, after all, supplied with words that could specify emotional contexts far more efficiently than the stylized "language" of gesture.

A further blow to the reputation of ballet among serious artists and their audiences was its association with what, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, became identified as outmoded aristocratic taste, and the way in which ballet was sometimes forcibly (and, it could seem, frivolously) interpolated into preexisting scores. The classic instance was the Paris production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1861, for which Wagner was prevailed upon to supply a short dance *divertissement* in the first act (called the "Venusberg" music) to depict the title character's dalliance with the goddess Venus on her sacred hill. This, however did not prevent members of the Jockey Club, an association of ballet- (or ballerina-) loving aristocrats, from disrupting performances with catcalls and dog-whistles to protest the absence of a full-scale ballet in the second act, since that meant they had to curtail their dinners if they were to see their girlfriends dance. (Verdi, recalling

this fiasco, added an incongruous “Moorish” ballet to *Otello* for the Paris premiere in 1894; it was his very last music for the stage.) Then, too, the relatively lowly status of the composer in its scheme of things discouraged many of the major musical figures of the nineteenth century from becoming involved in ballet. Beethoven, who composed a *ballet d'action* called *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus* (“The creatures of Prometheus”) for the Vienna court theater in 1801, was something of an exception, and he was treated with exceptional deference. More typical was the experience described by Victor Alphonse Duvernoy, an old ballet composer looking back on the conditions of his youth, in a memoir published in 1903:

In olden days, the scenarist began by finding a choreographer. Between the poet and the dancer a close collaboration was formed. Once the plan of the piece and the dances were arranged, the musician was called in. The ballet-master indicated the rhythms he had laid down, the steps he had arranged, the number of bars which each variation must contain—in short, the music was arranged to fit the dances. And the musician docilely improvised, so to speak, and often in the ballet-master’s room, everything that was asked of him. You can guess how alert his pen had to be, and how quick his imagination. No sooner was a scene written or a *pas* [a section of choreography] arranged than they were rehearsed with a violin, a single violin, as the only accompaniment. Even after having servilely done everything the ballet-master had demanded, the composer had to pay attention to the advice of the principal dancers. So he had to have much talent, or at least great facility, to satisfy so many exigences, and, I would add, a certain amount of philosophy.²

Only beginning in 1886 was a piano, capable of rendering a semblance of the full score, used at ballet rehearsals for the Paris opera. These were not conditions under which Romantic composers (with rare if notable exceptions) would gladly work, proud as they were of their social emancipation and the vaunted “esthetic autonomy” of their work.

The main exceptions in France were two. Adolphe Adam (1803–56), primarily a composer of comic operas, wrote fourteen full-length *ballets d'action* in two or three acts beginning in 1830, the year of the July revolution when the Paris Opera, including its ballet company, was for the first time removed from the direct control of the royal court and put under private management. One of the results of this change was the installation of the grand historical opera as the reigning operatic genre in Paris, and the relegation of traditionally romantic subject matter—subject matter involving the mysterious “spirit world”—to the province of ballet.

And one of the results of that relegation was the creation of *Giselle* (1841), Adam’s masterpiece and the sole survivor in repertory of the Paris Opéra ballets of its day. It is now regarded as the quintessential romantic ballet, familiar to ballet audiences everywhere, making its creator the first “name” composer in history to be remembered chiefly for a ballet. Its scenario, by the romantic poet Théophile Gautier (1811–72), was based on a Slavic legend recounted by Heine in his book *De l'Allemagne* (“From Germany”), according to which nocturnal sprites called wilis (or willies), the ghosts of maidens, lure fickle young men to their death by enticing them into their endless round dance. Adam composed it as a vehicle for Carlotta Grisi (1819–99), “the lightest *sylphide* [airborne creature] of the Opéra,”³ according to a contemporary press release.

In the first act *Giselle*, a winsome, wholesome peasant girl, is seduced by Albrecht, a disguised prince; on learning his identity and despairing of his love, she kills herself with his sword. In the second act she is admitted to the company of wilis, but, still loving Albrecht, protects him from her companions’ spell and evokes, alas belatedly, his sincere love in return, expressed in a *pas de deux* (a “choreographed number for two,” the balletic equivalent of a love duet) in which the two protagonists are personified by instrumental soloists (viola for Albrecht, various woodwinds for *Giselle*) all accompanied by the harp.

With its moonlit set and a female corps de ballet spectacularly deployed on invisible wires, the second act was an invitation to the composer to come up with comparably rarefied effects of spooky orchestration and harmony, effects reminiscent of Weber’s in *Der Freischütz* but wistful (“feminine”) rather than menacing or violent in tone (Ex. 3-1). The result was a *ballet d'action* unprecedented in its musical ambition, challenging the supremacy of opera by adopting some of its most sophisticated musical techniques, such as the use of

reminiscence motifs, replete with “thematic transformation.” Ex. 3-2 shows the main reminiscence motif, which first accompanies the meeting of Albrecht and Giselle and last appears at the climax of the act II pas de deux.



fig. 3-1 Carlotta Grisi (1819–1899) in *Giselle*, act II (lithograph from a drawing by Challamel). Note the conventions of miming: the ballerina’s right arm is in the *J’écoute* (“I’m listening”) position.

Flutes, Clarinets

Chime *pp*

pp

This musical score is for the apparition of the wilis in Act II of Adolphe Adam's *Giselle*. It features two staves: the top staff is for Flutes and Clarinets, and the bottom staff is for Chime. The music is in a key with three flats and a 2/4 time signature. The Flutes and Clarinets play a series of chords, while the Chime provides a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The dynamic marking is *pp* (pianissimo).

ex. 3-1 Adolphe Adam, *Giselle*, Act II, apparition of the wilis

Adam's ballet became a benchmark, defining the style—and the particular ethereal tone—of romantic ballet for the next half-century. After *Giselle*, as Gautier reminisced in a Paris newspaper,

Andante

pp

This musical score is for Act I, figure 9 of Adolphe Adam's *Giselle*. It features two staves: the top staff is for the melody and the bottom staff is for the accompaniment. The music is in a key with one sharp and a 3/4 time signature. The tempo is marked *Andante*. The melody is played in the right hand, and the accompaniment is played in the left hand. The dynamic marking is *pp* (pianissimo).

ex. 3-2a Adolphe Adam, *Giselle*, Act I, fig. 9

Moderato

mf

f

This musical score is for Act II Finale, Valse of Adolphe Adam's *Giselle*. It features two staves: the top staff is for the melody and the bottom staff is for the accompaniment. The music is in a key with three flats and a 3/4 time signature. The tempo is marked *Moderato*. The melody is played in the right hand, and the accompaniment is played in the left hand. The dynamic markings are *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *f* (forte).

ex. 3-2b Adolphe Adam, *Giselle*, Act II Finale, Valse

Les Filets de Vulcain and *Flore et Zephyre* [that is, traditional “neoclassical” or mythological subjects of court ballet] were no longer possible. The stage of the Opéra was given over to gnomes [earth

or air spirits], to all those strange, mysterious folk who lend themselves so wonderfully to the fantasies of the *maître de ballet*. The twelve mansions of marble and gold of the Olympians were relegated to the dust of the scenery store, and artists were commissioned to produce only romantic forests, valleys by the light of that pretty German moon of Heine's ballads. The new type brought in its wake a great abuse of white gauze, tulle and tarlatan, shades dissolved into mist by means of transparent skirts. White was almost the only color used.⁴

The other major musical figure to emerge from the *ballet d'action* in France was Léo Delibes (1836–91), a pupil of Adam, who made his début as a composer of full-length dance spectacles ten years after his teacher's death while working at the Paris Opéra as chorus master. Delibes, who like Adam was primarily a composer of comic operas, went on to write two ballets that have remained repertory staples: *Coppélia* (1870), after a story by E. T. A. Hoffmann that parodies the "Pygmalion" legend (a young girl wins back the love of her sweetheart by impersonating a mechanical doll with which he is infatuated); and *Sylvia* (1876), about a forest nymph in love with a mortal.

By comparison with the romantic ballet of Adam's generation, the music in these scores of Delibes has been called "symphonic"—sometimes (as one might guess) in praise, sometimes in blame, depending on the caller's perspective. In either case, the term ought not to be taken too literally. Sometimes it was merely code for "Germanic." Here it seems to refer to the unusually lengthy mimed episodes in which the freely modulating music follows the action with what might—very loosely!—be termed a process of motivic development, as in Ex. 3-3, from the act I finale in *Coppélia*. The passage accompanies the discovery, by Swanilda, the "young girl" in the summary above, of a key to toymaker Coppélius's shop, and her decision to break in together with her companions to see Coppélia, the mechanical doll.

On leaving her companions, Swanhilda sees something shining on the ground.
Swanhilda au moment de se séparer de ses compagnes voit briller quelque chose à terre.

Musical score for the first scene, featuring piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *p*.

It is a key – the one belonging to Coppélius, who has let it drop.
C'est une clé – c'est celle de Coppélius, qu'il a laissé tomber en se débattant!

Musical score for the second scene, featuring Cellos and Violas with a dynamic marking of *p*.

Coppélius is far away: why not profit from his absence and visit his mysterious abode?
Coppélius est loin: si l'on profitait de son absence pour visiter cette maison mystérieuse?

Musical score for the third scene, featuring Flute and Oboe with a dynamic marking of *p*.

They hesitate – but Swanhilda thinks she sees Franz beneath the trees, trying to attract Coppelia's attention.
Elles hésitent – mais Swanhilda croit voir sous les arbres, Frantz, cherchant encore à attirer les regards de Coppélia.

Musical score for the fourth scene, featuring piano accompaniment.

She'd like to see her rival...
Elle veut connaître sa rivale...

Musical score for the fifth scene, featuring piano accompaniment with dynamic markings of *dim.* and *pp*.

Jealousy overcomes her scruples.
la jalousie dissipe ses scrupules.

Vivace

"Let's go in," she says.
Entrons! dit-elle.

ex. 3-3 Leo Delibes, *Coppélia*, from the Act I Finale

Yet despite the success of his ballets, despite the unprecedented respect his music won for the genre from serious musicians, and despite its popularity in the concert hall owing to the colorful orchestral suites that he cannily fashioned from his scores, Delibes only managed temporarily to buck the French ballet's irrevocable decline in the second half of the century. He had no successors.

The reason was simple: the fortunes of an aristocratic art form rise and fall with that of the aristocracy to whose taste it caters, and the off-again-on-again condition of the French monarchy in the nineteenth century was increasingly parlous and inhospitable to its dependent art-genres. Delibes's ballet career, which began during the "Second Empire" with the monarchy on its last legs, reached its climax in the period of the early "Third Republic." This period, the immediate aftermath of the disastrous defeat by Prussia, was one of fairly puritanical chastening.

"Idle" aristocratic taste for the luxurious and the decorative, already subjected to years of spoofing in Jacques Offenbach's operettas, was widely repudiated in favor of the high spiritual ideals of the Société Nationale de Musique, whose members, at least at first, were unanimously hostile to ballet. Even *Coppélia*, Delibes's masterpiece, with its comic episodes and happy "realistic" ending bore traces of parody. *Sylvia*, which took its old-fashioned romanticism seriously, was greeted with almost as much mockery as enthusiasm. It was the last of the line. *Ballet d'action*, scarcely a century old, was dead.

Notes:

(1) Arnold Haskell, *Ballet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1938), p. 22.

(2) *L'Art du théâtre*, January 1903; quoted in Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), p. 11.

(3) *La Presse* (Paris), 5 July 1841; quoted in Guest, *The Romantic Ballet*, p. 206.

(4) *La Presse*, 1 July 1844; quoted in Guest, *The Romantic Ballet*, p. 10.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Ballet: Classical ballet in Russia

OFF TO RUSSIA

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Or so it would have been, had it not escaped to Russia. Why Russia? For the same simple reason. In Russia, the strongest autocracy in Europe (and after 1848 the last bastion there of true-blue absolute monarchy), where the theaters remained until 1882 under the direct control of the crown, ballet was fostered to an extent unheard of anywhere else on the continent. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the Russian court was already a magnet for French choreographers, exactly as it had been, during the eighteenth, for Italian opera composers. Didelot served in St. Petersburg for two tours of duty, from 1801 to 1811 and again from 1816 until his death in 1837. He was followed there by Arthur Saint-Léon (1821–70), who retained his connection with the Russian Imperial Theaters even when called back to Paris to stage Delibes's ballets. But the golden age of the Russian "classical" ballet came with the reign of Marius Petipa (1818–1910), widely regarded as the century's greatest choreographer, who headed the company at St. Petersburg's Mariyinsky Theater (called the Kirov in Soviet times) from 1869 until his death.

By the late 1870s, Russia was the only country where one could regularly see "pure" ballet—that is, ballet as a separate entity rather than as an adjunct or appendage to an opera or a play. During his tenure at the Mariyinsky, where he was enthusiastically supported by the imperial family, Petipa created no fewer than forty-six full-evening *ballets d'action* and enjoyed virtually unlimited access to the imperial treasury, so that his productions reached a peak of spectacular grandeur never matched before or since—and completely unavailable to the actual composers of Russia.

For although flourishing in the Russian capitals as nowhere else on earth, and therefore an art of immense national importance for Russia for the prestige it brought the court, the ballet remained a French art, dominated by French artists, and one that admitted Russian practitioners only in subordinate roles. The most important Russian choreographer at this time, Lev Ivanov (1834–1901), never rose above the rank of assistant to Petipa; his chief claim to fame came as choreographer of Chaikovsky's *Nutcracker* (1892), a task that fell to him only because Petipa had taken ill.

And this seemed perfectly natural in a country where until the 1880s French remained the official language of the court (as, a century earlier, it had been in Germany). Nor was composing the music for the imperial Russian ballet a task for Russians. The theater maintained a staff of imported specialists like the Italians Cesare Pugni (1802–70, in Russia from 1851) and Riccardo Drigo (1846–1930, in Russia 1879–1920) or the Austrian Ludwig Minkus (1826–1917, in Russia 1853–86), Petipa's favorite, whose ballets—especially *Don Quixote* (1869) and *La bayadère* (1877)—are still occasionally revived as vehicles for virtuoso ballerinas. The only Maryinsky ballet with a Russian subject or setting was Pugni's *Konyok-gorbunok*, "The Little Humpbacked Horse," (1864, choreography by Saint-Léon), a holiday confection based on a favorite children's story.

Children, in fact, were one of the target audiences for the Mariyinsky ballet, which chiefly performed at matinées—where "the half-empty auditorium contained a special public," according to one wry memoirist, consisting of "a mixture of boys and girls accompanied by their mothers or governesses, and old men with binoculars"—and holiday galas.⁵ Russian intellectuals and "serious" artists were not altogether unjustified in thinking ballet an entertainment for snobs and tired businessmen—"the fruits of M. Petipa's and St. Léon's nonsensical imagination"⁶ as one very serious critic put it in the pages of *Enokha*, an intellectual journal

edited by the novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. As for Russian composers, largely frozen out of the ballet business anyway, their opinion was well summarized in 1900 by Rimsky-Korsakov, in a letter to a critic who had inquired whether the ballet had matured under Petipa to the point where composers of the front rank might profitably apply themselves to it. "I'm inclined to think not," was the adamant reply:

And therefore I myself will *never* write such music. *In the first place*, because it is a degenerate art. *In the second place*, because miming is not a full-fledged art form. *In the third place*, balletic miming is extremely elementary and leads to a naïve kind of symbolism. *In the fourth place*, the best thing ballet has to offer—dances—are boring, since the language of dance and the whole vocabulary of movement are extremely skimpy. With the exception of character and national dances (which can also become tiring), there is only the classical, which makes up the greater part. These (that is, classical dances) are beautiful in themselves; but they are all the same, and to stare for a whole evening at one classical dance after another is impossible. *In the fifth place*, there is no need for good music in ballet; the necessary rhythm and melodiousness can be found in the work of any number of able hacks today. *In the sixth place*, in view of its paltry significance in the spectacle, ballet music is usually performed in a sloppy, slapdash manner that would tell sorely on the work of a highly talented composer.⁷

The attitude Rimsky-Korsakov was expressing was to a considerable degree a prejudice, born in part out of professional envy, and in part out of the special high-mindedness (or civic-mindedness) that the traditions of Russian realism had inspired. That prejudice came especially to the fore in an astonishing letter that a young Moscow composer, Sergey Taneyev (1856–1915), had the effrontery to send Chaikovsky, his former Conservatory professor, in 1878, after hearing Chaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. "In my opinion," he wrote,

the Symphony has one defect to which I shall never be reconciled: in every movement there are phrases that sound like ballet music: the middle section of the Andante, the Trio of the Scherzo, and a kind of march in the Finale. Hearing the Symphony, my inner eye sees involuntarily "our *prima ballerina*," which puts me out of humor and spoils my pleasure in the many beauties of the work.⁸

Chaikovsky protested against Taneyev's assumption that balletic associations must necessarily be a taint: "Do you mean to say that the Trio of my Scherzo is in the style of Minkus or Pugno? It does not, to my mind, deserve such criticism. When the music is good, on the other hand, what difference does it make whether *la Sobiechtchanskaya* [the Moscow prima ballerina] dances to it or not?"⁹

Notes:

(5) Prince Peter Lieven, *The Birth of the Ballets-Russes* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1936), p. 56.

(6) A. A. Grigoryev, "Russkiy teatr v Peterburge," in *Epokha* (1864), no. 3: 232.

(7) Rimsky-Korsakov to Semyon Kruglikov, 2 February 1900; N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy: literaturniye proizvedeniya i perepiska*, Vol. VIIIb (Moscow: Muzika, 1982), p. 105.

(8) Sergey Taneyev to Chaikovsky, 18 March 1878; M. Chaikovsky, *Life and Letters of Tchaikovsky*, Vol. I (New York: Vienna House, 1973), pp. 292–93.

(9) Chaikovsky to Taneyev, 27 March 1878; *Ibid.*, p. 293.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky

Ballet d'action

CHAIKOVSKY'S BALLETS

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The hidden subtext to this exchange was the fact that “la Sobiechtchanskaya” (that is, Anna Iosifovna Sobeshchanskaya [1842–1918], lead dancer of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow) had indeed been dancing of late to the music of Chaikovsky, and that was news. (It was in the wake of Chaikovsky’s balletic successes that the critic had elicited from Rimsky-Korsakov his irritated condemnation of the genre.) Chaikovsky was the one leading Russian composer to be powerfully attracted to ballet; perhaps more to the point, or at least to the point of this book, he was surely the only major composer of the nineteenth century to be equally known for his symphonies and his ballets—oil and water, as far as most musicians (Taneyev, for one) were concerned—and to be adjudged an outstanding producer of both.

So where Taneyev had feared that Chaikovsky’s involvement with ballet would tarnish his reputation as a “symphonist,” the historical outcome was just the opposite: the participation of a recognized symphonist like Chaikovsky was among the factors that succeeded (Rimsky-Korsakov notwithstanding) in raising the artistic standing of ballet in late-nineteenth-century Russia, eventually turning it, in a gloriously ironic and unexpected twist, into one of the most prestigious media for early-twentieth-century modernist music. For that to happen, however, ballet had to undergo its own process of “maximalization.” Chaikovsky’s first ballet, composed in 1875–76 (that is, more or less simultaneously with Delibes’s *Sylvia*) and first performed at the Bolshoi Theater in 1877, was called *Lebedinoye ozero* (*Swan Lake*). Both in its scenario (worked out by the composer in collaboration with members of the theater staff) and in its music, it was modeled quite noticeably in several respects on Adam’s *Giselle*: enchanted swan-maidens in place of wilis, a tragic mortal lover (Prince Siegfried in place of Prince Albrecht), a moonlit set against which a pas de deux is danced to the accompaniment of obbligato string solos and harp, a wealth of reminiscence motifs.

Like most nonspecialists, Chaikovsky was unprepared for the rigors that the conventions of the genre imposed on composers. Not knowing that “the balletmaster fixes the number of bars in each *pas*, or that the rhythm, the tempo and everything is strictly assigned in advance,” he recalled years later with amusement, “I leapt before I looked, began to write, like an opera, a symphony, and it came out such that not one *danseur* or *danseuse* could dance to my music, all the numbers were too long, no one could last them out.”¹⁰ Instead of disgusting him (as, we have seen, they disgusted Rimsky-Korsakov), these requirements fascinated Chaikovsky. Once having been through the choreographic mill, he prided himself on his *métier*, his hardboiled professional skill, scorned those who in their ignorance scorned the ballet specialists, and itched to submit again to the ballet discipline, delighted that he was able to come up, like a specialist, with music that sounded spontaneous despite the extreme degree of calculation that had to go into its manufacture.

These attitudes, it is only too obvious, are the very opposite of “Romantic.” That, too, was a source of contrarian pleasure to Chaikovsky, whose confessional symphonies have given him an arch-Romantic reputation not only with the public but with critics and historians as well. But in fact no nineteenth-century composer retained a more thoroughly eighteenth-century outlook on his craft than Chaikovsky. It would be wrong to call this paradoxical fact the direct result of his brush with ballet, however. Rather, his involvement with ballet was one contributory factor out of many.

Like an eighteenth-century composer, Chaikovsky was the lucky recipient of patronage: first from a wealthy widow, Nadezhda von Meck, later from the treasury of Tsar Alexander III. Like an eighteenth-century composer, he composed for immediate consumption, often on commission from the imperial theaters. Finally, and most important, his status as a member of the first class to graduate from Russia's first conservatory made him highly conscious of his novel professional status—he was in effect Russia's first full-time “pro” composer—and extremely proud of it.

In all of these ways, it was membership in what could justly be regarded as the last surviving eighteenth-century (hierarchical, aristocratic) society in Europe that shaped Chaikovsky's creative attitudes and made him into not just a successful ballet composer but an avid one. Very sincerely, and of course very unusually for his time, Chaikovsky rated Delibes as a composer far higher than Wagner or Brahms. The reasons, as he expressed them, were that Delibes's music unlike Brahms's or Wagner's (but like Mozart's) remained beautiful (rather than “great”) and pleased its hearers (rather than raising them up to its exalted level). Upon witnessing the first Bayreuth *Ring* in 1876, right after finishing *Swan Lake*, Chaikovsky wrote to his brother in disgust, “Formerly, music strove to delight people; now they are tormented and exhausted.” Notice that Chaikovsky's reasons for preferring Delibes over Wagner and Brahms were as much social as esthetic ones. That, too, bespoke an antiromantic, “eighteenth-century” attitude.

Stylistically, however, Chaikovsky's music was as “Romantic” as could be, ideally suited to the mysterious moods and magical transformations that suffused the *Swan Lake* scenario. A pair of examples, both based on the evocative “swan theme” that accompanies the first sight of the enchanted maidens, will serve both to point a parallel with Adam's reminiscence technique in *Giselle* and to demonstrate Chaikovsky's more potent powers of transformation, capable of intensifying the dramatic import at the dénouement (the death of Odette, the doomed heroine) to a tragic pitch—or (as ballet purists might object) to fully “operatic” blatancy (Ex. 3-4).

The image displays a musical score for the 'swan theme' from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. It consists of two systems of music, both marked 'Moderato'. The top system is for the Harp, featuring a melodic line with triplets and slurs. The bottom system is for the Piano, showing a harmonic accompaniment with dynamic markings such as *sf* (sforzando) and *p espress.* (piano, expressive). The score is written in 3/4 time and includes a key signature of one sharp (F#).

The image shows two systems of piano accompaniment for the beginning of Act II of Swan Lake. The first system consists of two staves (treble and bass clef). The treble staff features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a 12-measure melodic line. The bass staff provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with similar melodic and harmonic textures.

ex. 3-4a Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Swan Lake*, beginning of Act II

The image shows two systems of piano accompaniment for the climax of Act IV of Swan Lake. The first system features a treble staff with a melodic line marked with fortissimo (fff) dynamics and a 12-measure melodic line. The bass staff includes triplets and other rhythmic patterns. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with similar melodic and harmonic textures, including triplets and dynamic markings.

ex. 3-4b Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Swan Lake*, climax of Act IV

By the time Chaikovsky returned to the genre of full-length *ballet d'action* he had achieved world fame. Although he still lived near Moscow, he was now composing on eager commission from the Mariyinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, the imperial capital, working in close collaboration with Petipa and with Ivan Vsevolozhsky (1835–1909), the “Intendant” or imperial theater director himself. A former diplomat, Vsevolozhsky was a powerful bureaucrat, an impresario, an expert ballet scenarist, and a stage designer all in one. In full control of the tsar’s unlimited theatrical budget, he created—in the words of the modern choreographer George Balanchine (1904–83), who had his start in the Imperial Theaters School shortly after Vsevolozhsky’s time—a Russian “Imperial Style”¹¹ that surpassed in its lavishness anything previously seen in the nineteenth century, not excluding even the Paris Opéra in its own imperial heyday some sixty years before.

The two ballets Chaikovsky created with Petipa and Vsevolozhsky—*La belle au bois dormant* (*The Sleeping Beauty*, 1889) and *Casse-noisette* (*The Nutcracker*, 1892)—brought the *ballet d'action* to its zenith of development. They are quite different, in fact. *The Sleeping Beauty*, after a famous folk tale found both in the Grimm brothers’ collection and earlier in the tales of the French fabulist Charles Perrault, is a *ballet à grand spectacle*, Petipa’s specialty—a ballet that mixed a strong plot line with a wealth of exotic divertissement and “apotheoses,” spectacular climaxes that summoned a huge and brilliantly costumed corps de ballet onstage.

The shorter and sparer *Nutcracker*, after a tale by E. T. A. Hoffmann, contains some choreography by Petipa, but most of it was the work of Lev Ivanov, who became the first Russian choreographer to create one of the masterpieces of the genre. Nevertheless, *Nutcracker* is of an equally distinctive (and equally French) type, called *ballet-féerie*. The term designates both a ballet that has fantasy creatures—fairies, genies, and the like—in its cast of characters (but *Sleeping Beauty* already had those), and one that aims lavishly for a special marvelous lightness of effect. A *féerie* is a procession of wonders, each there for no other purpose than to be admired: art (or artifice) for art’s sake with a vengeance. *Nutcracker*, consequently, has almost no plot. Past the opening scene of a Christmas party at which Clara, a little girl, receives a nutcracker as a gift from her Uncle Drosselmeyer, the whole action consists of dream visions and a final transport to Confiturembourg (Candyland) from which—but this could be scary!—no return is made to round things off.

These culminating ballets of Chaikovsky are masterpieces of what the composer called the *vkusnoye*—the “tasty,” or sensuously delectable. Nothing could be further removed from the spiritual or expressive tasks that German composers assigned their art; nor was there (yet) anything much in Chaikovsky’s or Petipa’s art of the Symbolist ideal of sensuous thrills as a gateway to the *au-delà*, the great suprasensory “beyond.” Its special quality is better captured by the less portentous English expression “out of this world.” From both the romantic and the symbolist perspectives, such an art was suspiciously hedonistic (another codeword for “aristocratic”).

There was of course a long tradition in the nineteenth century for harmonic and timbral exploration, allied with the romantic tendency to value everything unique and exquisite. But in Chaikovsky’s “Imperial” ballets, and especially in *Nutcracker*, the recondite harmonies and rarefied timbres have seemingly lost their connection with “expression.” Transcending the language of emotion, they have become wonders in their own right—*objets de féerie*—designed to elicit a special “esthetic” emotion found nowhere else but in the experience of art.

That, at any rate, was the theory they prompted. Called “estheticism,” it may remind us in some respects of the “impressionism” encountered in Chapter 2. It was a powerful stimulus for a brand of maximalistic thought and action in early-twentieth-century art that flourished first, and quite unexpectedly, in Russia. We will get to it presently, but in preparation let us first inspect a couple of *objets de féerie* from Chaikovsky’s “Imperial” ballets, both of them famous for their exquisiteness—one timbral, the other harmonic.

A measure of the importance Chaikovsky accorded tone color in his scale of musical values was the urgency—and the secrecy!—that surrounded the great timbral sensation in *Nutcracker*. On a trip to Paris in the late spring of 1891, Chaikovsky discovered “a new orchestral instrument, something between a small piano and a glockenspiel with a divinely marvellous sound,”¹² as the composer put it in a letter to his publisher. “It is called the ‘Celesta Mustel,’” he went on, “and it costs 1200 francs. It can be purchased in

Paris only at the inventor's shop. I would like to ask you to order this instrument, ... but I would also ask you not to show it to anybody, for I am afraid that Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov will get wind of it and use its unusual effects sooner than I."

This instrument—now it is simply called the celesta—had been invented by Auguste Mustel, a manufacturer of harmoniums and other keyboard instruments, five years before. Chaikovsky's description was basically accurate: it is like a glockenspiel in that the sound it makes is produced by a row of steel bars; and it is like a piano in that the bars (suspended over resonating chambers) are struck not by a mallet but by hammers activated by a keyboard. When the composer heard it he must immediately have thought of Petipa's description of the "voice" of the Sugarplum Fairy in *Nutcracker*: "the sound of the sprays of a fountain."¹³ Chaikovsky successfully scooped the competition. (Alexander Glazunov was a prodigy pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, then all of twenty-five years old, who unlike his stiff-necked teacher had begun flirting with ballet.) The "variation" (solo turn) for the Sugarplum Fairy in the Candyland sequence (Ex. 3-5) was indeed the first important solo ever written for the celesta as an orchestral instrument. The slithery chromatic harmony was of course another touch of *féerie*—something "out of this world."

The image shows a musical score for the Sugarplum Fairy Variation from *Nutcracker*, measures 1-12. The score is in 2/4 time and features a celesta, strings pizzicato, and a bass clarinet. The tempo is marked "Andante ma non troppo". The celesta part is marked "mf" and the strings are marked "pp". The bass clarinet part is marked "f".

ex. 3-5 Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky *Nutcracker*, Sugarplum Fairy Variation, mm. 1–12

More dramatic but still exquisite was the fairy music in *The Sleeping Beauty*, especially that assigned to the role of the wicked fairy Carabosse, the villain of the piece. It is derived from a colorful sequential extension of the way in which an augmented sixth chord resolves, observable in embryo as early as Mozart, in which pairs of voices move in contrary motion through an octave or unison. In its most extended version, often called the "omnibus progression" (on the basis of a widely cited but never published study by the American musicologist Victor Fell Yellin), complete ascending or descending chromatic scales can be harmonized by replicating the semitonal motion as a sequence along a cycle of minor thirds that returns to its starting point,

whence it could be repeated ad infinitum (Ex. 3-6).

The “omnibus” is thus a sort of harmonic pinwheel, displaying a dazzling array of “remote” harmonic centers in quick succession but without “going” anywhere. As pure harmonic “color” without functional progression it is the epitome of what Henri de Régnier, quoted by Ravel in Chapter 2, called “the delightful and ever-renewed pleasure of a useless occupation”—aristocratic sensuous play at its proudest. Chaikovsky’s leitmotivic use of segments from the omnibus progression was the most extensive—and extended—as of its date (Ex. 3-7).

Notes:

(10) Memoir by Alina Bryullova; *Vospominaniya o P. I. Chaikovskom* (2nd ed., Moscow: Muzika, 1973), p. 132.

(11) Solomon Volkov, *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky: Interviews with George Balanchine* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 127.

(12) Chaikovsky to Pyotr Jurgenson, 3 June 1891; P. I. Chaikovsky, *Perepiska s P. I. Yurgensonom*, Vol. II (Moscow and Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1952), p. 212.

(13) Roland John Wiley, *Tchaikovsky's Ballets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 376.

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Alexandre Benois

Sergey Diaghilev

Boris Godunov

BALLET FINDS ITS THEORIST

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Intellectual prestige was finally added to the social and artistic prestige the Russian ballet enjoyed during its opulent phase under Vsevolozhsky when Alexandre Benois (1870–1960), a young student from an old Russian family of Western European extraction long distinguished in St. Petersburg’s artistic life, attended the premiere of *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1890, found the experience esthetically overwhelming, and began bruiting it about among his friends, a group of rich young esthetes and dandies who called themselves the “Nevsky Pickwickians” (after Nevsky Prospekt, St. Petersburg’s main thoroughfare, which ran parallel to the Neva River).

descending "Omnibus" progression

or

ascending progression

or

ex. 3-6 "Omnibus progression"

Allegro vivo

fff

ex. 3-7a Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *The Sleeping Beauty*, Carabosse music, no. 1, mm. 1–2

Allegretto tempo

The image shows a musical score for the Carabosse music, no. 4 (finale) from Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty*. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system is in bass clef and features a piano (*ff*) dynamic. The second system is in treble and bass clefs and includes a boxed measure number '40'.

ex. 3-7b Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *The Sleeping Beauty*, Carabosse music, no. 4 (finale), mm. 37ff

ex. 3-7c Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *The Sleeping Beauty*, Carabosse music, no. 5 (scène), mm. 202–14

“Chaikovsky’s music was what I seemed to be waiting for since my earliest childhood,”¹⁴ Benois wrote in his old age, long after becoming a world-famous painter, theatrical designer, and art historian. It embodied “the aristocratic spirit, untouched by any democratic deviations, which reigned in Russia under the scepter of Alexander III; the unique atmosphere of the St. Petersburg Theater School and the traditions that had been pursued in consequence; and finally a rejuvenation of these traditions so that, on this occasion, shaking off the dust of routine, they should appear in all the freshness of something newly-born.” As Benois saw it, the Russian Imperial Ballet, that antiquated French entertainment preserved “in a state of mummification,” had “continued to live its own life, remote from all disturbances,” and in consequence had been saved from the general decline of the art of dance throughout the rest of Europe.

But far more than that, ballet had stood aloof from all the main trends of serious Russian art in the nineteenth century—the trends represented by novelists like Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, and by composers like Musorgsky or even the Chaikovsky of the operas and symphonies. Precisely because of this, because it was mere purposeless play and divertissement, because it had remained true to seemingly superannuated principles of beauty and stylization, it was far less tainted than opera with the hated residue of realism and was uncompromised by the didactic and social concerns that encumbered modern Russian literature. The

Russian ballet, in short, was a kind of *belle au bois dormant* or sleeping beauty in its own right, an outmoded aristocratic toy whose irrelevance to all serious artistic endeavor in Russia was a standing joke until, by a curious quirk of fate, the nature of serious artistic endeavor changed in such a fashion as to make it relevant once more.

It was the Nevsky Pickwickians, grown up into an intrepid estheticist faction known as *Mir iskusstva* ("The world of art"), who planted the awakening kiss. Benois remained their chief theorist, but their chief executive was Sergey Diaghilev (1872–1929), a man of enormous energy and vision who put the group and its magic name on the map, first by organizing *Mir iskusstva* art exhibitions, then by editing a superb arts journal also called *Mir iskusstva*, and finally by assuming the mantle of Vsevolozhsky but on an international scale, becoming, it is no exaggeration to say, the greatest impresario the world has ever seen. His efforts sparked a resurgence of ballet that lasted to the end of the twentieth century and beyond, and, toward the beginning of that century, briefly made ballet one of the major sites of artistic and musical innovation, perhaps the hottest one of all.

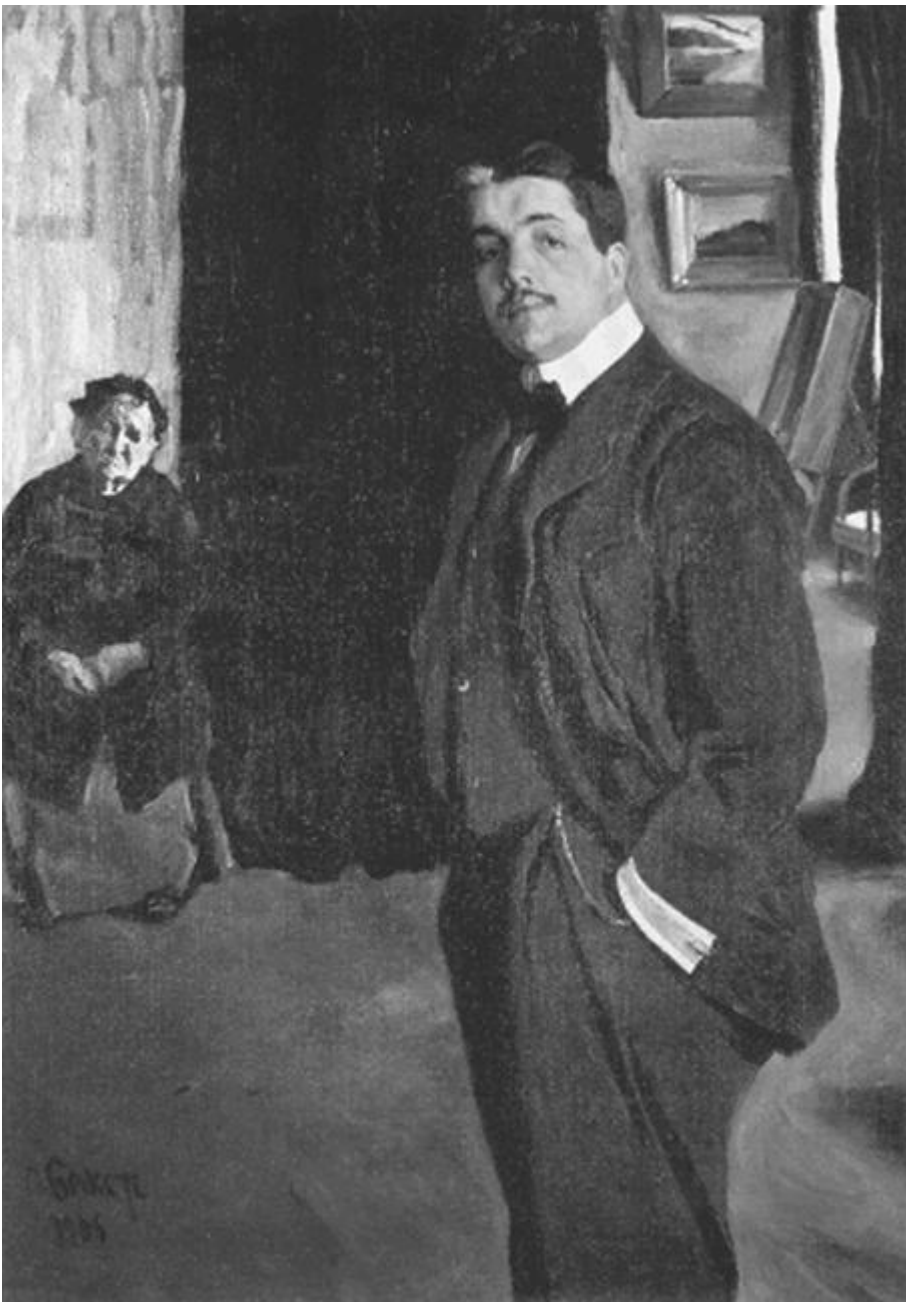


fig. 3-2 Sergey Diaghilev (1906), by Leon Bakst. The figure in the

background is Diaghilev's childhood nanny.

But first the enabling theory. Benois expressed it most succinctly in 1908, in an article called "Colloquy on Ballet" because it was cast in the form of a dialogue between an "Artist," representing the author, and a hypothetical "Balletomane." The latter voices the mindlessly hedonistic view that ballet was just "a fragile, aristocratic amusement" that can have nothing to do with "the serious questions of our day," and whose very existence in the modern world was anachronistic and therefore precarious.¹⁵ To this the artist replies that on the contrary, "the history of ballet is far from over; before it lie even greater prospects, perhaps, than lie before opera or drama." The reason was that ballet was an ideal *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as imagined by Wagner but never realized by him, because he never managed to rid his art of its utilitarian aspect.

And what was that? Words! True art cannot mix with words, precisely because words have fixed, hence earthbound, meaning. Benois's theory of ballet turns out to be the old romantic esthetic of "absolute music" in its maximalistic—or maximally "estheticized"—phase. The Artist continues:

One thing is clear. After all the temptations of our brains, after all *words*, tedious and confusing, insipid and foolish, murky and bombastic, one wants *silence* and *spectacle* on the stage. Yet it would be wrong to call ballet a dumbshow. Ballet is perhaps the most eloquent of all spectacles, since it permits the two most excellent conductors of thought—music and gesture—to appear in their full expanse and depth, unencumbered by words, which limit and fetter thought, bringing it down from heaven to earth.¹⁶

The Artist's point is that words, unlike music and movement, are *by nature* utilitarian. They seek to accomplish something specific, and therefore limited. They lead to laughter and tears—to emotions tied to objects and hence unesthetic. "A baby crying for its milk is utilitarian and boring," Benois wrote. "But a smiling baby—that one is holy, surrounded by a divine aureole, full of regal radiance."¹⁷ Ballet's unique capacity was its power to evoke the "esthetic smile," the emotion of pure esthetic delight. That made it supreme among the arts, and certainly among the theatrical arts:

Even the most abstract and exalted drama is burdened with utilitarianism. In most cases it conceals (sometimes very artfully) a didactic utility, or else at its very climax it reflects our vain concerns, our strivings, our clamberings, our aggressions. In the dramatic theater one either laughs or cries. In ballet, though, the chief meaning is in the smile (and not in laughter or in tears). In the drama the big moment comes when the spectator is most shaken by the depicted sufferings; in comedy it comes when the spectator bursts out laughing; but in ballet it comes when the spectator *smiles*. That is the reason for its existence. The dance is nothing but "a full-length smile," a smile in which the whole body participates.

Opera, according to this theory, is even worse than drama, because it "blasphemously" tries to force music into fusion with the utilitarian medium of words, not to mention the fact that the two media impede each other's comprehensibility (a problem to which most operagoers can indeed attest!) since words make a distracting counterclaim on the faculty of hearing. Was not Wagner's greatest opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, the very one in which the libretto's words mattered the least? So why not get rid of them altogether? Far from a truncated, denatured, or handicapped form of opera (the usual view of *ballet d'action*, even the best of them), Benois now proposed that ballet was the final step in music-theater's liberation from the tyranny of the spoken drama, ultimately in music's liberation from the tyranny of words. Ballet, he insisted, was the artistic wave of the future.

Notes:

(14) Alexandre Benois, *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*, trans. Mary Britnieva (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 372.

(15) Alexandre Benois, "Beseda o baletu," in V. Meyerhold, et al., *Teatr* (St. Petersburg: Shipovnik, 1908), p. 100.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

(17) *Ibid.*, p. 106.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Igor Stravinsky

BACK TO FRANCE

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

And so it became, thanks to Diaghilev. Beginning in 1906, at first with heavy financial backing from the Russian crown, Diaghilev embarked on an epoch-making “export campaign,” as Benois rather drily called it, a yearly “Russian season” in Paris, the artistic capital of the world and the political capital of what was, since the accession of Tsar Nikolai II in 1894, Russia’s most strategic diplomatic and military ally. Diaghilev’s first Parisian presentation was an exhibition of Russian painting from medieval icons to the work of the *Mir iskusstva* circle itself.

The next year, 1907, Diaghilev brought a series of dazzling “historical concerts” in which all the greatest Russian musicians of the day took part: Rimsky-Korsakov, the dean of living Russian composers; Glazunov, his star pupil; the pianist-composers Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915) and Sergey Rachmaninoff (1873–1943), and many others. These concerts were not only historical (that is, presenting works from the full range of Russian musical history) but also historic: they provided a conduit that brought the latest Russian music to French ears like those of Ravel, whose avid absorption of Russian influences we have already observed in Chapter 2.

In 1908, Diaghilev brought a legendary production of Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* (in a version edited by Rimsky-Korsakov) to the stage of the Paris Opéra, which set a never-to-be-surpassed benchmark for luxuriance and spectacle. The next year, 1909, it was a mixed “Russian season” of music theater, now including ballet for the first time. The Russian ballets especially amazed the French, who had considered the ballet to be their national property, but who now saw their version of it thoroughly surpassed. The ballet spectacles, unexpectedly, proved far more successful with the public than the operas. Diaghilev decided to follow Benois’s advice, which he had until then resisted, and specialize henceforth in presenting Russian ballets to Parisian audiences.

And yet the French critics had complained that the ballets presented in 1909 did not duplicate the exotic impression created by the Russian operas, and that without an overlay of recognizably Russian style (which meant, for French ears, a folkloristic or “oriental” style) they could not regard the Russian ballet as a truly authentic artistic product. Here indeed was a paradox: the Russian ballet, originally a French import and proud of its stylistic heritage, now had to become stylistically “Russian” so as to justify its exportation back to France. Diaghilev’s solution was to commission, expressly for presentation in France in 1910, something without precedent in Russia: a ballet on a Russian folk subject, and with music cast in a conspicuously exotic “Russian” style. He cast about for a composer willing to come up with so weird a thing.

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Ballet: Diaghilev and the Russian exiles

STRAVINSKY

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Four composers—all pupils of Rimsky-Korsakov who had possibly inherited his prejudices—refused before Diaghilev found his volunteer: Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), also a Rimsky-Korsakov pupil, but an ambitious member of a younger generation who had yet to make a name for himself and who therefore had everything to gain from the international exposure Diaghilev promised. In a couple of brightly colored orchestral scherzos the fledgling composer had shown a flair for *féerie*, the chief necessity for a “Miriskusnik” composer—that is, a composer in the spirit of *Mir iskusstva* and its aristocratic, decorative values. Stravinsky was invited to join the team.

For like all ballets, this one would be very much a team effort. As was traditional, the plot and scenario were largely the work of the choreographer, Mikhail Fokine (1880–1942), a brilliant young dancer who had trained under Petipa and Ivanov. The title, *Firebird* (*Zhar-ptitsa*, or *L’oiseau de feu*, as it was called at the Paris premiere), was symbolic: the Firebird, a Slavic mythological creature of gorgeous beauty whose feathers were treasures of incalculable value, had been adopted by the *Mir iskusstva* circle as the trademark of art-for-art’s-sake. Fokine patched together a story line from several well-known *skazki* or folk tales, a preposterous farrago as any Russian child could see, but calculated to cater to Parisian preconceptions of what was *du vrai russe*, “truly Russian.” It told of how Ivan Tsarevich, the Prince Charming character in Russian fairy tales, with the aid of the Firebird, won the hand of the Princess Nenaglyadnaya-Krasa (Unearthly beauty) by freeing her from a spell cast by the sorcerer Kashchey-Bessmertniy (Deathless Kashchey).

True to the history of the genre, Stravinsky was only called in when all of this was ready. Here is how Fokine described their traditional, very unequal process of collaboration:

Stravinsky visited me with his first sketches and basic ideas. He played them for me, I demonstrated the scenes to him. At my request, he broke up his national themes into short phrases corresponding to the separate moments of a scene, separate gestures and poses.

I remember how he brought me a beautiful Russian melody for the entrance of Ivan-Tsarevich. I suggested not presenting the complete melody all at once, but just a hint of it, by means of separate notes, at the moments when Ivan appears at the wall, when he observes the wonders of Kashchey’s enchanted garden, and when he leaps over the wall. Stravinsky played, and I interpreted the role of the Tsarevich, the piano substituting for the wall. I climbed over it, jumped down from it, and crawled, fearstruck, looking around—my living room. Stravinsky, watching, accompanied me with patches of the Tsarevich melodies, playing mysterious tremolos as background to depict the garden of the sinister Deathless Kashchey. Later on I played the role of the Princess and hesitantly took the golden apple from the hands of the imaginary Tsarevich. Then I became Kashchey, his evil entourage—and so on. All this found most colorful interpretation in the sounds that came from the piano, flowing freely from the fingers of Stravinsky, who was also carried away with his work.¹⁸

The music Stravinsky came up with under these conditions fell into two broad categories. One was the folkloric, reserved for the human characters, the Prince and Princess. The other was the fantastic or *féérique*,

associated with the supernatural characters, the Firebird and Kashchey. This dual or bifurcated style had been Rimsky-Korsakov's specialty, brought to what seemed a peak of perfection in his late "fantastic" or fairy-tale operas, of which the last two were composed during Stravinsky's period of apprenticeship. Typically, Rimsky-Korsakov would mine the music for the human characters from his own published collection of 1877, *One Hundred Russian Folk Songs*, and mine the music from the supernatural characters, as we have seen (Chapter 2), from the resources of the octatonic (or tone-semitone) scale.

Encouraged by Diaghilev, whose celebrated creative byword was *Étonne-moi!*¹⁹—"Astonish me!" (i.e., astonish the Parisians)—Stravinsky strove to maximalize the work of his teacher, just as Mahler and Strauss had been maximalizing the work of Wagner. For folk songs, like the one that brings the ballet to its brilliant conclusion, he remained faithful to his teacher's anthology, and in one or two instances, most notably in the "Infernal Dance" for Kashchey's monstrous retinue, he unconsciously plagiarized his teacher's actual compositions. For representing the supernatural, however, he found a way toward unheard-of effects by building directly and deliberately on Rimsky's work.

Just how directly and deliberately can be seen from Stravinsky's starting point, a one-act opera by Rimsky-Korsakov, almost too neatly called *Kashchey the Deathless*, in which Rimsky had taken his own octatonic explorations to their furthest point. In Ex. 3-8, a passage from Rimsky-Korsakov's opera, the harmony is governed by a "stable tritone" like the one governing the bell-ringing progressions in Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, and every note is referable to a single octatonic scale as indicated by the numbered degrees.

What attracted Stravinsky's attention was the sequence of thirds in the upper staff of the accompaniment in Ex. 3-8, played by a pair of clarinets in the orchestral original. By the simple expedient of regularly alternating major and minor thirds and further regularizing the progression so that the lower note of each successive third in the series stood a semitone below the upper note of its predecessor, Stravinsky hit upon a sort of universal harmonic solvent: an exhaustive cycle of twenty-four thirds in which no member of the series could recur until all of the others have intervened—an "omnibus progression" indeed! In Ex. 3-9 each "rung" in Stravinsky's exhaustive "ladder of thirds" is given a reference number so that examples of its actual use in the ballet score can be easily compared with the full series.

The ladder's most nearly complete appearance in the score comes in the "Dawn" passage that links the ballet's two scenes (Ex. 3-10); it goes through sixteen progressions. In the example, the harmonies are presented in a notation that emphasizes their derivation from the ladder of thirds. In the actual score, the voice leading is conventional, producing a series of harmonies with what seems to be a bafflingly arbitrary root progression. (Magicians, including harmonic magicians, always do well to conceal their tricks.) The ladder of thirds is set out in Ex. 3-9 beginning with the minor third D/F because that is the interval Stravinsky himself used at the beginning of a musical example that half-explained his procedure (Ex. 3-11) to purchasers of a player-piano roll on which he recorded the score in 1929. As he put it there,

All that relates to the evil spirit, Kashchey, all that belongs to his kingdom—the enchanted garden, the ogres and monsters of all kinds who are his subjects, and in general all that is magical, mysterious or supernatural—is characterized musically by what one might call a *leit-harmonie*. It is made up of alternating major and minor thirds, so that a minor third is always followed by a major third, and vice versa.²⁰

scale: ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧

(let c = 1)
Kashcheyevna

① ② ③ ⑤

(Dobro po-)zha lo - var', zhe - lan nūy

① ② ③ ⑤

gost! Da - lyo ko'l put' svoy der-zhish?

Welcome, long-awaited guest!
Are you going far?

ex. 3-8 Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Kashchey the Deathless*, scene 2, mm. 171–75

major thirds:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 (1)

minor thirds:

ex. 3-9 Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, “ladder of thirds”

Stravinsky’s “explanation” actually explains little. Indeed, it rather obfuscates matters by exchanging the positions of the two voices in the second illustrated third. That is one way in which modernists made their reputations: by issuing challenges to analysts, some of which went unmet for decades. But now that Stravinsky’s code, as it were, has been broken, some further demonstrations of the ways in which he derived his “magical” harmonies (and melodies) from the ladder of thirds can only enhance our appreciation of the extraordinary ingenuity with which the score of *Firebird* was constructed, even if we now also see how

thoroughly rationalized (which means how easily learned and imitated) Stravinsky's maximalizing methods were.

Ex. 3-12a, the very beginning of the ballet, is the passage illustrated in Stravinsky's misleading example. (Now we can see why he spelled the second third the way he did, as F^b-A^b rather than E-G#.) Exx. 3-12b through 3-12e are labeled according to notations on the piano roll to show the action they accompany. Ex. 3-12d shows two segments from the ladder of thirds in counterpoint, while 3-12e shows how harmonic progressions can be constructed by juxtaposing segments in block formation. Finally, Ex. 3-12f, the leitmotif of Kashchey's enchanted princesses, constructs "human" (because desire-filled) harmonies, dominant sevenths and *Tristan*-chords, over a pair of rungs from the ladder, as if to illustrate the plight of sentient human beings constrained by a supernatural force.



fig. 3-3 Piano roll of Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird* ballet, issued by the Aeolian Company, London, in 1929.

A musical score for Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird*, "Dawn". It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The treble staff contains a series of chords and melodic fragments. The bass staff contains a series of chords and a melodic line. Below the bass staff, there are 13 numbered boxes, each containing a chord symbol (e.g., F#m, Gm, Am, Bm, Cm, Dm, Em, Fm, Gm, Am, Bm, Cm, Dm).

ex. 3-10 Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, "Dawn"

A musical score for Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird*, "Dawn". It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The treble staff contains a series of chords and melodic fragments. The bass staff contains a series of chords and a melodic line. Below the bass staff, there are 13 numbered boxes, each containing a chord symbol (e.g., F#m, Gm, Am, Bm, Cm, Dm, Em, Fm, Gm, Am, Bm, Cm, Dm).

ex. 3-11 Igor Stravinsky's analytical example from piano roll notes

A musical score for Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird*, "Dawn". It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The treble staff contains a series of chords and melodic fragments. The bass staff contains a series of chords and a melodic line. Below the bass staff, there are 13 numbered boxes, each containing a chord symbol (e.g., F#m, Gm, Am, Bm, Cm, Dm, Em, Fm, Gm, Am, Bm, Cm, Dm).

ex. 3-12a Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, Kashchey music, opening theme

Musical score for Firebird, Kashchey music, "In the Darkness, Kashchey Watches for Victim s". The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system has a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The second system has a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

ex. 3-12b Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, Kashchey music, "In the Darkness, Kashchey Watches for Victim s"

Musical score for Firebird, Kashchey music, "Arrival of Kashchey the Deathless". The score is in 4/4 time and consists of three systems. The first system has a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The second system has a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The third system has a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The key signature has one sharp (F#). Fingerings and articulations are indicated throughout the score.

ex. 3-12c Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, Kashchey music, "Arrival of Kashchey the Deathless"

Two systems of piano accompaniment for the 'Dialogue of Kashchey and Ivan Tsarevich' from Stravinsky's *Firebird*. The first system covers measures 15-19, and the second system covers measures 18-21. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 4-5, 5-6, 6-7, and 7-6 above the treble clef, and 6-7, 7-8, 8-9, and 9-8 above the bass clef. Measure numbers 15, 16, 16-17, 17, 18, 18-19, and 19 are marked below the staves. The second system includes a dashed line indicating a melodic line in the bass clef starting at measure 20 and ending at measure 21, with a '6' below it. Measure numbers 18, 18-19, 19, 20, 20-21, and 21 are marked below the staves.

ex. 3-12d Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, Kashchey music, "Dialogue of Kashchey and Ivan Tsarevich"

Two systems of piano accompaniment for the 'Death of Kashchey' from Stravinsky's *Firebird*. The first system covers measures 11-17, and the second system covers measures 18-23. Measure numbers 11, 12, 13, 24, (1), 2, 3, 4, 5 are marked below the first system. Measure numbers 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 are marked below the second system. The first system includes a 'mf' dynamic marking and a 'string.' marking. The second system includes a triplet of eighth notes in both the treble and bass clefs, marked with a '3' above the notes.

ex. 3-12e Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, Kashchey music, "Death of Kashchey"

Ex. 3-12a also reveals the source of the ballet's main leitmotif, namely the Firebird's. The first four notes of the ostinato melody, consisting of the A^b - F^b third (the second rung of Stravinsky's ladder), the D (the ladder's bottom, seemingly its generating pitch), and a passing tone to connect the two ladder components, are extracted and subjected to a wealth of separate manipulation to accompany the Firebird's appearances. These manipulations are of an age-old academic sort that every counterpoint student learns: as illustrated in Ex. 3-13 (from a section titled "Apparition de l'Oiseau de feu"), the four-note motif is inverted (I), reversed (R), and reversed in its inverted form (RI).

18 19

ex. 3-12f Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, Kashchey music, end

original motif (O)

ex. 3-13 Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird*, “Apparition de l’Oiseau de feu”

All of these motivically saturated passages accompany mime, and one of the special features of *Firebird* is its heavy emphasis on mime in addition to virtuoso dancing, as if to dramatize the ballet’s similarity (i.e., its superiority) to opera. The dances, musically more conventional, were fashioned into a suite that immediately became a popular concert work. Thus Stravinsky managed in this wildly successful score to appeal both to the broad concert and theater audience and to the composing and critical fraternity, a feat he would duplicate many times over the course of his long career, in the process gaining an eminence (indeed, many would claim, a preeminence) among twentieth-century composers, and a prestige, that would last to the end of his life, more than sixty years later.

What was absolutely unprecedented was that such an eminence and prestige could come to a composer by way of ballet, formerly that most despised of genres. It could never have happened were it not a Russian ballet. The triumph of ballet was thus also the triumph of Russia. Both would enjoy in the twentieth century a hitherto unknown musical distinction, and Stravinsky became the chief protagonist and beneficiary of the intersecting trajectories of conquest that Diaghilev and his “Ballets Russes” had engineered.

Notes:

(18) Mikhail Fokine, *Memories of a Ballet Master*, trans. Vitale Fokine, ed. Anatole Chujoy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), p. 161.

(19) Cf. Jean Cocteau, “La Difficulté d’être” (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1947), p. 45.

(20) Typescript, dated 1927, in the Igor Stravinsky archive, Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, Switzerland.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Stravinsky: The early Diaghilev ballets, 1910–14

Octatonic

PETRUSHKA

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Maximalism had been a crucial component of that conquest, and would remain high on the list of Ballets Russes priorities. Successes needed to be topped. And so the next season, 1911, Diaghilev produced a new Stravinsky ballet, in hopes of topping *Firebird*. His hopes were not in vain. Success was even wilder. And although the primary impetus this time had come from Stravinsky, the history of the project and its outcome revealed even more decisively the essentially collaborative nature of the Diaghilev enterprise.

While finishing up the score of *Firebird*, Stravinsky had an idea for a sequel: a primitive sacrificial rite in which a virgin danced herself to exhaustion and death before an idol of Yarilo, the ancient Slavic sun god. The idea was not particularly original: the Russian version of symbolist poetry was rife with images of pre-Christian antiquity (which in Russia had lasted until 988 ce), and there were many attempts to foster, in the words of the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, a new mythological age. “Poets,” another Russian symbolist wryly observed, “wore themselves out trying to roar like wild animals.”²¹ Neoprimitivism, the quest for a modern style through evocations of prehistory, was the primary engine then driving Russian artistic maximalism. Stravinsky was merely buying in.

Before beginning the new ballet, however, Stravinsky wanted to “refresh himself,”²² as he put it in his autobiography, by writing a funny concert piece for piano and orchestra that would spoof the antics of a romantic virtuoso. It would take the form of a “combat between the piano and the orchestra,” according to an interview Stravinsky later gave a French reporter, in which “a man in evening dress, wearing his hair long, ... sat himself at the piano and rolled incongruous objects up and down the keyboard, while the orchestra burst out with vehement protests, with sonic fisticuffs.”²³ He composed the piece in September 1910.

Afterward, casting about for a title, Stravinsky noticed that some of the searing trumpet blasts he had composed were reminiscent of the kazoo-like instrument that produced the shrill voice of Petrushka (Little Pete), the “Punch” in the Russian “Punch and Judy Show” or fairground puppet theater—a character who, like Stravinsky’s mad piano player, was “always in an explosion of revolt.” Armed with a cudgel, he would beat up anybody in sight. The skit always ended with his being dragged off to hell by a big black dog. Delighted with the idea, Stravinsky changed the title from “Pièce burlesque” to *Krik Petrushki* (“Petrushka’s shriek”) and wrote a companion piece based on a few jottings he had already made for the “sacrifice ballet” he had envisioned before starting the concert piece.

These two little pieces for piano and orchestra made for a fascinating contrast. The one that now came first was a madcap puppet dance based on two Russian folk tunes (one from his teacher’s anthology, the other from a more recent and “scientific” collection that contained the melodies only, without any artistic embellishment). The second, the original concert piece, was a study in “octatonic maximalism” in which the harmonic language of Rimsky-Korsakov’s fantasy operas (exemplified both in Ex. 3-8 from *Kashchey the Deathless* and in Ex. 2-28 from *Sadko*) and already maximalized by Ravel in his *Rapsodie espagnole* (Ex. 2-32) was extended and distorted into a brusquely dissonant idiom of which Rimsky-Korsakov might well have disapproved.

But when Diaghilev, visiting Stravinsky later that fall, heard the two pieces, he was struck not only by the

contrast but also by the way both of its elements “maximalized” features of *Firebird* that had proven to be so appealing to his fashionable Paris audience. He immediately envisioned Stravinsky’s pieces within a ballet based on the Russian Shrovetide fair, where the puppet theaters flourished. He talked Stravinsky into promising to write the rest of it, and then talked Benois in to providing a scenario. In the end, Stravinsky and Benois were *Petrushka*’s parents, but Diaghilev had been the matchmaker.

Benois’s ballet combined the puppet-theater and fairground ambience with a love triangle adapted from the old *commedia dell’arte* as revived in the nineteenth century by the French *funambules* or acrobatic mimes: Pierrot (the sad clown) loves Columbine (the ingenue) who loves Arlecchino (the happy clown). Benois recast these roles in terms of the fairground theater: Petrushka himself (transformed from manic Punch into plaintive Pierrot), a ballerina puppet, and an African puppet or “blackamoor.”

The two-tiered action unfolds in four scenes. The outer scenes or *tableaux* show the fairground and its revelers, with the first scene culminating in a “Danse russe,” namely the first of Stravinsky’s piano-and-orchestra pieces, which now accompanies the three puppets dancing before the crowd. The inner tableaux present the love triangle. The second scene, corresponding to the original concert piece, takes place behind the scenes in Petrushka’s quarters: the puppet, secretly alive, laments his fate of subjugation to the puppet master and unrequited love.

The third takes place in the blackamoor’s quarters, showing the blackamoor and the ballerina happily in love until Petrushka stormily intrudes. At the end of the final tableau, the two male puppets burst out of their quarters into the public square and battle to the death. Many actual *Petrushka*-plays ended with Petrushka killing a blackamoor; this one ends with the Blackamoor killing Petrushka, so that the title character, like Pierrot, can attract the public’s sympathy. The puppet master, summoned by a policeman, shows the crowd that they have been fooled into thinking his wood-and-straw puppets were alive. But at the very end, after the crowd has dispersed, the ghost of Petrushka appears atop the puppet booth and jeers the frightened puppet master. The audience (in the theater, that is) is left not knowing what to think “real.”

As in *Firebird*, the plot is a wild mixture of sometimes incongruous objects presented to the French—and accepted by them—as authentically Russian. The music maintains and further maximalizes the fantastic/realistic opposition long traditional in Russian opera, and already maximalized in *Firebird*. Once again the human element (the crowd in the outer tableaux, the puppets appearing before the crowd in the “Danse russe”) is represented by diatonic folklore, and the nonhuman (the secret world where the puppets live) by Rimskian chromaticism based on circles of major and minor thirds, that is, symmetrical divisions of the octave by three or four semitones.

But this time the musical contrast, like the poetic contrast it reflects, is treated with a wily irony: the “people” in *Petrushka*, with only negligible exceptions, are represented facelessly by the corps de ballet. Only the puppets have “real” personalities and emotions. The people in *Petrushka* act and move mechanically, like toys. Only the puppets act spontaneously, impulsively—in a word, humanly. Although based on musical echoes of everyday life, the outer (“human”) scenes in *Petrushka* are transformed into something far removed from everyday reality by Stravinsky’s magic-making orchestration, which at the beginning evokes an all-enveloping accordion (*garmon’* or *garmoshka* in Russian; see Ex. 3-14) and replaces it for the “Danse russe” by a cosmic balalaika. However varied and inventive, the orchestration of the outer tableaux is rarely without some overlay suggestive of street music.



ex. 3-14 Igor Stravinsky, *Petrushka*, opening of first tableau, street-vendors' cries against a steady hum of accordion music

Add to that the extraordinary and unrelieved simplicity of much of the crowd music, quite the boldest and most subversive stroke of all, given the musical climate that reigned during the maximalistic decades we have been investigating. For pages at a time (e.g., the page shown in Ex. 3-15) the *Danse russe* proceeds with an absolutely unvarying pulse, with nearly flat dynamics, and (almost unbelievably) with nary an accidental nearly half a century after *Tristan und Isolde*.

This strict diatonicism was of course a way of characterizing the vaunted purity of Russia as against the decadence of “Europe”—a surefire means of impressing the French. But still, to achieve such freshness with such simplified means, and with no hint either of monotony or of unsophistication—this was surely Stravinsky's most startling achievement in the “human” tableaux of *Petrushka*. It brought neonationalism—the fashioning of “authentic” modernity out of folk tradition—to what seemed an unsurpassable creative peak.

But now contrast the puppets' secret world, the world of *Petrushka's* second scene. That scene, the only one to have been written before the “Konzertstück” or concert piece for piano became *Petrushka*, is the only one to be virtually devoid of allusion to folk or popular music of any kind. The sole hint of it comes three measures before the end, in some wheezing concertinalike chords in the muted horns and bassoon, marked “très lointain” (from very far away)—a distant echo from the street, added to the score after the scenario had been planned. The music moves fitfully, impetuously: in 110 bars of music there are sixteen changes of tempo. The volume is in constant flux as well, the harmony intensely chromatic and dissonant. In short, this music, now associated with puppets, is “expressive”—that is, human—with a vengeance. In its ceaseless ebb and flow, its waxing and waning, it analogizes the inner world, the world of passions and feelings with their onsets and abatements.

43

Tempo I (Allegro giusto)

E.H.

Tpt. I (Bb)

Pno.

Vln. I

Tempo I (Allegro giusto)

E.H.

Tpt. I (Bb)

Pno.

Vln. I

The image displays a page of a musical score for Igor Stravinsky's 'Petrushka', specifically measures 43 through 46. The score is written for five parts: E.H. (Electric Harp), Tpt. I (Bb) (Trumpet I), Pno. (Piano), Vln. I (Violin I), and Vln. I (Violin I). The tempo is marked 'Tempo I (Allegro giusto)' and the time signature is 2/4. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score is divided into two systems by a double bar line. The first system (measures 43-44) shows the E.H. and Tpt. I parts as rests, while the Pno. part plays a complex rhythmic pattern of chords and eighth notes. The Vln. I parts are also rests. The second system (measures 45-46) shows the E.H. part playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a 'sf' dynamic. The Tpt. I part plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a 'f' dynamic and 'con sord' marking. The Pno. part continues its complex rhythmic pattern. The Vln. I parts play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a 'f' dynamic.

The image displays a page of a musical score for Igor Stravinsky's "Danse Russe" from the ballet *Petrushka*. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. At the top, the woodwind section includes Piccolo (I and II), Flute (I and II), Oboe (I and II), Clarinet (I and II), and Bassoon (I and II). Below them is the Trumpet (I and II) section. The piano part is prominently featured in the middle, showing intricate rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as *mf*, *f*, *ten.*, *legato*, and *pizz.*. The string section at the bottom consists of Violin I and II, Viola, and Cello. The score includes various musical notations like slurs, accents, and dynamic markings, indicating a complex and expressive piece.

ex. 3-15 Igor Stravinsky remnants of the piano “Konzertstück” in *Petrushka*, “Danse Russe,” fig. 43

Although the folk and popular elements in *Petrushka* are abundant, chosen shrewdly and lovingly, and handled with novel resourcefulness and skill, they are so obviously a part of the “outer world,” so much a part of what is questioned and derided in this profoundly antirealistic “symbolist” ballet, that there is no cause for wonder that certain representatives of the older traditions of Russian musical nationalism (in particular, and very painfully for Stravinsky, the surviving members of Rimsky-Korsakov’s family) took offense at the work and its creator. But Stravinsky was nothing if not faithful to Rimsky’s legacy as he understood it.

This can best be seen precisely where the score is at its most maximalistic, in the novel treatment of harmony and tonality that made the second tableau of *Petrushka* for a while the ne plus ultra—the last word—in modernism. Not a single one of Stravinsky’s apparent innovations lacked a precedent in the music of his teacher and his fellow pupils. Yet there was a difference: past a certain point quantity determines quality; a sufficient difference in degree can amount to a difference in kind. The point that Stravinsky passed, and that Rimsky-Korsakov (and even Ravel in the *Rapsodie espagnole*) had always skirted, was the point at

which “octatonicism”—reference to a governing scale of alternating tones and semitones—became not just a color or an exotic accessory to more conventional tonal harmony, but a tonality in its own right.

In “*Chez Pétrouchka*,” the concert piece for piano and orchestra that became the second tableau of Stravinsky’s second ballet, an octatonic collection is maintained as a stable point of reference governing the whole span of the composition, whatever the tonal vagaries or digressions along the way. The collection is thus raised structurally to the level of what we ordinarily mean by a “key,” governing a hierarchy of pitches and providing a tonal center. It establishes not only a vocabulary of pitches, but also a set of stable structural functions. Hence departures from it and returns to it—on various levels, from that of local “chromaticism” to that of “modulation”—are possible without compromising its role as stable point of reference. The octatonic collection-of-reference is a far more stable referent within “*Chez Pétrouchka*” than any of the transient diatonic tonalities with which it interacts as the piece unfolds. The composition is thus not only a significant one within its composer’s stylistic evolution, but also an important benchmark of early twentieth-century maximalism.

The collection of reference in “*Chez Pétrouchka*” is the whole-step/half-step scale that includes the C-major and F#-major triads, which, when superimposed, produce what has become universally known among musicians as the *Petrushka*-chord (see Ex. 3-16). Now just as Wagner’s *Tristan*-chord was not the first half-diminished seventh chord in history, neither was the *Petrushka*-chord unprecedented. Ravel had anticipated it in both *Jeux d’eau* and *Rapsodie espagnole* (see Exx. 2-26 and 2-32); Richard Strauss had anticipated it in *Elektra* (1-17b), and even Maximilian Steinberg, a less famous pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, had used it in a memorial prelude for orchestra in honor of their teacher (and the passage including it had been borrowed from an unpublished sketch by Rimsky-Korsakov himself, shown in Ex. 2-30). There is even a fleeting occurrence of the *Petrushka*-chord near the beginning of *Firebird*.

It is clear, moreover, that Stravinsky conceptualized the chord just as Ravel and Steinberg had done, as a subset of the octatonic collection; for when the chord reappears, along with *Petrushka* himself, at the end of the third tableau (see Ex. 3-16), it is transposed so that it now mixes the triads of E \flat and A, exhausting the collection of reference by featuring its remaining (complementary) pair of /0 3 6 9/symmetrical “nodes.” Thus the C and F# triads are not an arbitrarily selected “bitonalism,” but rather one of many expressions of an octatonic tonality that pervades the whole composition on many levels. In this sense it was for Stravinsky nothing new.

a. *Chez Pétrouchka* [49]
2 clar.

b. *Chez Pétrouchka* piano at 1 after [60]

c. Scale of reference

d. *Pétrouchka*, 3rd tableau violin + viola at [77]

① ③ ② ④
[0 3 6 9]

ex. 3-16 Octatonic derivation of the *Petrushka*-chord

And yet again there was a significant “maximalizing” difference. In Ravel, Strauss, and Steinberg, the two chords are made to blend into a generalized sonority. Stravinsky makes them stand boldly out from one another. The F# is deliberately made to sound like a foreign element jostling the key (or at least the chord) of C major. This conflict is implied in many ways. In the first place, C major has been cadentially established as

the tonic in mm. 1–8 (Ex. 3-17). Not that the cadence that establishes it has been an ordinary one. There is no conventional dominant triad, since almost all the pitches in the passage are selected from the octatonic scale of reference, and no pair of fifth-related chords can be so selected. Instead, C major seems to be selected from among the four potential tonics the scale provides along its /0 3 6 9/nodes: C, E \flat , F \sharp , and A. Indeed, in m. 7, the dominant seventh on E \flat rather ceremoniously defers to C, its defining tones E \flat and D \flat resolving by half steps (that is, as leading tones) to E and C.

Having noted this much, let us look now at the way in which “nonharmonic” tones—that is, tones not referable to the “scale of reference”—are treated. In Ex. 3-17 all such nonreferable tones are circled. They are all resolved to “structural” pitches according to the most ordinary schoolbook techniques, either as passing tones or, in the case of the chord preceding the French sixth in m. 4, as neighbors, complete (D–E \flat) or incomplete (G \sharp –A, B–C \sharp). Particularly noteworthy is the B natural on the downbeat of m. 6. Its strong rhythmic placement reinforces its function as an imported leading tone (as it might function, more ordinarily, in the key of C minor). Although its resolution to C is indirect, since its position in a chromatic stepwise descent is alone what justifies its intrusion within an octatonic context, it nevertheless reinforces the contributions of the other half-step resolutions (F \sharp –G, D \sharp –E) to what is in weak but sufficient effect the tonicization of C in mm. 7–8.

At the passage marked the “Malédiction de Pétrouchka” (“Petrushka’s curses”), the *Petrushka*-chord accompanies (or contends with) a piercing melody in the muted trumpets that insists for five measures on a pure C-major arpeggio (Ex. 3-18). Note, too, that during the piano cadenza that leads up to it (Ex. 3-19), the C-major, but not the F \sharp -major, component of the *Petrushka*-chord is licensed, as it were, to import its dominant into the texture, lending it a truly structural function as against its “opponent’s” inert “pedal” quality. Thus it seems clear that Stravinsky regarded the two triadic subsets of the *Petrushka*-chord as independent functional agents, potentially (and at times actually) in conflict. It is fair to speak of the passages in which they contend as being “bitonal,” or (as Stravinsky himself always described it) as consisting of “music in two keys”—so long as we bear it in mind that the keys in question were chosen from among the circumscribed and historically validated wares of the time-honored (and specifically Russian) octatonic collection.

ex. 3-17 Igor Stravinsky, *Petrushka*, second tableau (“Chez Pétrouchka”), mm. 1–8

Musical score for 'Malédiction de Pétrouchka' from Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. The score is for voice (Cantata, I and II) and piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 2/4. The music is marked *fff* (fortissimo). The vocal line features a melodic line with triplets and a final phrase in 3/4 time. The piano accompaniment consists of a rhythmic pattern of chords in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, with a final section in 3/4 time.

ex. 3-18 Igor Stravinsky, *Petrushka*, “Malédiction de Pétrouchka”

Musical score for 'Chez Pétrouchka' from Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. The score is for piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 2/4. The music is marked *f* (forte). The score is divided into four systems, each with a bracketed measure count above it: 10, 10, 7, and 12. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed notes and rests, creating a dense, rhythmic texture.

ex. 3-19 Igor Stravinsky, remnants of the piano “Konzertstück” in *Petrushka*, “Chez Pétrouchka,” fig. 50

Finally, this interpretation of the *Petrushka*-chord, as an “active polarity” rather than a passive blend, suits the “poetic concept” and the action of the ballet, where the chord is called upon to accompany outbursts of painful emotion arising out of conflict among the characters. The chord only makes poetic “sense” if we regard the first section of the tableau as being in the key of C. This in no way contradicts the suggestion that the tonality underlying “Chez Pétrouchka” is essentially octatonic rather than conventionally diatonic. For just as a diatonic composition by Ravel or Rimsky-Korsakov might be “flavored” with octatonic condiments, so an octatonic conception may interact with familiar diatonic elements. To see how “deep” octatonicism may be expressed through “surface” diatonicism we need only cast an eye on the end of the tableau: a

cadence (Ex. 3-20), just as pronounced as the one in Ex. 3-17, but now establishing F# as tonic. Thus the tritone (/0 6/) polarity between C and F# not only exists within the work in the local vertical conjunction that has become famous as the *Petrushka*-chord, but is also extended in the temporal dimension to govern the overall tonal trajectory of the music.

The image shows a musical score for piano (Pno.) in 4/4 time. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music begins with a forte (f) dynamic. The treble staff has a triplet of eighth notes (F#, C#, G#) followed by a single eighth note (F#). The bass staff has a single eighth note (F#). There is a five-measure rest in both staves. The piece concludes with a final chord in F# major marked fortissimo (ff).

ex. 3-20 Igor Stravinsky *Petrushka*, cadence establishing F-sharp as tonic at end of second tableau

The tritone, moreover, as the midpoint of the octave, is found in every symmetrically apportioned scale. Thus it is a subset of both the octatonic and the whole-tone collections, between which it represents a nexus and a potential modulatory pivot. This dual function of the tritone also finds expression at the surface of the music in the immediate succession of keys that links the C-major opening of the work with its F# major conclusion. The Adagietto that follows Ex. 3-18 is centered on D and carries a signature of two sharps, while the music following the Adagietto has E as its center. (For fourteen measures, in fact, the key signature of E minor is explicit.) Thus the sequence of tonal centers forms an ascending octave-bisecting whole-tone progression: C–D–E–F#. Taking the octatonic collection as a whole as the “tonic” of “*Chez Pétrouchka*,” we can view the interaction between the octatonic and the exclusively whole-tone elements in the sequence of tonal centers as a departure-and-return scheme associated with the “binary form” and its many derivatives since the seventeenth century. The vocabulary has changed, and changed radically; the syntax, however, has remained familiar, enabling that new vocabulary to communicate a coherent and intelligible tonal message.

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the cadenza, with the first clarinet playing a solo line marked 'solo' and 'ff cadenza'. The piano part is marked 'molto ritard.' and 'p lamentoso assai'. The string quartet plays a sustained diminished seventh chord. The second system shows the continuation of the cadenza, with the first clarinet playing a solo line marked 'Ad libitum' and 'colla Pno.'. The piano part is marked 'colla Pno.' and 'mf'. The string quartet continues to play the sustained diminished seventh chord.

ex. 3-21 Igor Stravinsky remnants of the piano “Konzertstück” in *Petrushka*, “Chez Pétrouchka,” 4 after fig. 58 (“Petrushka’s despair”)

For maximum effectiveness, as we have long known, a departure-and-return trajectory needs a Far Out Point. Look now at the climactic moment marked “Petrushka’s despair” (Ex. 3-21). The texture consists of a cadenza shared by the first clarinet, the solo piano (by now firmly identified with the title character), and the English horn, over a sustained harmony played first by the trumpets and cornets in B \flat , then (when it quiets down) by a quartet of solo cellos.

That harmony is a diminished seventh chord. Comparison with Ex. 3-7 will show how strategically that chord has been selected: it consists precisely of the four “circled” pitches (B, D, F, A \flat) that are foreign to the octatonic “collection of reference” that governs the whole composition—or, more specifically, that furnishes it with its point of departure and eventual return. A position of maximum distance from what we might call the tonic matrix—in short, a FOP—has been deliberately assumed.

Not only is this point the extreme point of the tonal trajectory; it is also the most dissonant moment in the

piece, hence the most poetically expressive. The clarinet cadenza (notated for an instrument in B \flat) consists in the main of arpeggios on another diminished seventh chord (C \sharp , E, G, B \flat) that clashes maximally with the sustained harmony and complements its “foreignness” to the original tonic matrix, since the only pitches now absent from the texture are those of the remaining possible diminished seventh chord: C, E \flat , F \sharp , A. And these, of course, are precisely the roots of the four triads presented in Ex. 3-16 as the potential tonal centers within the governing collection of reference.

The climax of the clarinet part, marked *lamentoso assai* and clearly meant not only as a musical but also as a dramatic climax, at once represents the limit of dissonance and the limit of tonal distance. And even more than that, it is the one moment in the piece that sounds genuinely “atonal” in the sense that its constituent harmonic elements, diminished seventh chords, are harmonies without any single identifiable root. Hence none can function as a tonic in common practice. Despite the novelty of his materials, Stravinsky is deploying them in ways that make long-accepted musical sense. In fact, the novelty of the materials is being exploited to intensify the experience of these common syntactical relationships and make them new again. That is precisely what is meant by maximalism: the radical intensification of means toward traditional expressive ends.



fig. 3-4 Vaslav Nijinsky in the role of Petrushka.

Owing in part to Stravinsky's brilliant success in achieving those expressive ends while at the same time maintaining a proper musical "grotesquerie" in keeping with the puppet theme, and in part to the superb performance of the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950) in the title role (especially impressive because male dancing had long been in seemingly irrevocable decline outside of Russia), *Petrushka* was taken seriously—by "serious" artists and critics—as no ballet had ever been taken before. "C'est très à la Dostoevsky"²⁴ (Just like Dostoyevsky!) was the consensus in the theater. Sarah Bernhardt, the great French tragedienne, said after seeing Nijinsky, "I'm very afraid: I've seen the greatest actor on earth!"²⁵ Dame Edith Sitwell, an English poet of the avant-garde, who caught the show in London, wrote: "Before the arrival of the Russian ballet in England, the average person had never dreamt that movement could convey a philosophy of life as complete and rounded as any world could be."²⁶ Echoing Benois, who must have felt a sense of triumph on reading her words, she declared that

these bright magical movements have, now the intense vitality of the heart of life, now the rigidity of death; and for speech they have the more universal and larger language of music, interpreting still more clearly these strange beings whose life is so intense, yet to whom living, seen from the outside, is but a brief and tragic happiness upon the greenest grass, in some unknown flashing summer weather.

Finally, Sitwell found universal meaning in the wordless spectacle she had observed:

We know that we are watching our own tragedy. Do we not all know that little room at the back of our poor clown's booth—that little room with the hopeful tinsel stars and the badly-painted ancestral portrait of God? Have we not all battered our heads through the flimsy paper walls—only to find blackness? In the dead Petrouchka, we know that it is our own poor wisp of soul that is weeping so pitifully to us from the top of the booth, outside life for ever, with no one to warm him or comfort him, while the bright-colored rags that were the clown's body lie, stabbed to the heart, in the mire of the street—and, with Claudius [the guilty king in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*], we cry out for "Lights, lights, more lights."²⁷

Notes:

(21) Korney Chukovsky, *Futuristi* (1922); quoted in I. V. Nestyev, *Prokofiev*, trans. Florence Jonas (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1960), p. 91.

(22) Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 31.

(23) Florent Fels, "Un entretien avec Igor Stravinsky à propos de l'enregistrement au phonographe de *Pétrouchka*," *Nouvelles littéraires*, 8 December 1928; François Lesure, ed., *Stravinsky: Études et témoignages* (Paris: Éditions Jean Claude Lattès, 1982), p. 248.

(24) Yakov Tugenhold, "Itogi sezona (pis'mo iz Parizha)," *Apollon* (1911), no. 6: 74.

(25) Charles Hamm, "The Genesis of *Petrushka*," in Igor Stravinsky, *Petrushka*, ed. Hamm (Norton Critical Scores; New York: Norton, 1967), p. 12.

(26) Edith Sitwell, "The Russian Ballet in England," in *The Russian Ballet Gift Book* (London, 1921); rpt. in *Petrushka*, ed. Hamm, pp. 187–88.

(27) *Ibid.*, p 189.

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THE RITE OF SPRING

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

With this rapturous reception of *Petrushka* in mind, Stravinsky returned to “The Great Sacrifice,” the stone-age ballet he had begun sketching the year before, with a new sense of urgency, knowing what he would now have to top. We can form an idea of what his third ballet would have been like had it been his second—that is, had he composed it right after *Firebird*. As mentioned earlier, the “Danse russe” from the first tableau in *Petrushka* had originally been sketched for “The Great Sacrifice” after Stravinsky had consulted with the man who would eventually write its scenario, the painter and archeologist Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947), a matchless connoisseur of Slavic antiquity.

Stravinsky never left any direct testimony that this was the case, but we can deduce it from the nature of the folk songs on which the “Danse russe” was based. Roerich, who had made a special study (published in 1909) of Russian pagan festivals, told Stravinsky about two of them: Semik, a spring festival of ancestor worship at which wreaths were cast on water to predict the future, and Kupala, the midsummer festival (celebrated in Christian times as St. John’s Eve), when images of the sun god Yarilo were burned in effigy, young men leapt over the fire, and then chose brides from among the eligible maidens of the tribe. Together, Stravinsky and Roerich planned the first tableau of “The Great Sacrifice” around these holiday rituals, paying special attention to a passage in an eleventh-century Kievan manuscript called the Primary Chronicle, or “Tale of Bygone Years” (*Povest’ vremennikh let*), in which the Christian monk Nestor the Chronicler had described the wild customs of the surrounding pagan tribes, the “Radimichi, the Vyatichi, and the Severi”:

Living in the forests like the very beasts, there were no marriages among them, but simply games [*igrī*] in between the villages. When the people gathered for games, for dancing, and for all other devilish amusements, the men on these occasions carried off wives for themselves [*umīkakhu zhenī sebe*], and each took any woman with whom he had arrived at an understanding. In fact, they even had two or three wives apiece.²⁸

Nestor’s very diction (as indicated in the brackets) found its way into the scenario Stravinsky and Roerich worked out, and is now reflected in the titles of the constituent dances. The ceremony here described became the *Igra umīkaniya* (“Game of abduction”) in the first tableau. That was the dance that became the “Danse russe” in *Petrushka*. Its main theme was a *khorovod* or ritual dance Stravinsky found in Rimsky-Korsakov’s old anthology (Ex. 3-22a). Its title, “Ai, vo polye lipin’ka,” means “A Linden Tree Stands in the Field,” and the text, slightly paraphrased, runs as follows:


In the field there stands a linden tree; beneath the linden is a tent; in the tent there stands a table; at the table sits a maiden. She has picked blossoms from the grass; she has plaited a wreath from the garden; it is woven with precious rubies. “Who shall wear the wreath? No old man shall carry off this wreath; my youth shall not be restrained! My sweetheart will carry off this wreath; my youth shall not be restrained!”

It is a matchmaking song about “carrying off the wreath” (=the bride). And the song that formed the middle


section of the “Danse russe” (Ex. 3-22b) was even more closely allied with the scenario since it was an *Ivanovskaya*, a song for *Ivanovskaya noch'* or St. John's Eve (=Kupala), with a text that read, “Oh yes, I'm running after a bride!”

In all likelihood, Roerich himself directed Stravinsky (who would probably not have known the ethnographic significance of an *Ivanovskaya*) to the tune in Ex. 3-22b.

a.
“Ai, vo pole lipin'ka” as it appears in the Lvov-Pratsch collection (1790)



b.
Petrushka, first tableau: “Danse russe” (transposed to facilitate comparison)



ex. 3-22a “Ai, vo polye lipin'ka” compared with main tune of “Danse russe”



ex. 3-22b *Ivanovskaya* (F. M. Istomin and S. M. Lyapunov, *Pesni russkogo naroda* [1899], p. 167)

But having used it in the “Danse russe,” Stravinsky needed fresh tunes when he returned to “The Great Sacrifice” after *Petrushka*. Again Roerich probably came to the rescue, telling Stravinsky that of all the European peoples of the Russian Empire, the Liths and Letts—Lithuanians and Latvians as they are called in modern times—were the most recently Christianized, having remained pagans until 1386, and had performed ritual animal (though not human) sacrifices within living memory. Accordingly, Stravinsky sought out a recently published anthology of Lithuanian wedding songs, from which he adopted several tunes in the first tableau, including the high bassoon melody that opens the whole work, and also the tune given in Ex. 3-23 for use in the *Igra umikaniya*, the “Game of Abduction” in what became the definitive version of “The Great Sacrifice,” performed in Paris in 1913 under the name *Le sacre du printemps*, of which the standard English title, *The Rite of Spring*, is a translation.

No. 142



ex. 3-23 *Tevuseli manu!* (Anton Juskiewicz, *Melodje ludowe litewskie* [Cracow, 1900], no. 142)

Comparison of this tune with the corresponding section of the new ballet in the composer's arrangement for piano four-hands (Ex. 3-24), and between the new dance and the jolly "Danse russe" that it replaced, shows how determined Stravinsky was to maximalize his achievements in *Petrushka*. The tune is presented only once complete; thereafter it is presented only in fragments, often interrupted by brutally interpolated dissonant chords. Indeed, the whole dance is permeated with the sort of dissonance that had still been a special effect in *Petrushka*: "polychords" consisting of superimposed triads and seventh chords drawn from the /0 3 6 9/nodes of the same octatonic collection employed in "Chez Pétrouchka," namely C, E \flat , F \sharp , and A.

At the very outset of Ex. 3-24, the Primo part is mixing dominant sevenths on C and E \flat against a pounding F \sharp in the bass, played by the Secondo. In the last two measures of the example, the Primo continues the dominant seventh of E \flat while the Secondo arpeggiates triads—very confusingly spelled (perhaps simply to disguise their identity?)—on A and C. A similar arpeggiation in the Secondo part (Ex. 3-25) circulates triads at all four nodes, sounding all the while against "polychordal" mixtures of the same triads in the Primo that are frequently voiced in the maximally dissonant form of "clusters" (scale segments sounded as simultaneous harmony).

Presto (♩ = 132)

Pno.

f

Presto (♩ = 132)

Pno.

f

3

5

The image displays a musical score for piano, consisting of six systems of staves. The first system shows a piano introduction with a tempo marking of 'Presto (♩ = 132)' and a dynamic marking of 'f'. The second system features a piano part with a 'z' marking above a rest. The third system continues the piano part with a 'z' marking above a rest. The fourth system shows a piano part with a 'z' marking above a rest. The fifth system shows a piano part with a 'z' marking above a rest. The sixth system shows a piano part with a 'z' marking above a rest. The score is written in a key signature of two flats and a 3/4 time signature.

Musical score for measures 7-10 of "Ritual of Abduction" from *The Rite of Spring*, piano four-hands arrangement. The score is in 4/8 time and features a complex, rhythmic texture. Measures 7-8 show a piano introduction with a *cresc.* marking. Measures 9-10 are marked *ff* and feature a strong, driving bass line.

ex. 3-24 Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring* (piano four-hands arrangement), "Ritual of Abduction," mm. 1–10

Musical score for measures 23-25 of "Ritual of Abduction" from *The Rite of Spring*, piano four-hands arrangement. The score is in 6/8 time and features a complex, rhythmic texture. Measures 23-25 are marked *mf* and feature a strong, driving bass line. A *stacc.* marking is present above the first measure.

ex. 3-25 Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring* (piano four-hands arrangement), “Ritual of Abduction,” mm. 23–28

Indeed, maximal dissonance was one of Stravinsky’s chief means for evoking the pitiless brutality and inhumanity of primitive religion as he imagined it. At the same time he sought validation for his stylistic extravagances in ethnographic authenticity. What is chiefly maximalized in *The Rite*, then, is the neonationalist ideal, the project of wringing stylistic innovation and renewed technical resources from archaic folkloristic models. For this purpose Stravinsky cultivated another manner of treating the octatonic scale, one with fewer precedents in earlier Russian music (though it can be found occasionally in the work of Rimsky-Korsakov and his contemporaries), but which was particularly well suited to the task of harmonizing Russian folk tunes in a maximally dissonant but consistent (and “authentic”) fashion.

In addition to the manner of “partitioning” the octatonic collection (or set) already illustrated by the *Petrushka*-chord and the harmonization of the “Game of Abduction”—namely, grouping its constituent tones into four major or minor triads or seventh chords with roots along a cycle of minor thirds—it is also possible to partition the scale (that is, group its constituent tones) into four minor tetrachords with starting pitches arrayed along a similar cycle. (A minor tetrachord consists of the first four notes of the minor scale, its constituent intervals being tone-semitone-tone or TST; see Ex. 3-26.) The reason why this partition of the octatonic scale has a special affinity for Russian folklore is that many Russian folk melodies, especially the ones associated with ancient “calendar songs” that bear the traces of pre-Christian agrarian religious observances (hence especially relevant to the subject of *The Rite of Spring*), are confined precisely to the notes of a minor tetrachord. An especially economical way of giving such a melody a maximalistic harmonization, therefore, would be to accompany it with the tetrachord that forms its octatonic complement—that is, the tetrachord which, when added to the tune’s tetrachord, will exhaust the octatonic collection. The two tetrachords that function in this complementary way, like the two constituent triads in a *Petrushka*-chord, have their beginnings or root-notes a tritone apart.

ex. 3-26 Tetrachordal partition of an octatonic scale

Ex. 3-27a shows an authentic Russian folk song, recorded in the field in the mid-1960s, that belongs to a genre particularly relevant to the action of *The Rite of Spring*: it is a *vesnyanka* (from *vesna*, “spring”), a song that survives from an ancient ritual of “calling in the spring” at winter’s end by shouting spells. Like many *vesnyanki*, it is confined in its ambitus to a minor tetrachord. Ex. 3-27b shows a melody of exactly the same structure, hence recognizably (or at least plausibly) a *vesnyanka*, from the section of *The Rite of Spring* called “Ritual Action of the Ancestors.” It is harmonized with a vamping bass and a countermelody both drawn from the complementary octatonic tetrachord in the manner just described. It is one of many instances in the ballet of maximalistically harmonized melodies that are either authentic folk artifacts or convincing imitations thereof. By beginning with a piece of folk “reality” and applying a radical new technique to it, Stravinsky sought authenticity and modernity at once.

Oy vi-ri, vi-ri ko-lo-dez, vi-ri, vi-ri sto-dyo-ne Oy

lyu-li, lyu-li, vi-ri, vi-ri sto-dyo-ne etc.

ex. 3-27a *Oy vir vir kolodez*, *vesnyanka* recorded ca. 1965 from the singing of Agrafena Glinkina, Smolensk, Russia

ex. 3-27b Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, from “Ritual Action of the Ancestors”

From the opposition of the “x and y tetrachords,” as they are labeled in Ex. 3-27b, Stravinsky educed a three-note harmonic skeleton or “source chord” consisting of the outer notes of the one tetrachord accompanied by the lowest note of its complement, producing an intervallic configuration that can be represented as /0 6 11/. This harmony pervades *The Rite* from beginning to end, giving rise in the process to some of the most famously dissonant chords on its musical surface, like the one that chugs along in ostinato fashion to accompany the “Spring Auguries” in the first tableau, or the first chord in the culminating “Sacrificial Dance” in the second tableau. Ex. 3-28 gives a sampling of them. (In some cases, the inversion of the source chord—/0 5 11/—is used.)

ex. 3-28a The *Rite*-chord, “Dance of the Adolescent Girls” (Part I)

ex. 3-28b The *Rite*-chord, “Sacrificial Dance” (Part II)

104 (note spelling simplified)

abstract:
inv. → Rite-Chord

15ma

appogg.

“flute slide”

“tonic”

(appogg.)

ex. 3-28c The *Rite*-chord, sketch for the “Glorification of the Chosen One” (Part II)

Musical score for ex. 3-28d. It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system has three measures with fingering numbers (0,5,11), (0,6,11), and (0,5,11) above the chords. The second system has four measures with fingering numbers (0,6,11), (0,5,11), (0,6,11), and (0,5,11) above the chords. A wavy line indicates a tremolo effect in the first measure of the second system.

ex. 3-28d The *Rite*-chord, preparatory measure before “Glorification of the Chosen One”

Musical score for ex. 3-28e. It shows two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system is labeled "Embellished *Rite*-chords (coll' ottava):" and includes a dashed line with an octave sign (8va) above the treble clef staff. The second system is also labeled with a dashed line and an octave sign (8va) above the treble clef staff. The score includes treble and bass clefs and various chordal textures.

Middle line, reduced to essential *Rite*-chords:

Musical score showing the middle line reduced to essential *Rite*-chords. It is a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It contains five measures of chords, with the final measure enclosed in a circle.

ex. 3-28e The *Rite*-chord, “Spring Rounds” (Part I)

ex. 3-28f The *Rite*-chord, “Mystic Circles” (Part II)

The most maximalistic dances in *The Rite of Spring* are the ones that conclude the two respective tableaux. The “Dance of the Earth” at the end of part I is a montage of ostinatos, one of which is an adaptation of an instrumental dance tune or *naigrish* of the kind that, sixty-five years earlier, had furnished the point of departure for Glinka’s *Kamarinskaya*, the “acorn from which the oak of Russian music grew,” as Chaikovsky had so famously called it.²⁹ Stravinsky, inevitably conscious of this legacy, was resolutely attempting to achieve its ne plus ultra. This source melody is shown in Ex. 3-29a as it appears in Stravinsky’s sketches for the ballet; directly under it, in Ex. 3-29b, is a hypothetical original version, lacking the whole-tone harmonization; finally, Ex. 3-29c shows an authentic wedding song, adaptable as a *naigrish*, for comparison. Another source sketch for the dance is shown in Ex. 3-29d; this one resembles a melody from Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (Ex. 3-29e).

ex. 3-29a Source melody for Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, “Dance of the Earth,” sketchbook, p. 35

ex. 3-29b Source melody for Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, “Dance of the Earth,” lower line of sketch

ex. 3-29c Source melody for Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, “Dance of the Earth,” Wedding song *Letal golub vorkoval* (“The dove flew, cooing”)

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The first staff is a single line of music in treble clef. The second staff is labeled 'ossia' and shows an alternative version of the melody in 4/4 time. The third staff continues the melody in a different time signature, likely 3/4.

ex. 3-29d Source melody for Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, “Dance of the Earth,” sketchbook, p. 35

The image shows a single staff of musical notation with lyrics underneath. The tempo markings 'a piacere' and 'in tempo' are placed above the staff. The lyrics are: Po - ka - zhi Mi - kha - lush - ka, po - ka - zhi du - rach - li - vīy!_____

ex. 3-29e Source melody for Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, “Dance of the Earth,” Nikolai Rim-sky-Korsakov, *Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (1907), Act II

Pno.

Pno.

ff sempre

*sub. meno *f* e cresc. sino al Fine*

fff

ex. 3-30 Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, "Dance of the Earth," end

Between them, these two source melodies provided Stravinsky with all of the material out of which he constructed the “Dance of the Earth”; it is fascinating to trace the process by which it took shape in his sketches. Even the punctuating chord that injects a note of unpredictability into the proceedings is a derivation from the first source melody, consisting of a “verticalization” of several of its constituent pitches. What governs the whole is the combination of whole-tone and octatonic elements drawn from scales that have the familiar nodal points C and F# in common. By the end of the dance, the timpani is very explicitly directing a harmonic oscillation between these poles. As we found out in the case of the Coronation bells from Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, however, a tritone oscillation produces a harmonic stalemate that makes closure difficult. How to end the piece? Stravinsky’s first idea for an ending is shown in Fig. 3-5a, a page from his sketchbook. He originally meant to end the dance, and with it the first tableau, with a sustained version of the punctuating chord in full brass, *crescendo al possibile*.



fig. 3-5a Stravinsky’s sketch for the conclusion of *Danse de la terre* (*The Rite of Spring*, end of first tableau).

Why did he cancel such a striking idea? Obviously, one can never really know the answer to such a question

but pondering it is instructive. For one thing, the chord might have made too obvious an ending to a section of the ballet the whole character of which is one of ceaseless and essentially undifferentiated activity. The blunter ending finally decided upon (Ex. 3-30), just an abrupt and shocking halt, emphasizes in retrospect that very ceaselessness. For another—perhaps more important—thing, the bass note of the sustained chord, an octave G in the tubas, confuses the very clear bipolar tonality of the dance based on oscillation between C and F# (the very combination that, in block superimposition, we know as the *Petrushka*-chord).

In any event, the “Dance of the Earth” was a momentous achievement, for it shows how profoundly Stravinsky’s musical imagination was stirred by the manipulation of elements abstracted in neofolk style from folk songs, and how thoroughly many of the most pregnantly original of *The Rite’s* technical innovations had their origins in this maximalistic approach to received material. The “Dance of the Earth” is at once one of the most radical sections of *The Rite*—surely the most radical by far in part 1—and the dance most rigorously based on folk-derived source melodies.

Notes:

(28) *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, trans. Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 56.

(29) Chaikovsky, diary entry for 27 June 1888; quoted in David Brown, *Glinka* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 1.

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THE NE PLUS ULTRA

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The only dance that exceeds it in its startling maximalism is the one that had to exceed it: the “Sacrificial Dance” at the ballet’s end. Like the rest of the ballet it revels in the crashing force of a huge orchestra and a chronically elevated level of dissonance. (“Imagine!” one Russian reviewer exclaimed after the first performance, exaggerating only slightly, “from beginning to end there is not a single pure triad!”³⁰) But now Stravinsky added to all of that an equally extreme dislocation of meter in order to convey the lurching, wrenching quality of the dance that will lead the Chosen One to her inevitable death.

This technique of constantly shifting the lengths of measures had been amply prefigured earlier in the ballet, especially past the point at which the sacrificial maiden had been chosen by fate. In the “Glorification of the Chosen One,” for example, there is a maddening contest between elements that are absolutely fixed and those that are, so to speak, absolutely variable. The opening measure (given in Ex. 3-28c), with its violent drumbeat in the middle, constitutes the “theme” in the outer sections of the dance. Each of its twenty subsequent appearances is absolutely identical to the first.

What is not uniform is the grouping—that is, the number of identical repetitions that will make up each successive statement of the returning theme (anywhere from one to four)—and also the number of eighth-note beats that will elapse between the statements (anywhere from two to thirty-eight). These intervening beats are “marked” by a vamp of *Rite*-chords as already shown in Ex. 3-28d. The number of these beats being unpredictable, each return to the theme is experienced as a disjuncture, a disruption of an “immobile” uniformity. Momentum is maintained by exploiting this interplay of utter fixity and its opposite, utter mutability. The listener is involved, so to speak, in a harrowing guessing game: When will vamp give way to theme? How many iterations will a given statement of the theme contain? Metaphorically, one is left constantly wondering when one is to be beaten again, and how long the beating will last.

The middle section of the dance, distinguished from the surrounding ones by a key signature of five flats, shifts over to another set of rigidly fixed (or “hypostatized”) elements. Three new static ideas, radically differentiated in instrumentation, are intercut. As before, the only variable elements are temporal, “quantitative.” But as before, whatever is variable gets varied to the hilt! That simple axiom is the key to Stravinsky’s rhythmic innovations in *The Rite*. They are of two distinct types. One is the “immobile,” unchanging ostinato or vamp, sometimes quite literally hypnotic, as when the Elders charm the Chosen One to perform her dance of death. That is what their Ritual Action (Ex. 3-27b) is all about, and that is why, except for a brief middle section, the beat-rhythm of that dance is one of the most regular and relentless in the ballet, and the most undifferentiated as to stress.

The other type is the one that was such a novelty—for European art music, that is; in Russian folklore it had been a fixture from time immemorial. This was the rhythm of irregularly spaced downbeats, requiring a correspondingly (and, for “Europe” and for “art,” unprecedentedly) varied metric barring in the notation. To demonstrate that the device had precedents in Russian folk song it is only necessary to quote a relevant example from Rimsky-Korsakov’s famous anthology. The wedding song “The Bells are Ringing in Yevlashev Village” (Ex. 3-31) is especially convincing because it has a story attached to it. Rimsky transcribed it from

the singing of a village woman who worked as a maid for his fellow composer Alexander Borodin. “I struggled till late at night trying to reproduce the song,” Rimsky reported in his memoirs. “Rhythmically it was unusually freakish, though it flowed naturally from the mouth of Dunyasha Vinogradova, a native of one of the provincial districts along the Volga.”³¹ In the end, the meter shifts he adopted have a decidedly “Stravinskian” appearance.

ex. 3-31 *Zvon kolokol v yevlasheve sele* (Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *100 Russian Folk Songs* [1877], no. 72)

Particularly fascinating and innovative (hence influential) was the way in which Stravinsky contrived to have his two rhythmic/metric types—the “passive” ostinato and the active shifting stress—coexist within a single texture. One notable instance comes in the middle section of the Glorification dance. Beneath a variable-downbeat pattern in the violins’ and violas’ pizzicati, the lower strings, lower winds, and percussion play a rigid figure of four eighth-notes’ duration (Ex. 3-32). Neither element is in syncopation with respect to the other, for neither possesses what could be called the defining or dominant rhythm against which the other could be construed as syncopated. They merely go in and out of phase with one another, fixity and mutability coexisting in concurrent, independent strata.

ex. 3-32 Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, “Glorification,” mm. 114–115

The most radical—that is, the “maximal”—form of the variable-downbeat technique is one in which the shifting meters are coordinated on the “subtactile” level—that is, by an equalized note-value that is less than the duration of a felt beat, or *tactus*. There was no precedent for this technique even in earlier Russian art music; it was Stravinsky’s discovery, his modernist (or neonationalist) breakthrough. And it reaches its zenith, both in terms of complexity of pattern and in terms of fractionated counting value (sixteenths rather than eighths) in the vertiginous “Sacrificial Dance”—the dance “which I could play,” as Stravinsky put it in a memoir, “but did not, at first, know how to write.”³²

Also reaching its apogee in the “Sacrificial Dance” was the technique of hypo-statement, extreme fixity of musical “objects.” More than in any earlier number, the metric processes of the “Sacrificial Dance” are “mosaic,” concretized in specific, discrete, and (above all) minuscule musical “tesserae,” the variations in the ostensible “metric” patterns actually reflecting permutations of the order in which these tiny fixed elements are juxtaposed. This is the feature called *dashbez* in Russian, the quality of being not an “organic” whole

but a “sum of parts”—raised to the highest power, revealing not just a rhythmic innovation but a novel constructive principle. The literalness of the analogy with tesserae (the tiles in a mosaic)—or “cells,” as later analysts (still influenced, it seems, by the “organicist” ideal) have been calling them—is breathtakingly disclosed in Stravinsky’s sketchbook, when the composer suddenly takes to representing his fixed musical objects with letters, arranging and rearranging them at will (Fig. 3-5b). And he left the articulation of the irregularly spaced downbeats his sequences of tesserae elicited to the most elemental force of all—to volume alone, as expressed by the bass instruments and percussion, especially the timpani (the octave A’s in the Secondo part in Ex. 3-33), which in this dance achieve the status of a terrifying, buffeting force of nature.

Notes:

(30) Vyacheslav Karatigin, “Sed’moy kontsert Kussevitskogo,” *Rech’*, 14 February 1914.

(31) Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life*, p. 165.

(32) Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 161–62.

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Igor Stravinsky

Ballet: Nijinsky

THE REACTION

Chapter: CHAPTER 3 Aristocratic Maximalism

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

That terror was something that the audience felt—and can still feel, if the orchestra can refrain from showing off the ease with which, nearly a century later, it is now possible to perform Stravinsky's music. The alliance of the music with the stage action and the romantic neoprimitivist ideology that the action embodied makes it possible to continue to speak of Stravinsky's music as "maximalist." Despite its extreme novelty, at least so far as the Paris audience was concerned, its expressive aims were intelligible, indeed familiar.

The image displays a piano four-hands arrangement of the "Sacrificial Dance" from Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. The score is written for two pianos (Pno.) and consists of three systems of music. The first system includes the initial measures with the instruction "poco cresc. sino al Fine". The second system continues the piece with similar dynamics. The third system features a section marked "accel. Tempo" and "colla parte", with dynamics ranging from *fff* to *pp* and *non cresc.*, leading to a final *fff* section and ending with "Fine". The score is in a key with two flats and a 3/4 time signature.

ex. 3-33 Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring* (piano four-hands arrangement), "Sacrificial Dance"

And yet, as already noted, past a certain point a difference of degree can be—and past another point, can only be—perceived as difference in kind. In *The Rite of Spring* the expressive ends were so fundamentally transformed by the composer's and the choreographer's radicalized expressive means that they could no longer be confidently taken as "traditional" or "accepted." Not only was the audience distracted from the ballet's ancient and time-honored themes by the modernity (to them, the ugliness) of the style with which they were confronted. No less significantly, the composer and the choreographer, by insisting so on the terror of Mother Nature rather than the beauty of human nature, projected a thoroughly alien expressive ambience, alien to all humanistic thought in its brutally dehumanized mien.

The choreographer was Nijinsky, the greatest dancer of the day, but (at the age of twenty-three) still a novice at direction. It was his contribution—now lost, despite strenuous efforts at revival—that, taken as incompetent, was chiefly responsible for the notorious fiasco at the ballet's premiere. The audience's very

voluble rejection of the work has become a legend. “The real thing—a big ‘Paris’ scandal,”³³ critics marveled or scoffed, something to set beside the fiasco of *Tannhäuser* half a century before. And the reasons were similar: the ballet audience expected one thing and got another. Then, it was a short divertissement in the first act, rather than a full-dress second-act operatic ballet. Now, it was prehistoric peasants on stage, instead of sylphides and wilis, stamping on the earth rather than soaring aloft from it. (And, although no reviewer mentioned it, it might also have been a ballet orchestra that contained no harp!) What could be read as maximalism in expressive terms was, in more narrowly balletic terms, read as mere disfigurement. No wonder, as Stravinsky laconically reported in a letter home, “things got as far as fighting.”³⁴ But it was not his music as such that offended, let alone fomented a “riot.” It was not even the primary object of the audience’s attention that fabled night of 29 May 1913. Many if not most of the reviews failed to deal with Stravinsky’s contribution at all beyond naming him as composer; as one of the reviewers candidly admitted, “past the Prelude the crowd simply stopped listening to the music so that they might better amuse themselves with the choreography.”³⁵ When the music was heard again a year later, by itself, in a concert performance under the same conductor (Pierre Monteux) who had officiated at the premiere, the composer enjoyed the greatest triumph of his career.

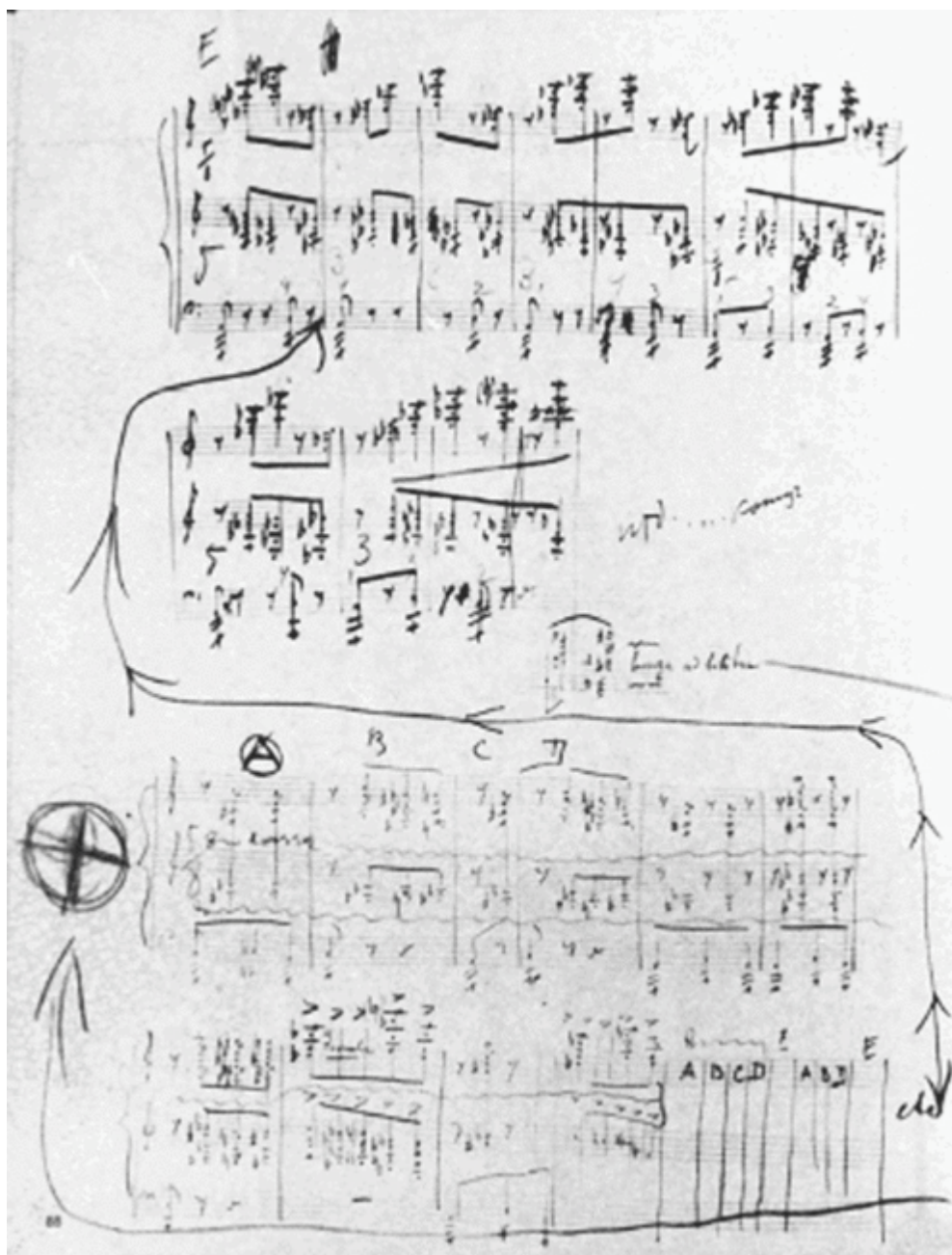


fig. 3-5b Stravinsky's sketch for *Danse sacrale* (*The Rite of Spring*, end of second tableau).



fig. 3-6 Drawings by Valentine Hugo (née Gross, 1887–1968) of Maria Piltz as the Chosen One in *Danse sacrale*, coordinated with the accompanying music. The huge, unwelcome contrast between the heavy earthbound steps Nijinsky choreographed for his dancers and the older ballet ideal, exemplified by the winged, ethereal Carlotta Grisi in *Giselle* (Fig. 3-1), was the shock that triggered the famous riot at the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*.

But even among those who hailed the music as a masterpiece were those who perceived a baleful message in the ballet. “Ce ballet est un ballet biologique,” declared Jacques Rivière, the editor of the *Nouvelle revue française*, Paris’s most sophisticated literary and intellectual journal: “This is a biological ballet.”³⁶ The adjective summons up a variant of neoprimitivism called biologism, one of the bleakest, most

antihumanistic of all philosophical visions. Primitivism, the belief that what is least mediated by modern society—children, peasants, “savages,” raw emotion, plain speech—is closest to the truth, was compatible with all the noblest aspirations of romanticism. Biologism was something else. Skeptical of all humane ideals, it held life to be no more than the sum of its physical facts and drives: birth, death, procreation, survival. Anything else, it averred, was mere ornament and palliative, a lie. The movements Nijinsky had choreographed for the corps de ballet, the collective, anonymous “body” of dancers, was in Rivière’s terrible opinion

not just the dance of the most primitive man, it is also the dance before there was man. There is something profoundly blind in this dance. There is an enormous question being carried about by all these creatures moving before our eyes. It is in no way distinct from themselves. They carry it about with them without understanding it, like an animal that turns in its cage and never tires of butting its forehead against the bars. They have no other organ than their whole organism, and it is with that that they carry on their search. They go hither and thither and stop; they throw themselves forward like a load, and wait. Nothing precedes them; there is nothing to rejoin, no ideal to regain. Just as the blood within them, without any reason save its pumping, knocks against the walls of their skulls, so they ask for issue and succession. And little by little, by dint of their patience and persistence, a sort of answer comes, that is also nothing other than themselves, which also meshes with their physical being, and which is life.

It was the great thrust of the nineteenth-century science of anthropology to demystify mythology, to demote myths from the status to which post-Wagnerians and Symbolists wished to reelevate them, to that of metaphor for grim biological realities. It was the project of Sir James Frazer, for example, in his encyclopedic study of the myths of the world called *The Golden Bough* (1890), to strip away the anecdotal content of myths and the metaphorical content of rituals to reveal the ruthless rites of propitiation that lay behind them—the very thing that *The Rite of Spring* exposed. It was a threat not only to poetic mythologism but to the sanctity of revealed religion as well, especially Christian religion, for it reduced the Holy Eucharist to a cannibalistic rite no different from those practiced by any number of “savage” tribes. It was all too easy to draw a horrifying parallel between the culminating virgin sacrifice in *The Rite of Spring* and the sacrifice commemorated in every Christian service.

But was that Stravinsky’s fault? Or was it just a part of the staging, the part that, once removed from the music, no longer encumbered it? Beginning with that first triumphant performance in 1914, Stravinsky’s ballet has been heard far more often in the concert hall (not to mention its countless recordings) than in the ballet pit. Stravinsky himself went on record as saying that that was how he preferred to hear it. In fact, in 1920 he gave an interview to a Paris reporter in which he denied that his music was “programmatic” at all. “Its embryo,” he claimed,

was a theme that came to me while I was finishing *Firebird*. Since this theme and what followed from it were conceived in a stark and brutal manner, I chose as a pretext to develop them the evocation of prehistoric Russia, since I am Russian. But note well that the idea came from the music, not the music from the idea. I have written an architectural work, not an anecdotal one.³⁷

There was hardly a word of truth in this, and of course Stravinsky knew it. By 1920, as we will see in a later chapter, he had reasons for wishing to deflect attention from the original subject matter of the ballet and to call attention instead to its form. But can subject matter really be so easily divorced from form, in this or any work of art? Or does the music’s reliance on throbbing ostinatos, on arbitrary arrangements of “hypostatized,” nonprogressive harmonies and rhythms, and on inscrutable metrical situations that make the future unpredictable and memory useless already inscribe and participate in the great strip-down from culture to nature, from individual reflection to collective action, from psychology to automatism, ultimately from humanism to biologism, that the ballet presents and even seems to celebrate? Is the utter lack of pathos, the withholding of sympathy from the Chosen One, merely an aspect or product of the “anecdotal” content of the work, or is that pitilessness already implicit in the music itself, its form and its technical procedures?

One who felt the music to be complicit in the parlous message and inextricable from it—and hence that there was no “music itself”—was Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903–69), an influential German social philosopher whose extensive musical training impelled him to seek evidence of social attitudes in music. He was appalled by *The Rite* because of the way it seemed not only to portray but to perpetrate the annihilation of the ego, the seat of conscious reflection and moral decision. Even the performers, he thought, must submit to this process. The rigorous precision Stravinsky’s difficult rhythms required for their coordinated execution ruled out any spontaneous modification of tempo such as conductors employ for purposes of expressivity. The composer constrains—and dehumanizes—his performers just as surely as the primitive tribe constrains the sacrificial maiden, he suggests. The task of realizing Stravinsky’s “fluctuations of something always constant and totally static” reduces the conductor (shades of *Petrushka!*) “to puppet-like motions,” and conveys to the listeners as well as the ballerina “the immutable rigidity of convulsive blows and shocks for which they are not prepared through any anticipation of anxiety.”³⁸ Adorno wrote these words in 1948, in a book called *The Philosophy of New Music*. *The Rite of Spring* was already thirty-five years old, and accepted everywhere as a twentieth-century classic. By 1948, however, Adorno felt that events had grimly vindicated his reading of the ballet’s sinister elevation of an unreflective collective mentality over individual conscience. Those events included the rise of fascism, which Adorno felt to have been prefigured in Stravinsky’s dehumanizing music, and the Second World War.

Did Stravinsky’s music prefigure fascism? Can any music do such a thing? Does it affect the question to know that between the world wars Stravinsky was indeed a “fascist sympathizer”? What are the implications of such questions for performance and criticism? We seem to be dealing with another “Wagner problem.” And just as with Wagner, there would be no problem were the music not a supremely compelling artistic achievement.

Notes:

(33) Leonid Sabaneyev, “Vesna svyashchennaya,” *Golos Moskvī*, 8 June 1913.

(34) Stravinsky to Maximilian Steinberg, 3 July 1913; in *I. F. Stravinskiy: Stat'i i material'i*, ed. L. Dyachkova (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1973), p. 474.

(35) Louis Vuillemin, “Le Sacre du Printemps,” *Comoedia* 7, no. 2068 (31 May 1913); in Truman C. Bullard, “The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps*,” Vol. I (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1971), p. 144.

(36) Jacques Rivière, “Le sacre du printemps,” *La Nouvelle revue française*, November 1913; Bullard, *The First Performance*, Vol. III, pp. 271, 274.

(37) Michel Georges-Michel, “Les deux Sacres du printemps,” *Comoedia* (11 December 1920); Bullard, *The First Performance*, Vol. I, pp. 2–3.

(38) Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music* (1948), trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 155.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Scriabin, Messiaen

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

MAXIMALISM REACHES THE MAX

The “Sacrificial Dance” at the end of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* reaches its dénouement in a massive crunch, denoting a strain the body of the Chosen One can no longer bear. Afterward there is only a tiny coda (reminiscent, perhaps, of the way the “March to the Scaffold” ends in Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*) that tracks the concluding mimed action closely: she crumples (flute glissandi); the elders rush up to catch her (sweeping upbeat figure); she collapses in a heap (concluding thump).

That final crunch, the culminating chord in the culminating dance (incompletely represented in piano reduction in Ex. 3-33), consists of eight pitches doubled in many octaves. (When doubling or register are not themselves the issue, one often uses the term “pitch classes,”¹ coined by the American composer Milton Babbitt in the 1940s and popularized in the 1960s, to refer to differently named pitches irrespective of octave position; thus the culminating chord in *The Rite* comprises the pitch classes C D \flat E F F \sharp G A B \flat .) As usual in Stravinsky, the pitches in question are grouped so that the harmony can be construed as a “polychord” consisting of superimposed C major and F \sharp major triads (a *Petrushka*-chord, as we have learned to call it), with an extra A joined to the former by downward extension (to make a seventh chord, or else to produce overlapping A minor and C major triads), and an extra F (or E \sharp) joined to the latter by upward extension (again to make a seventh chord, or else to produce overlapping F \sharp major and B \flat [A \sharp] minor triads; see Ex. 4-1).



ex. 4-1 Culminating harmony in *The Rite of Spring* represented as a maximalized *Petrushka*-chord

Describing the chord in this way is admittedly a mouthful, but it may well reflect Stravinsky’s conceptualization of it as a maximalization of his previous octatonic practice. But the process of extension is simultaneously one of transformation, since the chord in question can no longer be referred to the octatonic scale. Thus what can in one sense be described as a difference in degree (whether simply the number of notes heard simultaneously or the amount of crushingly expressive dissonance) can be described in another sense as a difference in kind (transcending the limits of octatonicism to embrace and control a greater chromatic purview). The chord, with its imagined creative history, represents and exemplifies in a nutshell the concept that drove the radical new music of the early twentieth century. It was a *ne plus ultra* within a *ne plus ultra*.

But a limit loomed. Eight pitch classes was only four away from complete chromatic saturation—or more to the point, from chromatic exhaustion. Stravinsky never reached the limit. Not to put it past him, it never figured in his expressive designs. But Mahler (unbeknownst to Stravinsky or anyone else at the time) had already come one pitch class closer to the saturation point in his unfinished Tenth Symphony (see Ex. 1-6); and at least four composers were driven to the limit—that is, to the use of “twelve-tone chords” or “aggregate harmonies”—in the period between 1911 and 1915, the years leading up to and immediately following the outbreak of World War I.

It was not a question of mutual influence. The works were not only too widely dispersed geographically for their authors to have been aware of each other’s projects, but also, with a single exception, they were all left unfinished like Mahler’s Tenth and were never published or even performed during their creators’ lifetimes. To describe them as emblematic works of their time might seem a bit paradoxical since their time did not know them. But the idea of reaching limits was indeed something known. It was nothing short of an obsession. Despite their being hidden from contemporary view, then, these unfinished (perhaps unfinishable) works, which will serve as the climactic exhibits, so to speak, of this chapter and the two that follow, will illustrate the predominating obsession of their time in the most concrete and tangible fashion.

And they can serve as emblems in another way as well. What is hidden from view is occluded, or *occult*. By extension, the latter word has acquired a figurative connotation in addition to its literal meaning. It stands for what belongs to the world beyond (hence hidden from) the senses, already identified with the Symbolists’ concept of the *au-delà*. And the three great torsos—the *Mysterium* by the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915), the *Universe symphony* by the American composer Charles Ives (1874–1954), and the oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter* by the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)—all concerned matters occult.

They were all grand visionary statements on the borderline between philosophy and religion, a region already broached by Mahler in his grandly visionary Second Symphony, which dealt in its final movements with eschatological matters—matters of literally *ultimate* significance—rarely broached in secular art. These matters were broached more and more insistently in the art of the early twentieth century. They were perhaps the main impulse driving the engine of stylistic maximalism at this crucial time. What better way of exemplifying the way in which music was driven by ideas than with pieces of music that only existed, during their composers’ lifetimes, as ideas? (They have all been posthumously, which means speculatively, “realized” by subsequent composer-scholars, and in this way performed and recorded.)

Notes:

(1) The first of Babbitt’s published articles in which this term appeared was “Twelve-Tone Invariants as Compositional Determinants,” *Musical Quarterly* XLVI (1960): 246–59; rpt. in *Problems of Modern Music*, ed. P. H. Lang (New York: Norton, 1960), pp. 108–21.

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Alban Berg

Richard Engländer

RUSH-TO-THE-PATENT-OFFICE MODERNISM

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

But first a word about the one composition using aggregate harmonies that was completed and performed—once only—during this phase of maximal maximalism. The composer was the then virtually unknown Alban Berg (1885–1935), formerly a pupil—and still very much a disciple—of Schoenberg. He would win fame in the 1920s as a composer of opera, and we will reencounter him. But the work that concerns us now is a little song cycle called *Fünf Orchesterlieder nach Ansichtskartentexten von Peter Altenberg*, op. 4 (“Five lieder with orchestra on picture-postcard legends by Peter Altenberg”), composed in 1912. The performance, which took place under Schoenberg’s direction on 31 March 1913, provoked a reaction similar to the one that would greet the legendary premiere of *The Rite of Spring* two months later.

Altenberg (real name Richard Engländer, 1859–1919) was a popular Viennese writer who specialized in aphoristic “prose poems.” The texts Berg set did not literally come from postcards, but from a book of Altenberg’s poems (*Altes Neues* [Old News], 1911) in which they were so labeled. Only the two shortest songs from the cycle of five, the second and the third, were on the program Schoenberg conducted. It was the third song, which contained the aggregate harmony, that provoked the most vociferous protests. As one member of the audience later recalled, its

dissonances and the accumulation of wrong notes produced with all the might of the orchestra became a signal for a storm. A wave of laughter greeted the groans and squeaks of the orchestra, and this increased the singer’s nervousness to the point where his voice cracked. The audience tumult grew so great that Schoenberg finally had to interrupt the concert. When, after a while, quiet was restored, Schoenberg, who never left the podium, announced that “those who do not know how to keep quiet can leave the hall.” No one followed this invitation, of course, and the song was then repeated, but with the same results except that the laughter and the chaos were much louder, and that this time shouts, hisses and cursing came from the parterre and the galleries, while in the boxes a few fanatics stood brandishing their arms against the uprising hall. At last a commissioner of police appeared on the stage and forbade the continuation of the concert, an occurrence without precedent in the Viennese music world.²

The offending song has this poem for a text:

- Über die Grenzen des All blicktest du sinnend hinaus:
- Hattest nie Sorge um Hof und Haus!
- Leben und Traum vom Leben, plötzlich ist alles aus—
- Über die Grenzen des All blickst du noch sinnend hinaus....
- (You gazed pensively over the all-encompassing brink:
- Never a care for home and hearth!
- Life and dreams of living, all of a sudden gone—
- You still gaze pensively over the all-encompassing brink....)

19

Tam-t. *(FFF sempre)* ausklingen lassen

Cel. *(p sempre)*

Voice *FP*
U-ber die Gren-zen des All blickst du noch sin - - nend hin-aus - - ! *(FFF)*

Vln. I *FP*

Vln. II *FP*

Vla. *arco FP*

Vc. *arco FP*

Cb. *(FP)*

ex. 4-2 Alban Berg, *Altenberg Lieder*, no. 3, end

The all-encompassing aggregate harmony, which comes at the beginning in the winds, and again at the end (Ex. 4-2) in string harmonics to accompany the repeated line, is actually a rather obvious example, if an audacious one, of traditional “word painting.” The audacity was enough to provoke the public, but its motivation was anything but novel, and far from profound. Although it purports to intensify a typically aspirant, romantic mood, it remains an exercise of wit, and its effect—especially, of course, when analyzed—is comic. To call it that is not necessarily to call it funny, but it does imply that the device is an intellectual conceit rather than an expression of feeling or belief. Berg’s song thus confronts the age-old dilemma that some three hundred years earlier had midwived the birth of directly emotional and tragic recitative (hence opera) out of the intellectual conceits of “madrigalism.”

The grand eschatological torsos of Scriabin, Ives, and Schoenberg do not put the aggregate harmony to such obviously illustrative, hence potentially trivial, use—and this may be one reason why Schoenberg, to Berg’s intense dismay, sharply criticized the *Altenberg Lieder* to his former pupil’s face after the notorious concert.

As we shall see, Schoenberg regarded the aggregate harmony the way Scriabin and Ives did, as something virtually holy, even taboo, not to be defiled by utilitarian, “madrigalian” use. Berg, having invoked it in an ironic vein, could even be charged with playing into the hands of the philistines who laughed.

But nevertheless his little *Altenberg Lieder* enjoy huge prestige as a landmark in the history of twentieth-century music, a prestige that derives from the way in which that history is often recounted. That telling, and the theory on which it rests, are in themselves a sort of maximalism, in which the neo-Hegelian esthetic values of the New German School, as first enunciated in the mid-nineteenth century, have been universalized and exaggerated. The highest of all values, in this view, is technical innovation, provided that (1) the innovation in question can be viewed as an emancipation, (2) it was “influential” (in other words, that it inspired imitation, or at least turned up in a lot of later music), and (3) it placed the innovator beyond the comprehension of his contemporaries (or beyond all but an initiated elite), so that he might learn, in the words of Milton Babbitt, “how it feels to have the history of music leave you ahead.”³

These values are nothing if not asocial. When challenged, as we shall learn, they can take more radical, downright antisocial forms. Twentieth-century historiography has also been influenced, like much twentieth-century art making, by the spirit of technological progress, giving rise to a “machine age” esthetic. The American poet William Carlos Williams voiced this view especially forcefully when he maintained that a poem was “a machine made out of words,”⁴ and that therefore a great poet was one who showed by his practice how to manufacture a new kind of machine. Much twentieth-century theorizing on music seems to regard it similarly, as a machine made of notes. The attention of composers and critics has thus often been more readily captured by the internal workings of the poetic or musical mechanism than by the expressive work it accomplishes. The resulting esthetic has been aptly characterized by the American scholar Christopher Williams as “techno-essentialist.”⁵

Like *The Rite of Spring*, the *Altenberg Lieder* qualify as “historically significant” on all three techno-essentialist counts listed above. The third criterion is met magnificently by the story of its ill-fated first performance, even though Berg (and, it seems, Schoenberg) experienced that event not as a Diaghilevian succès de scandale but as a humiliation. The first criterion is met most conspicuously by the aggregate harmony, which admitted a denser dissonance than ever before into musical practice. And the pervasiveness of “patent office modernism,” as well as its potential links with nationalism or otherwise parochial biases, are well illustrated by the *Traité de l'harmonie*, a harmony textbook by Charles Koechlin (1867–1950), a venerable French composer and pedagogue, which appeared in 1928 and contained the news that the earliest twelve-tone chord was actually penned not by the Austrian Berg but by the Frenchman Jean Huré (1877–1930), in an unpublished and unperformed stage work called *La cathédrale*, which was actually written not in 1912, not in 1911, but all the way back in 1910!

The second criterion is met even more conspicuously by the fifth and last song in Berg’s *Altenberg* cycle, a passacaglia that expresses the “chromatic aggregate” not as a harmonic simultaneity (Ex. 4-3a) but as a melodic succession is that repeated as an ostinato (Ex. 4-3b). Such arrangements, placing the twelve pitch classes all in a row, were destined (though nobody foresaw it at the time) to become the basis of one of the century’s most widely practiced and propagated compositional methods. The melody in Berg’s fifth song has been acclaimed—first by the composer Ernst Krenek (1900–91) in a memorial essay published in 1937, by which time the new method had been established and was gaining many adherents—as history’s first “twelve tone row.”⁶



ex. 4-3a Alban Berg, *Altenberg Lieder*, aggregate chord in song no. 3



ex. 4-3b Alban Berg, *Altenberg Lieder*, twelve-tone theme from no. 5 (passacaglia)

But where *The Rite of Spring*, notwithstanding its stormy premiere, has enjoyed a triumphant career in the concert hall that has lasted from 1914 to the present, the *Altenberg Lieder*, following that lone partial performance (which did not include the fifth song), “fell,” to quote Krenek, “like a stone into the abyss of the forgotten from which no one has as yet fetched it.” The first complete performance did not take place until 1952; the piano-vocal score was not published until the next year; the full score, not until 1966.

This retarded rediscovery, adding the aura of martyrdom and resurrection to that of its early rejection, has done its bit to enhance the work’s prestige even further. But unlike *The Rite of Spring*, Berg’s *Altenberg Lieder* did not become a part of history—that is, an entity with a potential relationship to listeners, performers, and composers, available to influence their thoughts and deeds—until two or three decades after the composer’s death. To accord it a comparable historical importance because of its hidden relationship to

what came later is literally to consign it to the realm of the occult—to mythology rather than history. A great deal of musical historiography in the twentieth century has been mythology of this kind. The tales it has spun are on the record and have been influential. As a part of history in their own right they will need to be dealt with. But they should not be confused with an account of contemporary events.

The foregoing little sermon on history implies no esthetic judgment on the *Altenberg Lieder*. They are properly admired for their intense expressivity—often compared, as we will see, with a style of vividly exaggerated and subjectively distorted painting known as “expressionism”—and for the feats of compositional virtuosity that their expressionistic manner called forth. (Again a parallel with the old Italian madrigal in its “mannerist” phase might be suggestive.) Within the context of their time, however, these songs (like the madrigals of Gesualdo) might be better viewed as eccentric than as pregnant.

Notes:

(2) Quoted by Robert Craft in the notes accompanying Columbia Masterworks MS 6103 (1959).

(3) Milton Babbitt, untitled memoir in “Stravinsky: A Composers’ Memorial,” *Perspectives of New Music* IX/2–X/1 (1971): 107.

(4) William Carlos Williams, introduction to “The Wedge” (1944), in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 256.

(5) Christopher Williams, “Of Canons and Context: Toward a Historiography of Twentieth-Century Music,” *Repercussions*, 2–1 (spring 1993): 42.

(6) Willi Reich, *Alban Berg. Mit Bergs eigenen Schriften und Beiträgen von Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno und Ernst Krenek* (Vienna: Herbert Reichner Verlag, 1937), p. 47.

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Alexander Scriabin

Octatonic

FROM EXPRESSION TO REVELATION

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

And yet the essential motivating metaphor that drove the more potent maximalists of the period to the limit—the aggregate harmony standing for the All, the One, the Universal, the object of all metaphysical and religious striving—was not all that different from the image of the “all-encompassing brink” that inspired Berg. The difference lay in the treatment. Rather than a playful surface ornament as it was with Berg, the aggregate harmony was for Scriabin, Schoenberg, and Ives a symbolic ideal, not to be invoked lightly but to be approached gradually, as the One was to be approached through a properly perseverant spiritual quest, and to be expressed not blatantly but latently, in a properly occult fashion.



fig. 4-1 Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin in an engraving from a photograph taken aboard the Volga steamship that carried him on a concert tour through Russia in 1910.

For Scriabin, the quest was the work of a lifetime. A piano prodigy, he seemed destined at first for the career of a virtuoso-composer like Liszt or, more precisely, like Chopin, with whom he identified powerfully and on whose very distinctive style he at first attempted to fashion his own, even going so far as to adopt Chopin's characteristic Polish genres like the mazurka, of which he wrote twenty-three between 1889 and 1903. He was drawn even more to that most "poetic" of Chopinesque forms, the freestanding aphoristic prelude, of which he composed a complete Chopinesque set of twenty-four (published as op. 11) between 1888 and 1896.

Scriabin continued to write preludes throughout his career, right up to his final work, a set of Four Preludes published in 1914 as his op. 74. As he came ever more explicitly to maintain, short but striking preludes were in their immediacy akin to spiritual disclosures and could function as prophecy. From an art of the sensuously—at times erotically—beautiful, Scriabin's music developed by degrees (each with its clearly

identifiable technical preoccupations) into an art of sublime—at times mystical—revelation.

We can take the measure of this transition by comparing a prelude from the middle of Scriabin's career—op. 48, no. 4 in C major (1905; Ex. 4-4)—with a selection from that final group, op. 74. The highly emotional tone of the earlier piece is achieved by methods we have come to associate with Wagner (perhaps by way of Schumann). The primary method is the maintenance throughout of a sense of harmonic tension that is relieved only by the final cadence. Indeed, the last chord of the piece is practically the only pure, unadulterated triad to be found in it. Almost all of the other harmonies, while clearly “triadic” in concept and function, have been altered, either by the use of additives like sevenths and ninths, or by the chromatic tweaking of their constituent pitches so that they become “tendency tones.”

The very first chord is an especially telling instance. It is only in retrospect that we can confidently identify it as a tonic harmony. The added B \flat , turning its quality into that of a dominant-seventh chord, gives it the implied function “V of IV”; and its short-term resolution to a chord rooted on F confirms that local diagnosis. The raising of its fifth degree to G \sharp adds to its implicit short-range function, since now that tone too seeks resolution, in A. But the F chord to which the first chord resolves is no more stable than the first chord had been: it too has been given a seventh that demands resolution, and its fifth has been lowered a semitone (to C \flat , spelled B). Its quality, therefore, has been altered to that of a “French sixth,” a chord that normally resolves as a \flat VI to a dominant. And so it does—but “deceptively,” to the dominant of C rather than the expected dominant of A.

The dominant of A arrives in m. 8, exactly as the dominant of the home key had arrived in m. 4, to round off a pair of parallel periods that together make up the first half of the prelude. It is evident that the novelty of Scriabin's idiom applies only to its harmonic dimension; rhythmically and in its phrase structure (i.e., its form) it remains simple—and in its high rhetorical keyboard style, for all its virtuosity, it remains conventional. As Schoenberg would later put it, “if comprehensibility is made difficult in one respect, it must be made easier in some other respect.”⁷ Scriabin, like Schoenberg somewhat later, seems to have been attempting to “reduce difficulties by providing a familiar type of unfolding.”

Festivamente (♩ = 88-100)

Pno.

animando

poco a poco

precipitando

ex. 4-4 Alexander Scriabin, Prelude in C major, Op. 48, no. 4

But after the cadence on the E-major chord in m. 8 (the only other “pure triad” in the piece and therefore, despite its short duration, a major point of articulation), something happens that is indeed unconventional —though far from unprecedented in our experience—in terms of “normal” tonal practice. What sounds at the very end of m. 8 like an A in the bass, the implicit goal of the E major harmony, is made to function very differently, as suggested by its respelling as B $\flat\flat$. Impelled by accompanying tones that form with it a French sixth chord, it is directed down to A \flat , a root note that in direct juxtaposition with E (and recalling the initial C) suggests that the overall tonal trajectory of the prelude will be based on a symmetrically apportioned cycle of major thirds rather than the locally operating circle of fifths.

The period from m. 9, where A \flat intrudes, to m. 16, where the dominant of C is regained, is based on a modulating sequence progression. In that sense it functions like a development section, and identifies the return of the opening harmony at m. 17 as a thematic recapitulation. This is indeed a “familiar type of unfolding,” sanctioned by more than a century of common practice as “sonata form,” here applied on a

microscopic level. And its familiarity helps us accept the cycle of thirds as harmonically normative. The two halves of a binary form express not the usual I–V, V–I trajectory, but a complementary symmetrical progression: tonic up to mediant (I → III) followed by flat submediant up to tonic: I–III, \flat VI–I. The three points of departure and arrival that articulate the form—I, III, \flat VI—occupy evenly spaced positions along the chromatic scale: /0 4 8/, familiar to us not from common or “classical” practice but from the alternative practice branching off from Schubert to Liszt, thence to Rimsky-Korsakov, Debussy, Ravel, and, most lately, Stravinsky.

One other harmonic idiosyncrasy is conspicuous in this prelude, and that is Scriabin’s propensity for approaching V by way of \flat II, expressed not as a “Neapolitan sixth” but in root position. That is something probably picked up from Chopin (e.g., Chopin’s Prelude in C minor, op. 28, no. 20; see Ex. 4-5), but Scriabin turned what was in Chopin a rarity into a basic *modus operandi*. The progression bracketed in Ex. 4-5 and labeled “tritone link” shows up in Ex. 4-4 in mm. 1–2, 5–6, and—climactically—over a two-measure general pause in mm. 19–22. The term “tritone link” (*tritonovoye zveno*) was coined by Varvara Pavlovna Dernova in a dissertation on Scriabin written in 1948 but only published twenty years later, by which time Scriabin had been dead for more than fifty years.⁸ It was the first important breakthrough in analyzing Scriabin’s until-then enigmatic and refractory harmonic style; like many a modernist, Scriabin kept his methods a secret, the better to stun listeners with their effect.

p.t.

a.

VI \flat II V7 i

tritone link

ex. 4-5 Frédéric Chopin, Prelude in C minor, Op. 28, no. 20, end

Just how enigmatic Scriabin’s idiom eventually became can be seen at a glance in Ex. 4-6, which contains the first and last of the Four Preludes, op. 74. The extravagant expressive markings in French—*Douloureux, déchirant* (excruciatingly anguished) in the first, *Lent, vague, indécis* (slow, indefinite, uncertain) in the last—may seem at first reminiscent of Debussy; but Debussy’s art, while it cultivated the *vague* and *indécis*, perhaps, avoided the *déchirant* at all costs. Rather, they point to a common bond in Symbolism, which in Russia achieved an aura of maximalized religious ecstasy that it never approached in France.

Douloureux, déchirant

Pno.

The musical score is written for piano (Pno.) in 3/4 time. It consists of five systems of piano and bass staves. The title "Douloureux, déchirant" is written above the first system. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (p, mf, f, dim.), articulation (accents, slurs), and performance instructions (poco). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor).

ex. 4-6a Alexander Scriabin, Prelude, Op. 74, no. 1

Lent, vague, indécis

ex. 4-6b Alexander Scriabin, *Prelude, Op. 74, no. 4*

Alone among musicians, Scriabin actively participated in “mystical symbolist” circles, attending the meetings of the Moscow Religious Philosophical Society, a forum for avant-garde poetry and theology alike, beginning in 1898. By 1905, he had discovered theosophy, an esoteric mystical doctrine that sought to reconcile Christianity with the transcendentalist religions of South Asia, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, which saw as the purpose of life the achievement of a transcendent enlightenment that would free the soul from the shackling temporality of human desire and allow it to join the eternal unity of the Godhead.

In the strong form with which Scriabin was affiliated, theosophy was a Russian maximalist movement. It was spearheaded and disseminated by a society founded in New York in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91), a Russian aristocratic émigré. Mystic symbolists and theosophists considered art a medium of gnostic revelation—that is, the direct imparting of divine knowledge unmediated by the imperfect and limited human intellect. Within their circles Scriabin was hailed as a prophet, because his artistic medium was the least trammled by specific representational meaning, had the least paraphrasable content, and was

therefore the most inherently “theurgic” of all the arts—the most capable, that is, of becoming an instrument of theurgy, the channeling of divine influence on human affairs.

In the amicably envious judgment of Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), the leading mystical-symbolist poet and one of the composer’s closest friends, Scriabin was a greater artist than any poet could ever be because of the superiority of his medium. “Where we [poets] monotonously blab the meager word ‘sadness,’ ” Ivanov wrote, “music overflows with thousands of particular shades of sadness, each so ineffably novel that no two of them can be called the same feeling.”⁹ Music, therefore, “the unmediated pilot of our spiritual depths,” is at once the most sensitive of the arts and the most inherently prophetic, “the womb in which the Spirit of the Age is incubated.”¹⁰ Scriabin, for his part, consciously modified his style so as to enable his music to serve the spiritualistic purposes his religious and philosophical beliefs demanded. That meant, among other things, making it inscrutable, resistant to analysis. For this reason he has often been attacked as a charlatan, and just as often defended against himself by nonbelievers who nevertheless regard him, in the words of the American music theorist James M. Baker, as “a master of the craft of musical composition.”¹¹ But Ivanov’s exaggerated remarks can easily be read as just another maximalization (and a particularly Russian one) of the old German romantic notion of “absolute music.” They also accord perfectly with the antiliterary esthetics of Alexandre Benois that (as we saw in the previous chapter) midwived the rebirth of ballet in Russia. So we should not be surprised to find that Scriabin’s late, “inscrutable” idiom has a lot in common with the maximalistic techniques that Stravinsky adopted, just as deliberately and almost simultaneously, in *The Rite of Spring*.

To begin with, in Scriabin’s preludes we again confront the total avoidance of “pure triads,” even at the ends of pieces. What to make of that? Of the preludes in op. 74, the last (Ex. 4-6b) ends with the most easily described harmony: seemingly a superimposition of the major and minor triads on A. We may then note that the piece begins with the same harmony, this time with the “disagreeing” thirds located at the extremities, as if the chord were inverted. This is a clue that the harmonic idiom of the music, however unusual, is internally consistent. Another indication: we may as yet be at a loss to account for the final cadential approach to the “A major/minor” chord, by way of a tritone, and yet we have already seen that Scriabin’s music makes considerable use of “tritone links.” The final chord of the first prelude (Ex. 4-6a), unnameable in terms of the common practice, is also approached via a tritone leap in the bass. Such observations give prima facie evidence that the music is following as-yet-undiscovered yet binding rules.

The mere avoidance of pure triads does not in itself demonstrate any real similarity between the idiom of Scriabin’s preludes and that of Stravinsky’s *Rite*. An arbitrary list of their “common absences” could be infinitely extended. But there are positive affinities as well. For one thing, the bass notes of the chords and arpeggios that inform the left-hand part in Ex. 4-6a—B# (=C) in the pickup; A alternating with B# in mm. 1–2, followed by F# (=G♭) alternating with C in mm. 2–4—suggest a pattern that is completed on the downbeat of m. 5 and recurs, significantly transposed, in mm. 9–15. We have certainly seen this pattern in Stravinsky, and even earlier. For another thing, the music in Ex. 4-6b falls briefly (mm. 13–16) into a regular sequential period. Allowing for some idiosyncrasies in the note-spelling, the “soprano” voice here outlines some ordinary triads, otherwise a great rarity in these compositions. How are they related? 4-6a—B

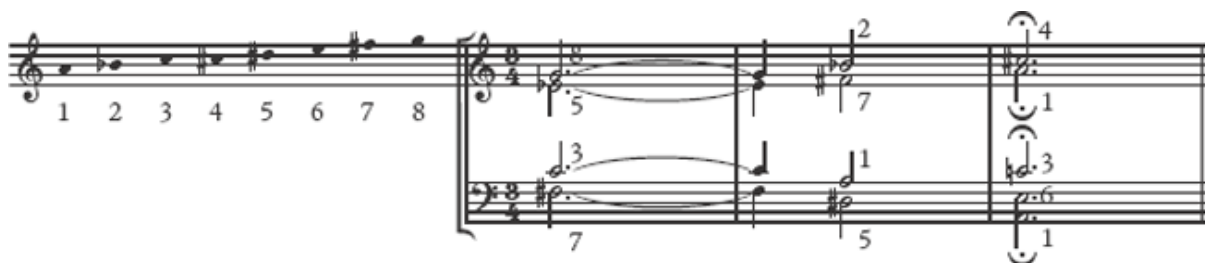
All of the foregoing observations are of a single phenomenon: reliance on symmetrical interval cycles—that is, cycles of intervals that evenly divide the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale—as governors of the tonal trajectory. The bass pitches in the first prelude describe a cycle of minor thirds (0 3 6 9); the sequential triads in the last prelude describe a cycle of major thirds (0 4 8). Both, but particularly the minor-third cycle, featured prominently in Stravinsky because of the affinity between the minor-third cycle and the octatonic scale. And now look at Ex. 4-7, the end of the third prelude from Op. 74: rarely is the octatonic scale displayed so pristinely on the surface of any music.



ex. 4-7 Alexander Scriabin, Prelude, Op. 74, no. 3, last four measures

As a subset of the octatonic, the /0 6/ tritone relationship was the basis for the harmony in “Chez Pétrouchka” (the second tableau of Stravinsky’s second ballet), and the source of the famous *Petrushka*-chord. In like fashion, the prelude sampled in Ex. 4-7 consists of two halves, the second of which is a literal transposition of the first by a tritone; owing to the properties of the octatonic scale, the two halves have identical (or “invariant”) pitch content. As for the /0 4 8/ cycle, while not especially prominent in the Stravinsky compositions that we have examined, it was at the heart of Debussy’s tonal procedures in *Nuages*, which Stravinsky knew and admired well enough to plagiarize (unconsciously) in the prelude to his early opera *The Nightingale*. Earlier, the cycle (and also its decorated version, the whole tone scale, /0 2 4 6 8 10/, so pervasive in Debussy) had been foreshadowed in our experience in works of Liszt and Schubert, as the /0 3 6 9/ cycle had been foreshadowed in Rimsky-Korsakov and Liszt. It is evident that Scriabin, even at his most purposefully inscrutable, had a considerable patrimony.

But Scriabin maximalized it the furthest, and in ways that bore directly on his theurgic purposes. For one thing, he mined more radical harmonic constructs directly out of the octatonic collection. The choralelike final cadence in the last prelude, right up to its enigmatic “major-minor” conclusion, is a case in point. It is all educed from a single octatonic scale, as shown in Ex. 4-8 (and note the rigorous voice leading in the right hand through a cycle of minor thirds, mirrored at first by the left in contrary motion).



ex. 4-8 Octatonic derivation of final cadence in Alexander Scriabin, Prelude, Op. 74, no.4

Most significant by far is Scriabin’s habit, taken to an extreme in the third prelude from op. 74, of saturating the musical surface with tritones, and then transposing the whole “globally” around a tritone axis. (Compare mm. 1–4 and 9–12 in Ex. 4-6a.) The harmonic stasis, brought about by the tritone’s invariance properties (since the tritone, when transposed a tritone, merely inverts or “maps into” itself) produces a trajectory that contains *movement*, so to speak, but accomplishes no *motion*. We have marched in place.

Moreover, whatever goes for melodic tritones will also apply to harmonic tritones, and especially to chords composed of multiple tritones, like diminished sevenths or French sixths. And the French sixth, it will emerge on closer inspection, is indeed the basic referential harmony in these preludes, having taken over the function performed in more traditional tonalities by the major or minor triad.

The final chord in Ex. 4-6a is an especially characteristic Scriabin sonority: a French sixth (F# B# A# E) filled out or garnished by two additives: a G that may be referred along with the French sixth chord to an octatonic scale, and a D that may be referred along with the same French sixth chord to a whole-tone scale (which it

nearly exhausts). The French sixth, then, functions here as a kind of “nexus chord” or pivot, linking two different symmetrical scale constructions that have usurped the place of the more traditional major and minor scales, providing a point of intersection between them on which the final chord is poised, as if balanced on a cusp (see Ex. 4-9).

Notes:

(7) Schoenberg, “Old Forms in New Music,” unpublished essay quoted in Alan Lessem, “Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Neo-Classicism: The Issues Reexamined,” *Musical Quarterly* LXVIII (1968): 538.

(8) Varvara Dernova, *Garmoniya Skryabina* (Leningrad: Muzika, 1968).

(9) Vyacheslav Ivanov, “Skryabin” (1919), in *Pamyatniki kul'turi: Noviye otkritiye, 1983* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1985), p. 114.

(10) Ivanov, “Vzglyad Skryabina na iskusstvo” (1915), *Pamyatniki kul'turi 1983*, p. 103.

(11) James A. Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 270.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Scriabin: Music and its philosophical background

EXTINGUISHING THE “I”

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The image shows a musical score for the final chord of Scriabin's Prelude, Op. 74, no. 1. It consists of two staves. The left staff is in bass clef and contains a French sixth chord (Fr6). The right staff is in treble clef and contains an octatonic scale. A whole tone scale is also indicated above the right staff. A bracket connects the Fr6 chord to the octatonic scale, and another bracket connects the whole tone scale to the octatonic scale.

ex. 4-9 Alexander Scriabin, Prelude, Op. 74, no. 1, final chord compared with its referential scales

Now what has all of this to do with the theurgic aims of mystic symbolism or theosophy? We may quote the answer to this question directly from Vyacheslav Ivanov, who in a lecture of 1919 enumerated the theurgic effects of Scriabin's music, which if regarded as the composer's ends provide the explanation of his means, as we have been describing them. "Scriabin has expressed in music the most profound ideas of the present day," Ivanov declared, defining them as follows:

- 1. The vision of surmounting the boundaries of the personal, individual, petty "I"—a musical transcendentalism.
- 2. The vision of universal, communal mingling of all humanity in a single "I"—or the macrocosmic universalism of musical consciousness.
- 3. The vision of a violent breakthrough into the expanse of a free new plane of being—universal transformation.¹²

The idea of art as world transformation is the essential Wagnerian ideal. Scriabin was the single Russian composer to accept from Wagner the Orphic mission. We have already defined the Wagnerian resonance in Scriabin in "purely musical" terms when we noted Scriabin's strong insistence on the dominant function. Most of his chords are dominant in color and tendency. In the Prelude, op. 48, no. 4, the chords were mainly dominant sevenths with additives; by the time of op. 74, the chords were mainly French sixths with additives. But the French sixth chord can be viewed as an "altered" dominant seventh, the alteration consisting of the flattening of the fifth degree. If the fifth degree is omitted from the French sixth, the remainder comprises an "incomplete" but fully functional dominant seventh, consisting of a defining root and a tritone in need of resolution.

With any given root, the tritone has only one option for resolving: the seventh must descend a semitone and

the third (the functional leading tone) must ascend a semitone. That dual necessity is what gives the chord such a restless will of its own, which when exploited as Wagner did in *Tristan und Isolde* can channel the desires of the listening multitudes. But that desire is a highly egoistic desire; it heightens a listener’s awareness of his or her “personal, individual, petty ‘I,’” as Ivanov would say, and its selfish needs. Yet the primary selfish need, as Wagner so compellingly if paradoxically emphasized in *Tristan*, is the ego’s need for satiation—the extinguishing of desire, which can only come from union with the other: already a transcendence.

Scriabin found a way of representing satiation without resolution, thus quelling the ego’s need and achieving its dissolution; and we have already observed the mechanism by which this remarkable effect of quiescence is achieved. It is harmonic invariance based on the tritone. Because the tritone exactly bisects the octave, and therefore replicates itself when transposed by itself, its two tones, while needing resolution as we have seen, are of ambiguous tendency. The way in which a tritone will seek its resolution will depend on external stimuli—that is, the notes that accompany it. When accompanied by a dominant-seventh root, its pitches are defined as leading tone and seventh respectively. The leading tone, as we know, seeks resolution by ascent, the seventh by descent. Yet by changing the defining root we can cause an exchange of the two functions: what had been the leading tone tending upward becomes the seventh tending downward, and vice versa (Ex. 4-10).

The image shows a musical score for piano with two staves (treble and bass clef) and six measures. The first two measures show a V-I progression. In the first measure, the leading tone (F#) and seventh (C) of the V chord are circled. In the second measure, the leading tone (C) and seventh (F#) of the I chord are circled. The next two measures show the same progression with the roles of the notes swapped. The final two measures show an 'Alternative spelling seventh' where the notes are spelled differently to illustrate the same harmonic relationship.

ex. 4-10 Alternative cadential harmonizations of the tritone

The two roots that accomplish this transformation must of course themselves lie a tritone apart. The direct progression formed by these two chords—chords sharing a tritone in common, their roots lying a tritone apart—was anticipated as early as Liszt and was memorably employed by Musorgsky to simulate coronation bells in *Boris Godunov*. It is the essential Scriabin progression. When turned into an oscillation along the “tritone link,” the bass progression continually contradicts and recontradicts the resolution tendencies in the harmonic tritone (see Ex. 4-11). This easy reciprocity of function negates the harmony’s “functionality,” turning it qualitatively from an active tendency (as in Wagner) into a latent or passive one. Although there is continual root activity, there is no functional progression—marching in place again.

The image shows a musical score for a piano, consisting of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom in bass clef. The music is divided into eight measures. Above the top staff, the notes are labeled as 'leading tone' and 'seventh' in alternating pairs. Below the bottom staff, the notes are labeled as 'seventh' and 'leading tone' in alternating pairs. A dashed line labeled 'tritone link' connects the seventh of one measure to the leading tone of the next measure across the two staves.

As a sum:

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef. It illustrates the 'tritone link' as a sum of intervals. On the left, a 'seventh' interval is shown between two notes, with a bracket labeled 'tritone link'. This is followed by a plus sign. On the right, a 'French sixth' interval is shown between two notes, with a bracket labeled 'French sixth'. The text 'inversion' is written above the plus sign. Other labels include 'leading tone', 'sevenths, leading tones', and 'roots'.

ex. 4-11 Alexander Scriabin's "tritone link"

Playing over Ex. 4-11, we seem to examine or experience a single “floating” harmony from a dual perspective, something the Russian music theorist Boleslav Yavorsky (Scriabin’s younger contemporary) compared with moving from two-dimensional to three-dimensional space—which in turn is something Scriabin himself hinted at in a remark reported to Varvara Dernova, the discoverer of the tritone link, by Georgiy Rimsky-Korsakov, a grandson of the famous composer and a composer himself: “You have to be able to walk around a chord.”¹³ Until one of the root notes exemplified in Ex. 4-11 leaves the tritone treadmill and proceeds along the circle of fifths (or, in a pinch, by a semitone as if resolving an augmented sixth), the eventual destination of the tritone is in doubt, and one can even forget that the tritone *has* a destination. A quality of hovering, of time-forgetful stasis, altered consciousness, or even trance, can be induced. The “personal, individual, petty ‘I’” is lulled; consciousness is made available for something larger.

Scriabin’s whole stylistic evolution can be viewed as the gradual extinguishing of the desiring subject, the “petty ‘I,’” so as to make possible a theurgic, world- (or at least consciousness-) transforming transcendence. We have seen the end result in the miniatures of op. 74. We can trace the process through which the composer arrived at their enigmatically attenuated style by sampling some of his larger pieces, which at their largest are truly grandiose. For Scriabin’s output spectacularly encompassed both romantic extremes of expression—that of intimate aphoristic disclosure, and that of swollen public oration—and maximalized them both.

Notes:

(12) *Pamyatniki kul'turi* 1983, p. 115.

(13) Dernova, *Garmoniia Skryabina*, p. 352.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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'Tristan' chord

Whole-tone scale

APPROACHING THE ULTIMATE

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the "Petty 'I'" (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Scriabin wrote ten piano sonatas in addition to his many miniatures, but they were not his biggest pieces. In fact, as his career went on they became smaller: the Fourth Sonata (1904) has two movements, like Beethoven's op. 111, but in reversed order so that it ends with a vertiginous *prestissimo volando* (flying at great speed). From then on, they were all single-movement works like Liszt's Sonata in B minor; and from the Sixth Sonata on, as the whole-tone and octatonic collections took over the normative functions formerly exercised by major and minor tonalities, Scriabin dispensed with the use of key signatures or designations.

Scriabin's public orations were his five symphonies, a genre in which he parted company with his erstwhile model, Chopin, and joined the ranks of symphonic maximalists such as Mahler and Strauss. (Both German names deserve to be invoked, since although Scriabin called them symphonies, the last two were single-movement programmatic works that could just as well have been called tone poems.) The First Symphony (1900), like Mahler's Second, apes Beethoven's Ninth in the use of vocal soloists and chorus for an oratorio-like finale. But Scriabin found his true symphonic métier when he dispensed with words and began finding musical analogues for the new ideas about art's significance that he picked up from his contacts among the mystical Symbolists and, later, from theosophy. The place to begin is the motto opening of the Third Symphony, subtitled *Le divin poème* ("The divine poem"), Scriabin's one multimovement programmatic composition. The use of the motto and the key, C minor, are transparent gestures of tribute to Beethoven's Fifth, the most famous symphony in the world.

But his starting point was as much Wagner as Beethoven, as we can infer directly from the motto theme, which he modeled (how consciously one can never tell) on the opening of the *Tristan* Prelude. In both cases an unaccompanied preparatory melody lasting one measure leads into a startlingly dissonant chromatic chord containing a tritone, urgently demanding an unspecified resolution. Scriabin's chord is the more radical of the two, in keeping with the emulative spirit of maximalism, since it is an ad hoc harmonic structure with no common-practice standing at all.

Where the famous *Tristan*-chord could be classified, if desired, either as homologous (similarly structured) to a half-diminished seventh chord, or (more functionally) as a French sixth with one of its intervals unconventionally altered by contraction, Scriabin's chord may be viewed as a German sixth, homologous to the dominant seventh, with one of its intervals unconventionally altered by expansion, adding to its dissonance and intensifying the affect of egoistic self-assertion (Ex. 4-12).

Lento

divin, grandiose

ff

hypothetical cadence completion

Avec trouble et effroi

tritone link

tritone link

Allegro

iv

tritone

V

ex. 4-12a Alexander Scriabin, *The Divine Poem*, I, mm. 1–15 (figuration and arpeggiation omitted)

"Scriabin sixth"

"German sixth"

Alternative spelling

VIb (D \flat major)

VIb (C \sharp major)

ex. 4-12b The "Scriabin sixth" and German sixth compared

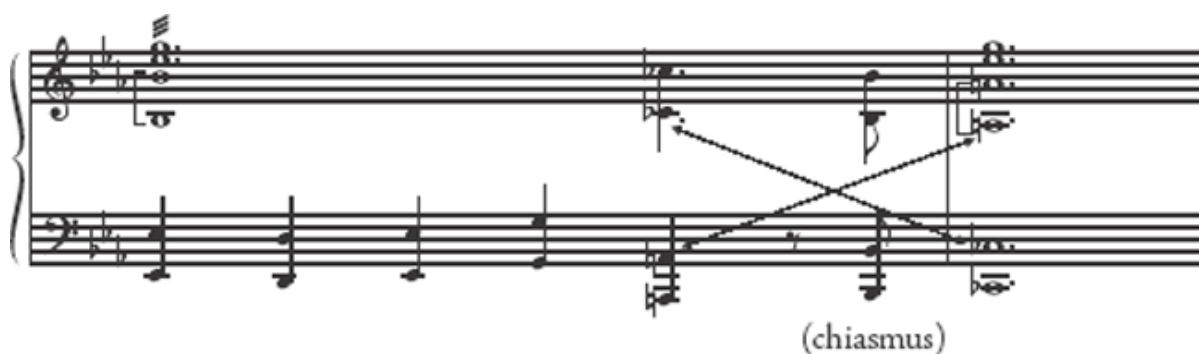
The most striking parallel between the two openings is the specific way in which the first chord is prepared. Wagner leaps up from the tonic note to the sixth degree, which in the minor mode is a half step above the fifth, and passes through the fifth to a complementary half step below—that is, to the chromatically inflected fourth degree, the "altered" note that gives the *Tristan*-chord its name-worthy color. Scriabin's opening exactly inverts Wagner's procedure. The melody (assuming D \flat , as at the beginning one must, to be the tonic) leaps down to the chromatically inflected fourth degree and proceeds through the fifth to a complementary half step above—that is, to the sixth degree, which, the mode being major, must also be chromatically inflected to preserve the half-step relationship.

The first resolution of Scriabin's "ad hoc" chord is to an unsullied consonant triad, enhancing the promise of

what the symphony's program note calls "joyous and intoxicated affirmation," to be wholly attained (as in the old Beethovenian scenario) in the C-major last movement, when the hero—personified by the solo trumpet—at last comes fully into his own. The trumpet had played the peremptory "summons" motif (the dotted rising sixth) in the third and the sixth measures of the opening as shown in Ex. 4-12. "The free, powerful man-god appears to triumph," according to the program, which, although actually penned by Tatyana Schloezer, the composer's common-law wife (much as Liszt's writings, including programs, were often the work of his mistress, the princess Sayn-Wittgenstein), transmits the composer's intentions well enough to have had his endorsement. "But," the program continues, "it is only the intellect which affirms the divine Ego, while the individual will, still too weak, is tempted to sink into Pantheism," that is, into hedonistic passivity and indolence.

How could such an abstract program be musically represented? Just as in the *Tristan* Prelude, the first phrase of Scriabin's motto theme is seconded by a sequential repetition. But unlike the second phrase of the *Tristan* Prelude, the repetition is no mere intensifying reiteration. It does not terminate in another affirmative cadence, as it might well have done (see Ex. 4-12), but dissolves in a tritone link that palpably weakens its thrust. It is followed, in perhaps all too craftsmanly a fashion, by a second tritone link calculated to prepare the main key of the first movement, thus to launch a conventional sonata form that is interrupted, in a manner reminiscent of Chaikovsky's Fourth Symphony or Franck's Symphony in D minor, by periodic recollections of the opening motto.

These reminiscences must surely have been written, or at least improvised, before the actual opening passage was composed, for they demonstrate the genesis of the "ad hoc chord"—a chord that the composer continued to exploit as a basic component of his harmonic vocabulary, and that has accordingly earned the nickname "Scriabin sixth." The first reminiscence (Ex. 4-13) takes place in E \flat major, the classically mandated key of the second theme in a C-minor sonata movement. The local tonic is held out in the treble instruments while the bass proclaims the motto in the new key. At the moment when the theme reaches the fifth note, the inflected lower neighbor tone or *appoggiatura* to the fifth degree, the trumpet-hero joins in to sound the complementary inflection above. The two voices, trumpet and bass, proceed in contrary motion through the fifth and on to the opposite or reciprocal inflection, thus producing the "Scriabin sixth."



ex. 4-13 Alexander Scriabin, *The Divine Poem*, I, fig. [1]

It is a symmetrical, simultaneous exchange of functions (known technically as a *chiasmus*, "cross" in Greek), comparable to the functional exchange involving the two tendency tones over the tritone link, illustrated in Ex. 4-11. It gave Scriabin an idea with enormous consequences. In the music following *The Divine Poem*, simultaneously sounding (rather than successive or progressive) symmetrical relations became the primary means for embellishing or prolonging the dominant function, and this is what led Scriabin to his special domain of quiescently "invariant" harmonic space.

Maximally prolonged "Wagnerian" dominants were long a Scriabin specialty. Even the little Prelude, op. 48, no.4 (Ex. 4-4), is Wagnerian in this sense, built over a dominant that is first sounded in m. 2, sustained through an/0 4 8/ vagary that moves by way of a symmetrical circle of major thirds from III to \flat VI, and not fully resolved until the end of the piece: *Tristan* in a nutshell. The obvious next step, once Scriabin had

begun superimposing rather than juxtaposing symmetrically related harmonies, was to combine the two members of the tritone link in Ex. 4-11 into a composite dominant that could be “walked around.”

The immediate product of the operation, the Scriabin “double dominant,” was a chord homologous to a French sixth, as demonstrated at the beginning of Ex. 4-14. But that was just the beginning. As the example shows, the French sixth is one of only two chords in common practice (the other being the diminished seventh chord) that contain two tritones, the one corresponding to the sustained tendency tones in Ex. 4-11, the other to the complementary roots along the tritone link. Chords consisting of two tritones have exactly the same properties of invariance as a single tritone, but twice as many of them. That is, they are inversionally invariant on two axes of symmetry and transpositionally invariant at two intervals. Such chords were ideally suited for enhancing and furthering—in a word, maximalizing—Scriabin’s developing methods of dominant embellishment and prolongation.⁴⁻¹⁴

Of the two possible double-tritone chords, only the French sixth suited the composer’s present purposes, not only because of its Wagnerian associations but also because it was generically related to the “Scriabin sixth,” and could even be combined with it to achieve a further maximalized dominant sonority. The two chords had three tones out of four in common. Put together, as the next step in Ex. 4-14, their total of five tones would immediately have suggested to Scriabin, heir along with Stravinsky to the special traditions of Russian “fantastic harmony” going back to Glinka, that with the addition of a single remaining tone he would have a chord that expressed the dominant function by encompassing all the members of the whole-tone scale.

Scalar summary

The diagram shows a piano-style musical notation with two staves. The upper staff contains a sequence of notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. The lower staff contains a sequence of chords: a French sixth chord (C, F, A, Bb), followed by a plus sign, then a tritone (C, Fb), followed by an equals sign, then a Scriabin sixth chord (C, F, Ab, Bb), followed by a plus sign, then another equals sign, and finally the whole-tone scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C). Arrows connect the notes in the upper staff to the corresponding notes in the Scriabin sixth chord and the whole-tone scale.

Roots from Ex. 4-11 “Complementary” tritone from Ex. 4-11 French sixth “Scriabin sixth” from Ex. 4-12b whole-tone scale

Invariance potential of whole-tone scale:

The diagram shows a single staff with three trichords: a first trichord (C, D, E), a second trichord (D, E, F), and three tritones (C, Fb), (D, Ab), and (E, Bb). A plus sign is between the first and second trichords, and an equals sign is between the second trichord and the three tritones.

first trichord second trichord three tritones

ex. 4-14 Whole-tone scale as expanded dominant

This was a momentous discovery. A chord containing the entire whole-tone scale contains three tritones, thus maximizing further the potential for harmonic (that is, inversional and transpositional) invariance. Like the complete twelve-tone aggregate, of which it is, so to speak, a fifty-percent sample, the whole-tone aggregate has the property of stasis: every possible position of the chord is intervallically, hence functionally, identical to every other one. No matter which of its members is in the bass, no matter by which of its constituent intervals it is transposed, the pitch and interval content of the chord never varies. It could be endlessly “walked around”—that is, mined for a great variety of symmetrical constituents (the tritone itself, the augmented triad, the French sixth, the “incomplete” dominant ninth, plus a few, like the “Scriabin sixth,” without any common-practice classification) that offered infinite possibilities for motion without functional harmonic progression or resolution.

Best of all, it could be resolved at will to a functional tonic merely by allowing any of its constituent tones to proceed by half step (i.e., as a leading tone) or by fifth (i.e., as a root). And all of these possibilities are in

effect doubled by the fact that there are two whole-tone scales—that is, two complementary samplings of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, one corresponding to the even-numbered tones counted from any given starting point or “zero pitch”, the other to the odd—between which progressions could freely take place without resolving harmonic tension.

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Alexander Scriabin

ECSTASY, AND AFTER

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

This description of the potential behavior of the six-tone extended dominant chord has been no mere theoretical exercise. It is a description of the actual behavior of Scriabin’s Symphony no. 4, op. 54, subtitled *Le poème de l’extase* (“The poem of ecstasy”), his most famous composition. It is very much a sequel to the *Divine Poem*, again casting the solo trumpet as “Nietzschean” superhuman protagonist, to the point where the symphony becomes a virtual concerto, requiring a credit to the performer. Its surface Tristanisms are too conspicuous to be missed by anyone who knows Wagner.

But the main *Tristan* affinity is profoundly structural and all-encompassing. Like Wagner’s opera, Scriabin’s symphony consists in the most general terms of a single fundamental gesture, an agonizingly prolonged “structural upbeat” that at the very last moment achieves cataclysmic consummatory resolution. That colossal consummatory gesture is the ultimate reality, the “noumenon” that underlies all sensory and cognitive experience, for which sexual union (as in *Tristan*), the creative act, childbirth or death as subjectively perceived, even the subjective notion of the beginning or the end of time, can be conceptual or “phenomenal” metaphors.

The music is thus laden with a profusion of powerful but apparently contradictory meanings—triumph and annihilation; procreation and spontaneous cosmic genesis; birth and death—that can best be clarified from the perspective of mystical symbolism, as in Vyacheslav Ivanov’s “threefold vision” of Scriabin’s accomplishment (quoted above), which encompasses both the transcendence of the individual person and the breakthrough to a new plane of being. The extinction or dissolution of the individual ego—the “petty ‘I’”—is ideally prefigured in the six-tone dominant chord, for its component tones constitute a symmetrical scale whose intervals are all equal and whose degrees, therefore, are all equidistant, structurally undifferentiated, and hence not subject to functional classification. If one cannot differentiate degrees or identify their functions, one can no longer identify *with* the fluctuations of harmonic tension or respond to them emotionally. One’s ego is stilled.

The functional relationships in the *Poème de l’extase* are thus reduced to a single essential dualism: an almost infinitely extended, graded, and variegated dominant that in its ceaseless flux and nuance is almost palpably sensuous, and a crushingly asserted tonic, tantalizingly glimpsed and tasted in advance, but for the most part withheld. Indeed the dualism is more than just a harmonic functional relationship. It is the interaction between two planes of consciousness.

The one, represented by the whole-tone scale, begins inchoate, undifferentiated, selfless, but—as the trumpet’s increasing prominence and the ever longer, more insistent dominant pedals announce—coalesces and concentrates itself into an overwhelming manifestation of desire. The other, represented by the diatonic scale, suggests Ivanov’s breakthrough to universal consciousness. Since we are constantly reminded that the whole-tone, functionally undifferentiated harmonies are in fact elaborations and prolongations of a single primal function—the dominant function, the most directed harmonic tension of all—the reconstitution of the ego at the same time presages the transcendence of desire. The ecstatic climax at the end of the symphony is in fact the dawn of satiety and quiescence, as Scriabin’s later compositions would bear out.

The opening of the *Poème de l’extase* is given in harmonic abstract in Ex. 4-15. (The point of the abstract will

emerge most clearly if it is followed while listening to a recorded performance.) The music recapitulates some of the cadential gestures encountered at the beginning of the *Divine Poem* (Ex. 4-12). A series of unusual chromatic chords, each a subset of a whole-tone scale, are quietly resolved by semitone to the C-major triad, thus establishing C major as tonic, thereby foreshadowing and planting expectation of the ultimate breakthrough. The first such resolution, shown in the first “measure” of the abstract, is complete and unambiguous. The second, in the second “measure,” leaves a dissonant seventh sounding; tension is not fully discharged, and it will continue to accumulate until the final shattering gesture of consummation.

m. 1

whole-tone collection (I)
(5 out of 6)

“inward”
resolution

complementary
whole-tone collection (II)
(5 out of 6)

“outward”
resolution

m. 11

full whole-tone simultaneity

ant.

collection (I)
(4 out of 6)

+ 1 + 1
II

V₉ (aug.)

m. 19

V₉ prolonged

incomplete whole-tone collection I

tonic pedal
(ant.)

Harp. gliss.
(collection I)

V₉^{#9} over tonic pedal

m. 22

ex. 4-15 Alexander Scriabin, *Le poème de l'extase*, Op. 54, harmonic abstract of beginning

A third cadential gesture now begins, which lasts until the end of the abstract. Its tension is augmented by the first full simultaneous presentation of the whole-tone collection (as shown in the box in Ex. 4-15), to which notes from the complementary collection are then added, creating a real sense of clash. The first of these clashing tones is A. It begins in the flute but is immediately taken up by the trumpet making its bow as protagonist. It is sustained through a crescendo, which is another way of building tension, while the bass instruments force the issue by sounding G, the traditional dominant of C major. Under this pressure, the notes of the one whole-tone scale give way to those of the other scale in a fashion that approximates a traditional dominant preparation. At the height of the crescendo, the trumpet, after a pair of attention-grabbing leaps, makes the final approach to the dominant, dramatically resolving E to D#, which functions in this context as the augmented fifth of a dominant-ninth chord on G, another chord that consists of five of the six notes of a whole-tone scale. The pressure toward resolution has by now grown intolerable.

It is resolved, however, in only one voice, albeit the most important one. The bass resolves dominant G to tonic C along the circle of fifths, but the tones of the augmented dominant ninth remain suspended over the tonic. The trumpet's D# returns in the cellos at the downbeat of m. 22 (the end of Ex. 4-15), having been introduced by a full whole-tone scale, sounded by a harp glissando. The clarinet, at the same time, makes a dramatic leap to a high A, the ninth of the ninth chord. We are left, so to speak, with a mixed color—augmented dominant ninth over tonic anticipation (or rather, eventually, a tonic pedal)—arising out of a mixed function, one of those finely graded sensuous nuances for which the *Poème de l'extase* is famous. The mixture produces a sense of disorientation in the listener, and will be exploited for that purpose throughout the composition, becoming one of its most characteristic harmonies. It could even be called the *Extase*-chord, as indeed Scriabin seems to have recognized when he used it, a short time later, to end a piano piece called *Désir* ("Desire;" Ex. 4-16).

ex. 4-16 Alexander Scriabin, *Désir*, Op. 57, no. 1, final chord

Let us take a walk around this chord. Like so many Scriabin harmonies, it contains a French sixth—the top four notes if the dominant-ninth component of the chord is laid out in close spacing as it is at the end of Ex. 4-16—which to Scriabin was the invariant harmony par excellence when inverted or transposed. Taking our cue from its presence, let us invert the chord and transpose its members. The obvious axis for such an inversion is the top note, A, the note strategically spotlighted by the clarinet's leap at the end of Ex. 4-15. Ex. 4-17 shows what happens when we perform the operation.

The image contains musical notation for the Extase chord and its manipulations. It is divided into two main sections: 'a. Inversion' and 'b. Transposition (respacing)'. Below these is a 'Usual representation of "mystic chord"'.
 Section 'a. Inversion' shows the 'Extase chord' in the bass clef (F#4, G#4, A4, B4, C5) and its 'French sixth' inversion in the treble clef (F#4, G#4, A4, B4, C5).
 Section 'b. Transposition (respacing)' shows the chord transposed up a third and respaced.
 The 'Usual representation of "mystic chord"' shows the chord in the bass clef (F#4, G#4, A4, B4, C5) with a tertium interval (t₃) indicated between the notes.

ex. 4-17 Manipulations of the *Extase* chord

Scriabin never used the fascinating chord thus arrived at in the *Poème de l'extase*. Yet he must have performed the operations shown in Ex. 4-17 at some point, for the chord formed by inverting the *Extase*-chord is the most famous Scriabin chord of all, the one christened the “Chord of Prometheus” by the composer’s disciple Leonid Sabaneyeff in a famous article (translated by the painter Wassily Kandinsky and edited by Arnold Schoenberg) published in Berlin in 1912¹⁴ and known in the English-speaking world since around 1916 as the “mystic chord” (so renamed by Arthur Eaglefield Hull, Scriabin’s first English biographer).¹⁵ Sabaneyeff and Hull pitched the chord up a third from the pitch shown in Ex. 4-17, presumably so as to represent it as if “in C” (i.e., neutrally as to “key”), but the pitch level shown in the example is in fact the one employed at the very outset of Scriabin’s Fifth Symphony, subtitled *Prométhée: Le poème de feu* (“Prometheus: The poem of fire”), op. 60 (1910), where it sounds steadily throughout the main thematic exposition (Ex. 4-18).

Scriabin had his own name for the chord. At an early rehearsal of *Prométhée*, his friend and fellow pianist-composer Sergey Rachmaninoff (1873–1943), stunned at the sound of it, asked “What are you using here?” Scriabin answered, “The chord of the pleroma.”¹⁶

The *pleroma*, a Christian gnostic term derived from the Greek for “plenitude,” was the all-encompassing hierarchy of the divine realm, located entirely outside the physical universe, at immeasurable distance from man’s terrestrial abode, totally alien and essentially “other” to the phenomenal world and whatever belongs to it. Scriabin would have encountered the word in Mme Blavatsky’s compendium *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), the theosophists’ bible, where it is associated with Promethean concepts like “Spiritual Fire” and “Astral Light” and with angelic androgyny (unisexism). What we know as the “mystic chord,” then, was designed by the composer to afford instant apprehension of—that is, to *reveal*, in the biblical sense—what was in essence beyond the mind of man to conceptualize.

Its magical stillness was a mystical or gnostic intimation of a hidden otherness, a world and its fullness wholly above and beyond rational or emotional cognition. In terms that poets as far back as Baudelaire had prized above everything else, Scriabin had created in the “chord of the pleroma” a genuine musical *symbol*: something that establishes a nexus between external phenomenal reality (what Ivanov called *realia*) and the higher noumenal reality that Ivanov called *realiora*, the “more real.”¹⁷ In the words of Simon Morrison, a historian of Russian musical maximalism, Scriabin’s harmony established “a relationship between the mobile, temporal world of perceptible phenomena” in which we actually hear the chord as a sound, “and the immobile, non-temporal world of essences.”¹⁸

But what produced this uncanny stasis? It arose out of the same conditions we have already observed in the final harmony of the Prelude, op. 74, no. 1 (Ex. 4-6a), where, as in the “mystic chord,” a French sixth chord, which contains two tritones, acts as a nexus between the whole-tone scale, which contains three, and the octatonic scale, which contains four. Unlike Debussy’s music, where the whole-tone scale interacts with the diatonic, or Stravinsky’s music, where the octatonic scale interacts with the diatonic, Scriabin’s late music inhabits a realm from which the diatonic scale, with its functionally differentiated degrees and its strong drive to resolution, has been virtually eliminated.

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for the opera Prométhée. The score is written on 24 staves, with various instruments and voices labeled on the left. From top to bottom, the staves are labeled: Violoncello (Cello), Violoncello (Cello). The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The page is numbered 15 on the right margin. At the bottom left, there is a small inscription: "SCOTT FROM, LONDON, ENGLAND".

fig. 4-2 Autograph page from *Prométhée* (1910).

ex. 4-18 Alexander Scriabin, *Prométhée*, abstract of beginning

Its presence may be felt at times behind the scenes, directing some vestigial harmonic progressions along the old circle of fifths, but for the most part we have proceeded, according to Vyacheslav Ivanov's famous formula, *a realibus ad realiora*, ("from the real to the more real"): from the phenomenal world of human senses and desires, long and effectively represented by the functions of diatonic harmony, to the world of spiritual revelation, the world of the pleroma, represented by a unique musical idiom in which there is a strong sense of harmonic fluctuation and root movement—walking, indeed darting, around and between chords and scales—but in which any sense of harmonic direction and potential closure has been weakened to the point of virtual extinction.

Notes:

(14) L. Sabanejew, "'Prometheus' von Skrjabin," *Almanach der blaue Reiter*, eds. W. Kandinsky and F. Marc (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1912).

(15) Arthur Eaglefield Hull, *Scriabin: A Great Russian Tone-Poet* (1916); (2nd ed., London: Kegan Paul, 1927), p. 106.

(16) Igor Boelza, "Filosofskiye istoki obraznogo stroya 'Prometeya,'" *Razlichniye aspekti tvorchestva A. N. Skryabina* (Moscow: Scriabin Museum, 1992), p. 19.

(17) See Andrey Bely, "Realiora," *Vesi' V*, no. 5 (May 1908): 59.

(18) Simon Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," *JAMSLI* (1998): 314.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Mystic chord

ATONALITY?

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The chief harmonic ingredient, the French sixth chord, remains recognizably a modified dominant chord in intervallic structure, but there is no longer any dominant function to perform. Where there is no dominant function, of course, there can be no complementary tonic function either. Hence the widespread view that Scriabin’s visionary achievement was the breakthrough into “atonality,” a concept (or at least a term) that he never knew, but one that excellently fulfills the old Hegelian promise of progress toward emancipation. What makes the view questionable for Scriabin was his continued reliance on the circles of thirds—major in the case of the whole-tone scale, minor in the case of the octatonic—that provide the symmetrical scales with a harmonic background that Scriabin continued to exploit for the sake of tonal coherence.

What Scriabin sought, then, and what he to a large extent achieved, was not atonality at all but a new (he might have said “higher”) kind of tonality, one that modulated by thirds rather than fifths through what might be called a musical hyperspace—space bent back into circles by the use of the closed /0 4 8/ and /0 3 6 9/ axes of transposition. Like traditional tonal harmony, and very much opposed in concept to atonality, Scriabin’s harmony was at all times firmly *directed*, subject to rules—its own rules, but consistent ones—of voice leading that made its progressions intelligible as such.

In *Prométhée*, for example, even the small amount of it visible in Ex. 4-18, almost all motivic and harmonic transpositions are by minor thirds or multiples thereof (designated t3, t6, and t9 in Ex. 4-18). That preference indicates a preference for the octatonic over the whole-tone as primary frame of reference, and this is confirmed by the melody, in which the B natural from the main harmony is leapt to and then inflected through a slur to B \flat , as if resolving an appoggiatura. If looked upon that way, the inflection resolves the “mystic chord” to a chord that is wholly referable to the octatonic scale (Ex. 4-19).

ex. 4-19 The “mystic chord” with top note resolved

The chord thus arrived at, as a matter of fact, would function in Scriabin's Seventh Sonata ("The White Mass"), op. 64 (1911), as a basic point of reference, much as the "mystic chord" had functioned in "Prométhée." As the object of a resolution, the whole octatonic collection could be said to have assumed the role of tonic, much the way it had functioned in "Chez Pétouchka". The difference, of course, and what makes Scriabin at this point the more committed maximalist, was that he emphasized not the familiar triadic material that can be mined from the octatonic collection, but "unclassified" harmonies of a kind that had come to the fore in "Chez Pétouchka" only once, at the Far Out Point.

Scriabin thus seems to hover constantly at Stravinsky's FOP. The only exception comes at the very end of *Prométhée*, where a climactic resolution is made to the F# major triad, perhaps on an analogy with the blazing climax of the *Poème de l'extase*. But resolving the "mystic chord" to an ordinary triad does not come this time as the fulfillment of a mounting agony of desire. Without a traditional harmonic function to fulfill, the chord is unexpected. It can seem arbitrary and even a bit anachronistic.

A much better illustration of Scriabin's unerring sense of harmonic direction, even in the period of his so-called atonality, is *Vers la flamme* ("Toward the flame"), op. 72 (1914), a work that incorporates a sense of direction into its very title. It comes from the last full year of Scriabin's composing career, and represents his style and technique at their most advanced. Yet even in a piece just as shy of "pure triads" as *The Rite of Spring*, Scriabin contrived to maintain a sense of forward momentum and eventual cadence and completion, in keeping with the implications of the title.

Like the much longer *Poème de l'extase*, the whole piece can be interpreted as a single consummatory gesture—what Ivanov, describing the spiritual qualities Scriabin's music conveyed, called *poriv*, a word that literally means "gust" (as of wind, etc.) but can also mean "transport," in the sense of a sudden access of rapture crowning a spiritual ascent. Its general effect can be instantly grasped by comparing the beginning, marked pianissimo and *sombre* (dark), with the fortissimo conclusion with the right hand approaching the very top of the keyboard. These are the two aspects of the piece's starkly concentrated dynamic unfolding: from soft to loud and low to high.

ex. 4-20a Alexander Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72, mm. 1–11

ex. 4-20b Alexander Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72, mm. 129–end

At both ends of the piece, however, the bass note is the same, a recurrence that one expects in tonal music, and that contradicts the notion of atonality. Further, one notes that the chord built over E at the beginning (Ex. 4-20a) is held unchanging but for surface figuration for four measures, and the one at the end (Ex. 4-20b) is held, in block form and in a final arpeggio, for nine. These observations point to what is most constant and characteristic in the piece: a very slow harmonic rhythm accompanying a frenetically active and variegated surface. With the rate of harmonic progression so slow, every chord change registers as a large event. Plotting the changes is easy, and very revealing. 4-20a

The first change, as shown in Ex. 4-20a, tells all. The opening chord, almost predictably a French sixth, moves after four measures to another French sixth a minor third away. After another six measures the process is repeated, placing the same chord now at a tritone's remove from the opening, at which distance, as we know, the French sixth chord is invariant. The only differences in pitch content between m. 1 and m. 11 are to be found in the surface embellishment (here, in the appoggiaturas applied to the main chord: A# and C# in m. 1, A natural and C# in m. 11). Armed with these observations, we can more or less predict the harmonic events to come in terms of departure and return, just as we can in traditional tonal music. The specialness of the music, as in traditional tonal music, will lie in the specific strategies through which the composer realizes the foreordained plan.

Having observed the beginnings of a harmonic plan involving rotations around an /0 3 6 9/ axis of minor thirds beginning on E, we may make the prediction that the harmonic basis of the piece will consist of a matrix of chords, probably of "altered dominant" quality, with roots on E, G, B \flat , and D \flat C#: call that the primary cycle. In *Vers la flamme*, as in "Chez Pétrouchka," the whole matrix (or "complexe sonore," as Stravinsky once termed it) will stand as tonic. For a dominant—a contrasting but closely related complex—Scriabin will shift, at times, to the /0 4 8/ axis of major thirds (E, C, A \flat): call that the secondary cycle.

The whole first section of the piece, up to m. 40, is built around a rotation ascending through three of the four members of the primary cycle. The final progression, to C#D \flat , is withheld, however; in its place we get a sort of deceptive cadence to B minor (practically the only "pure triad" in the piece) that appears first in m. 19

and reappears four times thereafter, its highest voice doubled at the third to produce a seventh chord. (Beginning at m. 27 this chord is briefly promoted to full “structural” status, empowered to import its own /0 3 6 9/cycle; but after only one progression, to D in m. 30, the feint is dropped.) At m. 41—where according to the expression marks emotion is kindled in the form of “a veiled joy”—E is reestablished as root (Ex. 4-20c). The chord quality this time is of another altered dominant, the “*Tristan* ninth,” alternating with something that might be called the “*Tristan* ninth”; and the harmonic path shifts over to the secondary cycle. Confining our field of vision momentarily to the “oompah” oscillations in the bass, we note the members of the /0 4 8/cycle passing in review: E at m. 41, C at m. 47, A \flat at m. 55, where Ex. 4-20c breaks off. Full circle is achieved at 64, whereupon the /0 3 6 9/primary cycle is reasserted, this time reaching the point withheld in the opening section. The first sounding of a harmony rooted on D \flat in m. 74 is an exhilarating moment, an apex; it palpably conveys the achievement of a new stage in our ascent.

ex. 4-20c Alexander Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72, mm. 41–55

Piano score for measures 97-103 of Alexander Scriabin's *Vers la flamme, Op. 72*. The score is written for piano (Pno.) and consists of three systems. The first system (measures 97-99) features a complex, atonal texture with dense chords and rapid sixteenth-note passages in the right hand, while the left hand plays a more rhythmic accompaniment. The second system (measures 100-101) continues this texture, with a dynamic marking of *f cresc.* (forte crescendo) appearing in measure 100. The third system (measures 102-103) concludes the passage with a dynamic marking of *p cresc.* (piano crescendo) in measure 102. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

ex. 4-20d Alexander Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72, mm. 97–103

Piano score for measures 108-111 of Alexander Scriabin's *Vers la flamme, Op. 72*. The score is written for piano (Pno.) and consists of two systems. The first system (measures 108-109) shows a continuation of the atonal texture, with dense chords and rapid sixteenth-note passages in the right hand, while the left hand plays a more rhythmic accompaniment. The second system (measures 110-111) concludes the passage with a dynamic marking of *p cresc.* (piano crescendo) in measure 110. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

ex. 4-20e Alexander Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72, mm. 108–111

Once E is regained in m. 77, the harmonic rhythm slows to a virtual crawl, but the surface is agitated into rapid oscillations that play on age-old conventions of fire imagery. The primary cycle is maintained to the end with only a single departure: the abruptly intruding chords rooted on D in mm. 97 and 101 (Ex. 4-20d), which in this context have the character of a Far Out Point, intensifying the sense of return when the opening thematic material is recapitulated transcendently in m. 107. The most noticeable difference between this spot (Ex. 4-20e) and the beginning of the piece is the contrast in loudness and register. More subtle, but also more telling, is the transformation of the French sixths from the opening into dominant sevenths. The perfect fifths in the bass give these chords a solidity that reinforces the sense of arrival and approaching climax. What is perhaps most remarkable is the way our ears have been conditioned by all the harmonic rotations that have gone before not to expect any “tonal” resolutions. The dominant sevenths here have all the stability of a tonic.

But as members of a symmetrically disposed *complexe sonore* they are all functionally equivalent. How can one of them be further promoted to the status of first (that is, last) among equals? Its sheer statistical predominance might suggest E as the best candidate for selection (and we have already observed that E provides the final bass note). But Scriabin actually found a better way to signify the completion of his spiritual *poriv*. Like the first section, the final one withholds the last member of the /0 3 6 9/cycle. There is a distinct sense of stalling at 6 (i.e., B \flat , the tritone antipode) in mm. 117–124. Lasting eight measures, it is the composition’s longest-sustained single harmony. After the stall, the return to E can seem a fallback, one reiterated in mm. 127–129 when B \flat again fails to pierce the implicit barrier.

All the greater, then, is the sense of breakthrough at the very top of the final arpeggio, already shown in Ex. 4-20b, when at last C \sharp , the very note withheld as a harmonic root, provides the melodic capstone. What gives the sense of finality here is not a gesture of reinforced return, as in a traditionally tonal composition, but a gesture of pattern-completion. As traditional tonal styles gave way to various maximalized idioms during the fraught decades of the early twentieth century, pattern-completion emerged as an effective alternative way of creating tonal expectations and achieving tonal fulfillments. *Vers la flamme* was a benchmark in this process.

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Alexander Scriabin

Scriabin: Music and its philosophical background

THE FINAL BURST

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Ivanov regarded this effect of *poriv*—sudden elevation, transporting burst—as an explicitly religious gesture. He related it on the one hand to the *Sursum corda*, the “heart-lift” at the Elevation of the Latin Mass—on which, as both he and Scriabin knew very well, Liszt had composed one of his most harmonically adventurous pieces—and on the other, to Scriabin’s constant striving to transcend the human plane. The result of Scriabin’s final attempted breakthrough to the *realiora*, the superhuman superreal, may be glimpsed in the sketches he left at the time of his death for the *Acte préalable*, or “Preparatory Act,” that reflected something of the *Mysterium*, an unrealized (and unrealizable) project that would have been Scriabin’s ultimate musical and religious testament.

The *Mysterium* was to have brought the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* to its unsurpassable maximum: indeed, as originally conceived, Scriabin’s work was to have been the *opus ultimum* of all time, literally the last word in art. For starters, it would have combined both of the meanings the Wagnerian term conveyed: Wagner’s original notion, of a collective or communal creation, plus the later one, not attributable to Wagner but exemplified by his works, of combining all artistic media in a single coordinated expressive or symbolic act.

The composer, who had long been dabbling in symbolist poetry (including a verse counterpart to the *Poème de l’extase* which he had finally decided to suppress), drafted a text for the work that summarized theosophical doctrine concerning the origin and destiny of the cosmos. To this music would be added, along with stage spectacle, choreography, and even aromatic effects to engage the powerfully suggestive sense of smell. The concept began, literally, as a “Mystery Play,” a representation of religious teachings in the form of a Wagnerian opera along the lines of *Parsifal* (or, even more to the point, the opera Wagner did not live to write, which would have depicted the life of the Buddha).

As he worked, however, the composer began to imagine something far more grandiose: not a mere artwork but an all-encompassing ritual enactment, lasting seven days and seven nights, in which there were to be no spectators, only participants; which would be performed once only, in a specially constructed temple in India; and which would so transform the consciousness of the participants as to give them—and with them, the entire world—access to a higher plane of consciousness transcending humanly imagined time and space. It would literally bring human history to an end.

The reader may be feeling relieved that Scriabin did not live to realize this plan: he died of blood poisoning, the result of a poorly treated boil on his lip, shortly after his forty-third birthday. But as much as two years before his death the composer had conceded that he, being after all only human, could not accomplish such a world-transforming goal. He was, in other words, and despite the insinuations of his many detractors, far from crazy (inasmuch as he was able to recognize his erstwhile delusions and scrap them); but the experience left him literally, and very sadly, disillusioned about the nature and value of art.

Instead of the *Mysterium*, then, he settled on a more modest project, which he called the *Acte préalable*, a “preparatory act” that would at least impart to its hearers something of the euphoric grandeur of the symbolist ideal. This is the work for which actual musical sketches exist. Intended no longer as an

achievement of a state of spiritual transcendence but rather as a speculative representation of such a state, the sketches for the “Preparatory Act” reveal the final, literally unexceedable stages of the composer’s stylistic and technical evolution.

We already know something of them, since the enigmatic preludes from op. 74 were actually incorporated into these sketches. Among the other things they contained was a series of aggregate harmonies—“ultimate” chords each containing all twelve pitch classes. Yet how can there be a “series” of such chords? In any structurally or functionally meaningful sense there can be only one. And that is precisely what gave the aggregate harmony its poetic significance: What better means could there be for musically representing the *vselenskoye* (as it is called in Russian), the universal or All-in-One in its literal plenitude? A twelve-note chord can be neither transposed nor inverted. It is everywhere, and everything, at once.

Yet (as Berg’s third “Altenberg Lied” already showed) even a twelve-note chord can be varied in color and in “voicing,” that is, the registral disposition of its individual components. And here we may note genuine connections between Scriabin’s twelve-note chords and the harmonic explorations we have already traced. The eight distinct aggregates that can be deciphered from his *Mysterium* sketches are not undifferentiated clusters of semitones, but are laid out registrally in ways that emphasize and combine older invariant structures. In one of them, triads are built systematically on C, E \flat , F \sharp and A, the nodes of an /0 3 6 9/ “primary cycle” of minor thirds as we called it in *Vers la flamme*. And then to these triads, which together exhaust an octatonic scale, major sevenths (B, D, E \sharp and G \sharp , respectively) are added to supply the four tones missing for full chromatic representation (Ex. 4-21a).

Another aggregate (Ex. 4-21b) places two French sixth chords, equivalent to the content of an octatonic scale, in distinct registers that would no doubt have been further distinguished in timbre when orchestrated. The four remaining tones of the chromatic scale, which (as we may recall from “Chez Pétrouchka”) are equivalent to a diminished seventh chord, are placed atop the French sixths, in a third contrasting register. The twelve notes of the full chromatic scale have been in effect partitioned into three separate inversionally and transpositionally invariant harmonies, each containing two inversionally and transpositionally invariant tritones for a “universal,” all-encompassing total of six.



ex. 4-21a Aggregate harmony from Alexander Scriabin's sketches for the *Acte préalable*

The image displays three staves of musical notation. The top staff shows a chord diagram for a diminished seventh chord, labeled "diminished seventh". The middle staff shows a chord diagram for a French sixth chord, labeled "French sixth". The bottom staff shows another chord diagram for a French sixth chord, also labeled "French sixth". A vertical bracket on the right side of the middle and bottom staves is labeled "t₉".

ex. 4-21b Aggregate harmony from Alexander Scriabin's sketches for the *Acte préalable*

Since it is harmonic progression that had always articulated the structural rhythm of music, which is to say its sense of directed unfolding in time, a music based on universal invariant harmonies became quite literally timeless, as well as emotionally quiescent. The two qualities, invariance and timelessness, insofar as we are equipped to interpret musical messages, are in fact aspects of a single quality of quiescence, expressed respectively in two musical dimensions, the "vertical" and the "horizontal." Interpreting these chords in light of Scriabin's development—or, as he had once hoped and assumed, hearing them in the context of the enacted *Mysterium*—we seem to experience an eschatological revelation: a *gnosis* (occult knowledge) that only music may impart: the full collapse of time and space and the dissolution of the ego (Ivanov's "petty 'I'").

It was a dissolution at which the composer deliberately aimed, as we learn from a memoir by Boris de Schloezer, an eminent music critic who, as Tatyana Schloezer's brother, was Scriabin's brother-in-(common)-law. Far from the solipsist of the *Poème de l'extase* or the Promethean protagonist of the *Poème du feu*, the author of the *Mysterium* "no longer dwelt on his own role; what was uniquely important to him was the act itself, and he was willing to be dissolved in it."¹⁹ But that dissolution presaged the end of

Scriabin's composing career. He reached the impasse, it is now thought, before his untimely death prevented his ever overcoming it. In a manner that made him all the more an object of worship to the mystical symbolists who surrounded him, Scriabin renounced the *Mysterium* in favor of the "Preparatory Act," and then renounced the "Preparatory Act" in favor of silence. As Simon Morrison has put it, Scriabin

was not in the end defeated in his plans—he triumphed—but they exacted a high cost: writer's block and compositional paralysis. He did not fail: no artist could accomplish what he attempted to accomplish. Rather, he transcended artistry. His vision [in the words of the mystical-symbolist poet Valeriy Bryusov] dissolved in the "mighty bonfire" of a "holy sacrifice."²⁰

It was Scriabin who faced first, and perhaps most starkly, the maximalist's dilemma: the fulfillment of his aims spelled the end of his—or any—art.

Notes:

(19) Boris de Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, trans. Nicolas Slonimsky (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p. 269.

(20) Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," pp. 326–27.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Nikolai Obouhov

Ivan Wyschnegradsky

Olivier Messiaen

A MAXIMALIST AGAINST THE TIDE

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Scriabin has often been viewed by historians as a dead end, not only because of this dilemma but because of the more mundane historical fact that he had few identifiable heirs. As we will learn in later chapters, there would be a sharp antimetaphysical turn—sometimes called “positivist,” sometimes “materialist,” most often “classicist” as it related to the arts—in the decades following World War I. In the aftermath of a real apocalypse—a real end-of-the-world experience—apocalyptic thought began to look like the opposite of avant-garde.

In Russia, Scriabin’s luxuriant musical style was much imitated for a while. By 1931, however, only sixteen years after Scriabin’s death, Dmitry Shostakovich, the leader of the younger generation of what by then were called Soviet composers (educated after the Russian Revolution of 1917), frankly called him “our bitterest musical enemy.”²¹ In part this may have been because Soviet education was militantly antireligious. But Shostakovich put it this way: “Scriabin’s music tends to an unhealthy eroticism; also to mysticism and passivity and escape from the realities of life.” Attention everywhere—not just in the atheistic Soviet Union but (as we shall see) in Western Europe and America as well—was increasingly focused on the real world and its exigencies, which entailed a substantial loss of faith even in “ordinary” romanticism, let alone its maximal, religiously transcendent phases.

pp Bla - zhen — ni - schchi - ye du - khom
 Bienheureux — pauvre d'esprit —
 Bles - sed are — the poor in Spi - rit

8----- 15-----

ff *rit.* *ff* *ff*

P *P*

gliss.

Tvo - ye Tsar - stvo v Ne - be sakh —
 Ton royaume est au ciel.
 Theirs is the king - dom of Hea - ven.

(15)-----

rit. *P*

ex. 4-22 Nikolai Obouhov, *Berceuse d'un bienheureux*, beginning

The only Russian composers who maintained a Scriabinistic stance well into the later twentieth century were a couple of religiously minded émigrés who lived most of their lives in France: Nikolai Obouhov (or Obukhov, 1892–1954) and Ivan Wyschnegradsky (1893–1979). Obouhov found his own way to what he called “total harmonies” or aggregates, but his motivation was similar to Scriabin’s. His *Berceuse d'un bienheureux* (“Beatific lullaby”), composed in Russia in 1918 but published in Paris in 1921, begins with three widely spaced aggregates partitioned like Scriabin’s into identifiable layers. They serve to illustrate the Biblical aphorism, “Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Ex. 4-22). Wyschnegradsky actually managed to continue Scriabin’s maximalism past the seeming limit imposed by the aggregate, by joining a small but hardy contingent of composers who split the musical atom, so to speak, dividing the semitone into smaller “microtonal” intervals. This provided a greater spectrum of available pitches for musical use, but (like much maximalist music) would raise serious problems of perception. We will face them in due course.



fig. 4-3 Olivier Messiaen; Paris, 1983.

Obouhov and Wyschnegradsky were marginal figures, regarded as eccentrics out of step with the majority of their fellow composers, whose numbers gave them the power (and the right?) to define the musical “mainstream.” But there was one resolute maximalist who managed, despite everything, to acquire a major reputation and maintain it throughout the period of positivist or classicist “retreat” with which he was completely out of sympathy, and even exert a considerable influence, though not without controversy. Despite the chronological discrepancy, then, the proper context to begin investigating and evaluating his music is the present chapter rather than one more contemporaneous with his work.

Our unregenerate maximalist is Olivier Messiaen (1908–92), a French composer whose Scriabinish affinities, like Obouhov’s and Wyschnegradsky’s, were a matter not merely of stylistic or technical means, but of spiritual ends. Indeed his technique as such, which (unlike many modernists) he loved to describe, often in phenomenal detail, was not directly modeled on Scriabin’s. Though demonstrably among them, Scriabin was only one of a great number of highly disparate sources that Messiaen combined into his remarkably eclectic *modus operandi*. But the spiritual vision that drove him, and the purposes he wished his music to serve, were so like Scriabin’s as practically to assure that they ended up in what might be called the same esthetic space.

Yet perhaps the word “esthetic” is misleading, since it refers to beauty. Rather, Messiaen wrote, “let us have a *true music*,” italicizing the word himself;

that is to say, spiritual, a music which may be an act of faith; a music which may touch upon all subjects without ceasing to touch upon God; an original music, in short, whose language may open a few doors, take down some as yet distant stars.²²

The words, for all their religious euphoria, come from the preface to Messiaen’s *Technique de mon langage musical* (“Technique of my musical language,” 1944), one of the most systematic expositions any composer has ever given to the mechanisms of his art. And past the preface, the treatise is true to its title. It resolutely

ignores all meaning and treats “language” alone—or as Messiaen put it, “technique and not sentiment,” abstracted and broken down in extraordinarily schoolmasterly fashion into its rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic dimensions.

Any seeming paradox or contradiction is dispelled when one considers the nature of the truth that Messiaen designed his art to convey. It is neither a personal doctrine nor an occult one, but rather “the theological truths of the Catholic faith,”²³ as dogmatically set forth in scripture. Messiaen was an extreme rarity among leading twentieth-century composers (indeed, among composers since the advent of romanticism) in being a working church musician. For more than forty years, beginning in 1930, he served as regular Sunday organist at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité (Church of the Holy Trinity), one of the largest churches in Paris.

Messiaen wrote many of his most important works for La Trinité’s huge Cavallé-Coll organ, and was without question the most important organist-composer of the twentieth century, as César Franck, who also served as organist for many years at a Parisian church, and who also wrote a highly spiritualized brand of modern music, had been in the nineteenth. For a further parallel, both Messiaen and Franck were famous and much-sought-after teachers of composition, whose pupils and disciples formed an elite group of modernists who universalized their master’s teaching and made it an important “mainstream” influence.

But Franck, whose career ended shortly before the great wave of maximalism broke, was never drawn to such radically novel means as Messiaen proposed, nor did he ever systematize his practices so thoroughly into a teachable method. It was the latter that made Messiaen such a potent force in the technique of contemporary music even among those who held his esthetic principles in disrepute. He managed to transform theological dogma into musical dogma, and that is why Messiaen always objected to being called a mystic. Rather than a mystic he was a *scholastic*, in the medieval sense of the term. Like Saint Thomas Aquinas, he sought to embody the mysteries of faith in a rational and transmissible discourse. No wonder his self-analysis was so “schoolmasterly,” and so influential. What were means for him became ends for many.

As already observed, Messiaen’s treatise very rigorously analyzes his maximalistic techniques into their rhythmic and melodic-harmonic domains. And yet the remarkable thing is how much the pitch and durational aspects of his innovative “language” had in common. The chief innovation with respect to pitch was the use of what Messiaen called “modes of limited transposition,” and the chief durational innovation was a preference for what he called “nonretrogradable rhythms.” Both of these impressively named devices depend on a single quality, one that has already figured frequently in our encounters with musical maximalism, and especially in Scriabin. That quality is invariance: more specifically, invariance achieved by means of symmetry.

Notes:

(21) Rose Lee, “Dmitri Szostakovitch: Young Russian Composer Tells of Linking Politics with Creative Work,” *New York Times*, 20 December 1931; reproduced in facsimile in Eric Roseberry, *Shostakovich: His Life and Times* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1982), p. 79.

(22) Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Leduc, 1956), p. 8.

(23) Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 13.

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Mode of limited transposition

Messiaen: Musical elements

“THE CHARM OF IMPOSSIBILITIES”

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Messiaen named and described his “modes of limited transposition” for the first time in 1935 in the preface to *La nativité du Seigneur* (“The nativity of our lord”), a book of nine “meditations” for organ on passages from sacred texts, to be played during the celebration of Mass. Only the name that Messiaen gave his “modes” was new. The concept had been familiar as such for almost a century, ever since Liszt had made his first systematic experiments with symmetrical cycles of thirds and scales derived from them. Messiaen had in good scholastic fashion merely carried the process of systematization, begun by Liszt and already maximalized by Scriabin, to the point of theoretical exhaustion.

“Of limited transposition” was Messiaen’s term for invariance; it refers to the property certain pitch configurations have of replicating themselves when transposed by certain intervals. The one we have most recently been concerned with, thanks to Scriabin, has been the French sixth chord, which retains its pitches when transposed by a tritone. We also know that the French sixth chord can be embedded in two scales that share its properties of invariance: the whole-tone scale, which retains its pitches when transposed by any of its constituent intervals (thus being, except for the untransposable chromatic scale, the mode of most stringently limited transposition), and the octatonic scale, which retains its pitches when transposed by every alternating interval in its makeup (that is, by the minor third, the tritone, or the major sixth). These scales being the most firmly established modes of limited transposition, they are naturally enough the first and the second mode in Messiaen’s classification, and the ones most frequently used by far, even by him.

Messiaen, with his scholarly bent, was well aware of the historical precedents for the use of these scales. Any French musician would have associated the whole-tone scale with Debussy (and with Dukas, Messiaen’s teacher); but Messiaen also knew, as did few others at the time, that the octatonic scale was the special predilection of Russian composers—Rimsky-Korsakov, Scriabin, Stravinsky—and of Ravel, whose Russian affinities were common knowledge but rarely described so cogently in terms of actual technique. It is clear that Messiaen was an unusually perceptive music analyst, which not only enabled him to rationalize and describe his own techniques with remarkable detachment, but also gave him, in the words of grateful former students, clairvoyant insight into the half-formed methods they were groping toward in their own compositions. They thus acquired from Messiaen technical facility without it necessarily entailing dependence on his own methods.

Ex. 4-23 shows Messiaen’s seven modes of limited transposition as ingeniously arranged by the British music analyst Anthony Pople into a chart that indicates their interrelationships: to wit, that mode 1 is included in modes 3 and 6; mode five in modes 6 and 4; and modes 2, 4, and 6 (hence 1 and 5 as well) in mode 7, the largest of the lot.²⁴ The reason why modes 1 and 2 are the most useful modes of limited transposition is simply that they are the most limited. Mode 1 can be transposed only once without replicating itself and mode 2 can be transposed only twice. Mode 3, which could be likened to a whole-tone scale with every other interval broken into two half steps, can be transposed without invariance three times. The rest have only one transposition (inevitably it is the tritone) at which replication takes place, leaving five or more available transpositions. As Messiaen puts it, the more limited a mode’s potential for transposition the more “strangely charming” it is, since it is “at once in the atmosphere of several tonalities, *yet not*

polytonal, the composer being free to give predominance to one of the tonalities or to leave the tonal impression unsettled.”²⁵



ex. 4-23 The modes of limited transposition



fig. 4-4 Magister Lambertus, illumination from *Liber floridus* (Flemish, fifteenth century) showing the three trumpets of the Apocalypse: (1) hail, fire, and blood; (2) the mountain hurled into the sea; (3) the flaming star.

Example 4-24 shows a passage from another organ work of Messiaen's—*Les corps glorieux* (“Glorious bodies”, 1939), a set of “seven brief glimpses of resurrected life”—in which the modes of limited transposition are deployed in Messiaen's most typical manner. It is the beginning of the second piece in the set, *Les eaux de la grâce* (“Waters of grace”), which carries an epigraph from the Apocalypse or Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament: “The Lamb [i.e., Christ], who is at the heart of the throne, will be their shepherd and will guide them to the springs of the water of life.” Like most organ music, the piece is notated on three staves: one for each hand at the keyboards, the third for the feet at the pedals. The three levels thus distinguished are rigorously differentiated by mode. Easiest to spot is the whole-tone scale (that is, “mode 1”) in the pedal part. Less obvious is the confinement of the right hand part to mode 2, what up to now we have called the octatonic scale. Partly it is the orthography—the note-spelling—that occludes it. Comparison with Ex. 4-23 will show that Messiaen has adhered strictly to the mode 2 orthography given

there, using only sharps to represent the “black keys.” Thus the status of the first chord in the right-hand part as a familiar B \flat -major triad may not be immediately apparent. But in fact all the chords in the right hand are major triads (or to be really fastidious, homologous to major triads), with roots—G, B \flat , C \sharp , E—that lie along a familiar symmetrical track, the /0 3 6 9/ circle of minor thirds.

ex. 4-24 Olivier Messiaen, *Les corps glorieux*, no. 2 (*Les eaux de la grace*), mm. 1–8

The left-hand line belongs to mode 7, the ten-note collection, which at this particular transposition consists of the other two modes combined. As must necessarily be the case, the two notes not present in the scale (C and F \sharp) lie a tritone apart. The C is withheld for the duration of the piece; the F \sharp makes an occasional appearance (in mm. 4, 6, and 8 within the confines of Ex. 4-24), but its inconspicuous rhythmic placement and its conjunct melodic behavior identify it as a “nonharmonic” tone, apparently allowed in for the same reason nonharmonic tones are used in ordinary tonal harmony, for the sake of smooth voice leading.

There are four points of intersection—F, G, B, and D \flat C \sharp —between the mode 1 and mode 2 scales. One of

these, G, is the root of the sustained chord that finishes each phrase in the right hand. Does that make G the tonic of the piece? It would be hard to justify such a conclusion, given the fact that the note G never coincides in the pedal part with the right-hand concluding chords. Instead, at these points there is a perhaps equally decisive cadential descent in the pedal to A. And the middle voice—the mediator, so to speak—emphasizes on every downbeat major thirds that correspond to every apparent root in the right-hand part *except* the G.

So no clear sense of pitch priority emerges from the texture. Instead there are three clearly defined but functionally inchoate tonal planes—polymodality, so to speak, in place of polytonality. The modal overload, plus the apparent carelessness of dissonance in Messiaen’s contrapuntal scheme, are two aspects of his maximalism (over Scriabin, let us say). In fact both aspects are more “maximal” than the look of the score conveys, for Messiaen employs the organ “registration” (the actual deployment of the organ pipes in relation to the keys and pedals, as regulated by hand levers, or “stops”) to complicate both the texture and the pitch content of the sounding music.

The pedal part is “registered” to sound an octave higher than played, so that the fast-moving left-hand part is the true bass. But that very part is so registered (by a stop called “Nazard et Tierce”) as to produce full triads on every note, the fifth and the third sounding softly in a register two octaves higher than that of the written note. “The general quality,” in the aptly metaphorical words of John Milsom, a British scholar, “is of a bright triadic halo hovering over each notated pitch.”²⁶ All of this, perhaps needless to say, will be quite disorienting to anyone attempting to follow a performance of the piece from the score, and even to the player. And the “halos” produce an ineffable harmonic smudge that seems to contradict all the meticulous modal planning we have been considering. Recalling Scriabin, it is hard not to see these effects of disorientation and “analytical frustration” as part of the very point of the music.

Nor are such effects confined to the pitch domain. Another characteristic Messiaenic touch is the way he keeps the meter of the music as indefinite as its tonal orientation. Not only the number of beats per measure, but also the length of the beats themselves, is unpredictably variable. The variable lengths come about by the interpolation, in every other bar, of an extra sixteenth-note that lengthens one of the eighth-note pulses to a dotted eighth. This device—Messiaen calls it simply the “added value”—is one of the principal topics addressed in *Technique de mon langage musical*. He attributes it, perhaps significantly, to the music (or at least to the music theory) of India, a land that exerted a crucial influence, though not technically a musical one, on Scriabin as well.

Also Indian in origin, Messiaen assures his readers, is the other technical device with which his name is chiefly associated, that of “nonretrogradable rhythm.” The term means nothing more than a rhythmic palindrome: an arrangement of note values that reads the same both forward and backward. One arranges such a thing most easily by working outward from a midpoint. Messiaen called the midpoint the “free value” or the “central common value.” Functionally speaking, of course, it is an axis of symmetry. Ex. 4-25, taken from *Technique de mon langage musical*, consists of a lengthy melody in which each measure is cast as a rhythmic palindrome. The first and last measures have identical (nonretrogradable) rhythms as well, and the third and fourth measures from the end are rhythmically identical, adding extra (or, more precisely, inner) dimensions of self-reversability to the symmetry of the whole.



ex. 4-25 Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, example 33

Putting the two axes of symmetry together, the harmonic axis represented by the modes of limited transposition and the temporal axis represented by the nonretrogradable rhythms, allows the coordination of the vertical (spatial) and horizontal (temporal) dimensions in dual representation of invariance = constancy = immutability = eternity. That is the time-transcending truth that religion reveals through music, its handmaiden, in Messiaen's esthetic universe. And that, Messiaen explicitly informs the reader, is the source of his mysterious hold on the listener. "Let us think now of the hearer of our modal and rhythmic music," he writes, in a passage to which Scriabin might gladly have subscribed:

He will not have time at the concert to inspect the nontranspositions and the nonretrogradations, and, at that moment, these questions will not interest him further; to be charmed will be his only desire. And that is precisely what will happen; in spite of himself he will submit to the strange charm of impossibilities: a certain effect of tonal ubiquity in the nontransposition, a certain unity of movement (where beginning and end are confused because identical) in the nonretrogradation, all things which will lead him progressively to that sort of *theological rainbow* which the musical language, of which we seek edification and theory, attempts to be.²⁷

Notes:

(24) Anthony Pople, "Messiaen's Musical Language: An Introduction," in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), p. 21.

(25) Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language* (1944), trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956), Vol. I, p. 58.

(26) John Milsom, "Organ Music I," *The Messiaen Companion*, p. 55.

(27) Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 21.

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SO OLD IT'S NEW

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

In language that seems as if borrowed from the Russian mystical symbolists who inspired (and were inspired by) Scriabin, Messiaen writes that one of his primary aims in composing as he does is “l’atrophie du moi”—the atrophy, or wasting away, of the “I,” the petty self. It will not be difficult to discover in his musical methods (to quote the English composer Wilfrid Mellers, one of Messiaen’s most sympathetic critics) the means toward the “complete reversal of the will-domination of post-Renaissance Europe.”²⁸ One aspect of this reversal was simply and literally the revival of pre-Renaissance practices long since considered obsolete by musicians caught up in the flux of history.

Many of the rhythmic techniques Messiaen describes in his self-analyzing treatise of 1944—canons by augmentation, by diminution, by “the addition of the dot”—were common during the *ars nova* of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the heyday of “mensural notation,” as was the idea of organizing musical structures around what Messiaen called “rhythmic pedals,” durational plans that could be mentally conceptualized but not followed perceptually (that is, sensorially) during performance. Messiaen, who claimed to have been ignorant of it at the time, had in effect revived the concept of the isorhythmic motet, and for the same purpose the original medieval practice had served: to represent (and in some small measure render present to human understanding) the divine eternal harmony of the cosmos, a harmony that expressed itself precisely in the coordinated movement of heavenly bodies in seemingly independent orbits.

Rhythmic pedals (*talea* in Latin, *tala* in Sanskrit) were the chief medieval means for representing cosmic harmony. And at the same time they provided a genuine meeting point between time-honored European (in fact, French) and Indian musical practices. But Messiaen also revived the other aspect of medieval isorhythm, namely the abstractly conceived melodic ostinato or *color*. Ex. 4-25 embodies a hidden sequence of 16 pitches that is repeated four times (or almost, since the last repetition ends two notes short of completion). One discovers it with delighted surprise.

But of course it was never hidden at all. It was right on the surface, but too big—that is, too *great*—for immediate detection. Like the truths of astronomy and many other scientific truths (as well, needless to say, as religious truths), it is the sort of fact that reflective intellect reveals sooner than the senses. Putting such a thing into an artwork is an implicit warning against assuming that true knowledge can only be gained empirically. The highest truths, Messiaen’s music implies, are revealed truths. Theology was truth. Anything beyond that, Messiaen implied along with countless theologians, was mere history. Take that, Hegel, and all who followed.

And yet while the truths may be transcendent, the means of representation (the work, after all, of mortals) are inevitably historical, the product of the fleeting moment. Messiaen’s music does not sound like a medieval motet. His ear, like the ears he addresses, has been otherwise conditioned. His “musical language” confronted and accommodated the musical styles of its time in an openly omnivorous and opportunistic spirit, even as it sought to extend them in the spirit of maximalism. And that is why his work has been so useful as a model to many composers who not only failed to share his religious commitments, but were hopelessly caught up in “patent-office maximalism,” something Messiaen outwardly decried as the rat-race

of historicism, and yet something in which he was willy-nilly a participant, and a very successful one at that.

A kind of summa or compendium of the practices cataloged in *Technique de mon langage musical* was the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* ("Quartet for the end of time," 1940–41), for violin, clarinet, cello, and piano, written during Messiaen's brief confinement in a stalag (German prisoner-of-war-camp) in the early stages of World War II, and first performed there by the composer and the three other camp inmates for whom it was written. The title, of course, is another reference to the Apocalypse, Messiaen's eternal subject, and the work is prefaced by another epigraph from the Book of Revelation (10:5–6):

Then the angel that I saw standing on the sea and the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by Him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them: "There shall be no more time; when the seventh angel shall sound his trumpet, the hidden purpose of God will have been fulfilled, as he promised to his servants the prophets."

Ex. 4-25 above, though taken from Messiaen's 1944 treatise, was in fact a quotation from the Quartet's dénouement: the sixth movement, a thunderous monody for all four instruments in unison called "Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes" ("Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets"), a sort of speculative transcription of the apocalyptic angelic call. We have already observed some of its "timeless" qualities. The Quartet's first movement, "Liturgie de cristal" is an evocation of prophecy. The piano part is organized isorhythmically throughout: that is, its pitch and rhythmic contents are organized in two independent repeating cycles. The rhythmic cycle, a pattern of seventeen durations, is taken (indirectly) from a thirteenth-century Sanskrit treatise by the Hindustani musician Sharngadeva, whose table of talas Messiaen found reprinted in a standard French reference source, Lavignac's *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du conservatoire*.

The pitch cycle consists of a series of twenty-nine chords that overlaps the rhythmic cycle just as the color of an isorhythmic motet overlapped its *talea*. Ex. 4-26 contains enough of the piece to permit the identification of both cycles. It was surely no accident that Messiaen selected for his pitch cycle another prime number to go with Sharngadeva's seventeen, since that insured that the beginnings of the patterns would coincide neither with one another nor with any recurrent downbeat (at least until the 493rd repetition, unlikely to occur within the confines of a given piece). Their hidden conjunction, impossible to detect by ear, was already an intimation of eternity. The sounding piece is merely a sample of its infinite expanse.

(comme un cisra)

Bien modéré, en poudroisement harmonieux (♩ = 54 environ)

Violin *ppp* (son filat.)

Clarinete in Bb (comme un cisra) *p* *espress*

Cello *ppp* (vibr.)

Piano *ppp* *legato* (très enveloppé de pédale)

4 *vers la pointe*

7

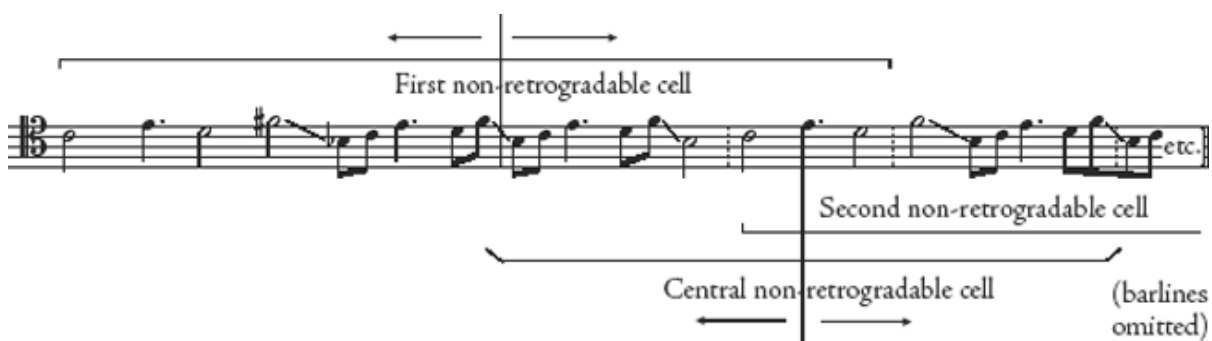
*Glissando bref; id. aux passages similaires.

10

ex. 4-26 Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, I (“Liturgie de cristal”), mm. 1–12

Above the isorhythmic piano part, the cello contributes a line, played entirely in ethereal artificial harmonics (“flageolets,” or flute tones, in French), that takes the form of a five-note melodic ostinato organized into patterns that display the “charm of impossibilities” in two dimensions. Its pitches are confined to the first mode of limited transposition (a.k.a. the whole-tone scale), and its durations are cast in a recurring series that is palindromic (or “nonretrogradable”) along two axes of symmetry (that is, from two midpoints), as shown in Ex. 4-27.

This, too, may be corroborated in Ex. 4-26 by noting the reversed recurrence of note values in the cello around the dotted quarter at the beginning of m. 9. The remaining parts, for clarinet (heard alone at the outset) and violin, are marked “comme un oiseau” (like a bird), and imitate actual birdsong: according to the preface to the score, the clarinet is a blackbird, the violin a nightingale, two birds that sing at dawn, thus adding another level of metaphor to the musical message. (Ornithological life-drawing would become an obsession for Messiaen in the 1950s, culminating in a massive cycle of piano compositions called *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, “Catalog of birds.”) These parts participate less than the others in Messiaen’s games of symmetry and invariance. The notes of the violin part may be referred to “mode 7,” the largest (ten-note) scale of limited transposition, but with a pitch collection that big, “referability” may be a happenstance. The clarinet part partakes of the full chromatic gamut—the ultimate mode of limited transposition, it may be tautologically argued, since it cannot be transposed at all; but Messiaen did not so regard it.



ex. 4-27 Analysis of Olivier Messiaen’s rhythmic palindromes

Yet these “free” parts, constrained not by systematic theory but by nature, are the most obvious symbols of revelation, for birds have been thought of as prophets, or as direct emanations from the Godhead, since ancient times and in many cultures. Recall the dove that whispered the divine chant to Pope Gregory the Great according to the tradition that arose in conjunction with the earliest musical notations. Recall Wagner’s Forest Bird who revealed the secrets of the gods to Siegfried, or Schumann’s Prophet Bird, both of them figments of German folklore. Russian folklore has its ornithological prophets as well, as we know from Stravinsky’s *Firebird*, and Hans Christian Andersen wrote a fairy tale that casts the nightingale in the role of Orpheus, the divine musician. Messiaen’s apocalyptic birds have a distinguished Romantic lineage.

Notes:

(28) Wilfrid Mellers, “Mysticism and Theology,” in *The Messiaen Companion*, p. 228.

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Olivier Messiaen

THE SUMMA SUMMARUM

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 Extinguishing the “Petty ‘I’ ” (Transcendentalism, I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

To see Messiaen’s musical cosmology maximalized to the very limit one must look to his gigantic *Turangalila-symphonie*, a ten-movement, seventy-five-minute blockbuster for a 107-piece orchestra, composed in 1946–48 and first performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under a young conductor named Leonard Bernstein in 1949. The orchestra is not only huge but unprecedentedly variegated as well. There are parts for fifteen different percussion instruments requiring eight players, and a “continuo” of six keyboard instruments including tubular bells and glockenspiel. (If keyboard-operated models for these are not available, the minimum number of players goes up to 109.)

The remaining keyboard instruments are a celesta, a vibraphone (an American invention consisting of a xylophone with metal bars and an electric-motor-driven mechanism to produce a controlled variation in amplitude that sounds like vibrato), a piano prominent enough to require a virtuoso soloist with feature billing (for the first forty or so performances it was the composer’s second wife, Yvonne Loriod), and an ondes martenot (“Martenot Waves”). This last, invented in 1927 by Maurice Martenot, a musically trained engineer (who called it the *ondes musicales*), was one of the earliest and most successful electronic instruments, producing its sound by means of an electric oscillator. It, too, is treated in *Turangalila* like a concerto soloist. (For the first dozen or so performances, the player was the inventor’s sister Ginette.)

According to Messiaen, who devised it, the title is a composite of two Sanskrit words: *turanga*, meaning the measurement of time by movement, and *lila*, meaning the play of the divine will on the cosmos (and, by poetic extension, the force of love). In their conjunction the two words are as protean (and, ultimately, as unfathomable) in meaning as *Liebe + Tod = Liebestod* in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, which Messiaen acknowledged to be the symphony’s inspiration. “*Turangalila* signifies, at one and the same time, a love song, a hymn to joy, time, movement, rhythm, life and death,” the composer wrote, seemingly leaving room for any desired interpretation of his words. Yet one thing does emerge with clarity: where *Tristan und Isolde* had shown time and movement to be powerfully unidirectional, to the point where it virtually defined the “Western” outlook on the nature of music for a hundred years, Messiaen’s concept of time, like Scriabin’s, while ostensibly Wagnerian in inspiration, was cyclic and ultimately quiescent, as the *Turangalila-symphonie* so massively demonstrates.

Three of the movements in the symphony bear the name “Turangalila” in their own right: they are the work’s quintessential “time and motion studies.” The seventh movement, *Turangalila 2*, an orgy of cycles and palindromes, is the densest of all, and in that sense the most maximalistic. Its many discrete components and subsections, juxtaposed like the tiles in a mosaic, can be classified into several recurring groups. What follows is a very selective description of some of the main events and relationships, keyed to the rehearsal figures in the score so that they may be verified there by interested readers.

- • The opening piano cadenza, clearly recognizable (on the basis of Ex. 4-26) as birdsong, is full of rhythmic palindromes. Taking the sixteenth-note rest in the second measure (an “added value”) as the midpoint, and ignoring grace notes, the first of them (for example) can be traced by moving forward to the end of m. 3 and back to the third eighth note of m. 1. The birdsong cadenza continues with accompaniment at fig. 3, and returns briefly by itself at fig. 9 with the

same nonretrogradable rhythm as at the beginning. The very end of the movement reproduces the end of the opening cadenza.

- • The section beginning at fig. 1 is identifiable by the chromatic scale descending in the ondes martenot and ascending in contrary motion in the cluster of low trombones. This simple contrary motion seems to rotate the idea of a rhythmic—temporal, “horizontal” palindrome by 45 degrees, so that it becomes spatial (“vertical”). At fig. 6 the scales are again set in motion with reversed trajectories: this could be interpreted either as an inversion (“vertical” reversal) or a retrograde (“horizontal” reversal) of the section at fig. 1. Another reversed recurrence comes at the end (fig. 12), resulting in a repetition or recapitulation of the music at 1, but harmonically enhanced. (The ondes martenot line, for example, is doubled by the violins in parallel diminished-seventh chords: chords, that is, which sample every other pitch of the second mode of limited transposition and therefore share its invariance properties.)
- • At fig. 2, the unpitched percussion contribute a little bazaar of rhythmic palindromes. The easiest one to spot is the one between the woodblock (second line in the score) and the bass drum (sixth line), because it fits exactly into the time allotted. Counting the sixteenths within each notated value, the woodblock series is 12 14 1 2 7 8 16 (played twice) and the bass drum is precisely the reverse. The triangle (top line) has the series 15 13 3 4 (played three times plus one note) and the maracas (fourth line) have precisely the reverse (played three times plus three notes). The “small Turkish cymbal” (third line) has the series 5 6 9 11 10 (played three times, the last not quite complete) and the “Chinese cymbal” (fifth line) has precisely the reverse. Notice that every value from 1 sixteenth to 16 sixteenths is represented once in the scheme. That is what Messiaen called the “*gamme chromatique de durées*” (chromatic scale of durations).
- • At fig. 7 the chromatic scale of durations is played in consecutive ascending order by the triangle, and backward (or in consecutive descending order) by the bass drum, doubled (on the attacks) by the string basses, who reinforce the notion of *gamme chromatique* by simultaneously executing a chromatic scale in the ordinary meaning of the term. At the same time the piano is playing a repeating series of three chords in the right hand, and another in the left in a rhythmic canon with the right at the time interval of a quarter note. Comparison with Ex. 4-26 will reveal that the rhythms so treated make up the very same pattern of seventeen durations from Sharngadeva’s treatise already used in the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (nor do these two exhaust its appearances in Messiaen’s work).

And that is not all. The upper strings and a group of winds (clarinets, bassoons, and horns) are simultaneously engaged in another isorhythmic game. The strings have a pair of chords that are first heard on the first and last sixteenths of the first measure. The second chord always comes on the last sixteenth of alternating measures; but the first chord advances along the chromatic scale of durations: at 7 it is on the first sixteenth, at $7 + 2$ it is on the second, at $7 + 4$ it is on the third, and so on. The second wind chord is always on the downbeat, while the first advances by chromatic durations, beginning with the second sixteenth at 7, the third at $7 + 2$, and so forth, so that the string chords always function as pickups to the wind chords. In the third measure before 9, where the advancing wind chord and the advancing string chord coincide on the last sixteenth, the two chords plus the high piccolo note together produce... yes, an aggregate harmony.

How much of this is actually meant to be “heard”? How much is mere “notation”? The bass drum part at fig. 2 is obviously notation, not sound. (The sound of a single drumbeat lasting two measures cannot even be imagined.) But this was nothing new. Similarly overloaded medieval polytextual motets suggest the answer to the question with which this paragraph began. As the singing eagle said to Dante, in the latter’s *Paradiso*, “As are my notes to thee who canst not follow, such is the Eternal Judgement to you mortals.” Where ultimate truth is to be revealed, the senses must be overcome, the mind boggled.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

CHAPTER 5 Containing Multitudes (Transcendentalism, II)

Ives, Ruggles, Crawford; Microtonality

Chapter: CHAPTER 5 Containing Multitudes (Transcendentalism, II)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

MAXIMALISM, AMERICAN STYLE

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.¹

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841)

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.²

—Emerson, “The Over-Soul” (1841)

Music is essentially the manly art.³

—William Lyon Phelps, *Music* (1930)

The two epigraphs from the *Essays* of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) may seem to be in contradiction. One places a proud and (it might be thought) typically American emphasis on individualism; the other places an equally strong premium on collectivity. Yet Emerson’s essay on “Self-Reliance” is also the source of his most famous maxim: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.”⁴ The great American poet and preacher would surely have chimed in gladly with Walt Whitman’s celebrated lines (in “Song of Myself” from *Leaves of Grass*, published somewhat later) proclaiming, on America’s behalf, “Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” And indeed, from a particular philosophical perspective Emerson’s two insights may be easily reconciled—or, to speak philosophically, “synthesized.” That standpoint can be found in a distinctively American strain of idealist thought that historians of philosophy now call New England transcendentalism (or “Transcendentalism,” unqualified and with a capital T, to use the name its proponents, like Emerson, preferred). Flourishing in and around the town of Concord, Massachusetts, between the 1830s and the 1850s, the movement is often cited as the first indigenously American “school” of philosophy.

That may be an exaggeration. For one thing, its roots are overwhelmingly German (Emerson’s “Over-Soul,” for one thing, being a direct translation of Hegel’s *Überseele*). For another, it may not have been sufficiently systematic to qualify as a real “school of thought.” As Michael Moran, a historian of Transcendentalism, has noted of its devotees, “although nearly all had made some attempt to read the German philosophers, very few had persevered to the point of mastering them.”⁵ Instead, they imbibed their philosophy from Romantic

poetry, both by Germans like Goethe and by English nature poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, who had imbibed Germanic idealism before them.

It was from these poets, predominantly, that Emerson derived the chief tenets of his philosophy. Still, he gave Immanuel Kant the (perhaps undeserved) credit for his biggest idea, first put forth in a Boston lecture of 1842. A Transcendentalist, he told his audience, believes in “a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself”⁶. Transcendentalists, therefore, and simply, were people who had embraced a “tendency to respect their intuitions,” whether or not such intuitions could be supported by observation or rational argument.

The chief intuition, paraphrased by Octavius B. Frothingham in his Emerson-authorized history of the movement (1876), was “the immanence of divinity in instinct,” which made possible “the transference of supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of mankind.”⁷ In short, by trusting their individual instincts (or, as Emerson said, “respecting their intuitions”), people could gain direct access to the all-encompassing wisdom of God. Here was the link between the individual and the collective. The only requirement, of course, was that instinct or intuition be truly that, rather than one’s conventional schooling in disguise. And this was, for most people, a very difficult requirement indeed.

This call to unlearn one’s learning was given its most memorable literary expression in *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (1854), the philosophical memoirs of Emerson’s disciple Henry David Thoreau (1817–62). It put New England transcendentalism in touch with a long line of inspirational “gnostic” or “primitivist” thinking. It was not so much a system of thought, then, as it was (to quote Frothingham) “an enthusiasm, a wave of sentiment, a breath of mind that caught up such as were prepared to receive it, elated them, transported them, and passed on.”⁸ Transcendentalism enters our narrative at this point — quite some time after the movement, properly so called, had ended — because it inspired Charles Ives (1874–1954), a New England composer, with both the vision and the self-reliance to become the one American whose music fully embodied the maximalistic spirit that was seizing his European counterparts in the first decades of the twentieth century.

No descriptive phrase could better capture Ives’s expressive purposes than Frothingham’s. He meant his music to provide a rush of sentiment and enthusiasm — some of it transcendental, much of it nostalgic—that would catch up such as were prepared to receive it and elate them. And to accomplish this, Ives was prepared to go to stylistic extremes that forced (or enabled) him to renounce his conventional schooling and follow his “instincts” to a degree that few other composers had the fortitude (or saw the need) to match. Yet because his vision was in so many ways a nostalgic one, Ives is a rare instance of a composer who, although the very model of a musical maximalist, cannot really be called a modernist.

Notes:

(1) *Emerson’s Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1901), p. 31.

(2) *Emerson’s Essays*, p. 188.

(3) William Lyon Phelps, *Music* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), p. 3.

(4) *Emerson’s Essays*, p. 39.

(5) Michael Moran, “New England Transcendentalism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. V (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 479.

(6) Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” quoted in Moran, p. 479.

(7) Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (1876); (New York: Harner and Brothers 1959) n. 136.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 355.

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Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Charles Ives

Horatio Parker

TWO AMERICAN CAREERS

Chapter: CHAPTER 5 Containing Multitudes (Transcendentalism, II)

Source: MUSIC IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

His principles, extravagantly idealistic both in the philosophical and in the ordinary meaning of the word, as well as the social and material conditions in which he grew up, mandated that Ives practice his musical vocation nonprofessionally. In this, his career somewhat resembled those of the Russian composers of his parents' generation. He was born in Danbury, Connecticut, into the family of George Ives (1845–94), the town bandmaster, who had served as the youngest Union bandleader during the American Civil War. From the age of fourteen, Charles Ives began following in his father's footsteps as a town musician, serving as Sunday organist in local churches before going off to New Haven, Connecticut, in 1894, for undergraduate studies at Yale University.

In later life Charles Ives tended to idealize the memory of his father both in words and in musical deed: his compositions often nostalgically evoked the nineteenth-century band music his father performed, as well as the congregational hymns he often accompanied in his youth. And he gave his father, an enthusiastic musical tinkerer if an unsuccessful composer, most of the credit for arousing in him an appetite for musical adventure. But George Ives's musical profession did not earn him much in the way of income or social respect, and he ended up, to his son's shame, as the family black sheep. That may have been one of the factors that eventually dissuaded Charles Ives, despite strong inclinations and many indications of talent, from pursuing a musical career.



fig. 5-1 Charles Ives, Yale graduation photo (1898).

He studied at Yale with Horatio Parker (1863–1919), then a dashing young composer (only eleven years older than Ives) who had trained in Munich under the then-famous organist and composer Joseph Rheinberger, and who was widely regarded at the time as the white hope of American music. Parker's career was modeled on his own teacher's. It was the very career that Charles Ives had modestly embarked upon in Danbury, but Parker practiced it at the highest possible level of prestige. After returning from Munich, Parker was appointed to successive positions as organist and choirmaster in various New York parishes: first in Brooklyn, next in Harlem (then a fashionable neighborhood), finally at the Church of the Holy Trinity, one of the city's most affluent congregations. In 1892 he was appointed by Dvořák to the distinguished faculty of the National Conservatory of Music.

In 1893, the year before Ives came to study with him, Parker produced (at the age of thirty) his magnum opus, the oratorio *Hora novissima*, set to verses from a famous sacred poem by the twelfth-century Benedictine abbot Bernard of Cluny. It made him famous. It was the first American work to be performed at

the august Three Choirs Festival in England, a performance that brought with it an honorary doctorate in music from the University of Cambridge. It secured for Parker not only his appointment as Battell Professor of the Theory of Music at Yale (beginning in 1894, Ives's freshman year), but also the organist-choirmaster's post at Boston's Trinity Church. When Ives met him, Horatio Parker was at the very zenith of American musical success. He had won high eminence and a comfortable, socially respectable position by doing the work that Ives had begun to do. He was a natural role model for his pupil.



fig. 5-2 Horatio Parker, Ives's composition teacher at Yale.

With Parker, Ives went through a thorough training that culminated in the writing of a traditional symphony (à la Dvorřák), now known as his First Symphony, as a graduation piece. All during his college years he maintained his Sunday church employment, now in New Haven, a larger town than Danbury. Upon leaving Yale in 1898, he continued to seek professional employment in the socially respectable domain of sacred music, finally securing the post of organist and choirmaster at New York's Central Presbyterian Church, a prominent place of worship with an affluent congregation, where Ives worked from 1900 to 1902.

This was a fairly high-prestige job; and it is clear that until his late twenties, Ives was aiming at a career in Horatio Parker's footsteps. The impression is more than confirmed by Ives's first important bid for public recognition as a composer: *The Celestial Country*, a cantata for soloists, chorus, and instrumental accompaniment, on which he embarked the year after graduating from Parker's class, and which he performed with his choir at Central Presbyterian Church on 18 April 1902—a performance to which critics were invited, and about which notices were published in the *Musical Courier*, the leading American professional periodical, and the *New York Times*, the country's newspaper of record. Ives proudly identified himself to the reporters as Parker's former pupil.

And not surprisingly, his debut work was modeled, in every dimension and particular, on Parker's *Hora novissima*. Even the text, a long hymn by Henry Alford (1810–71), the dean of Canterbury Cathedral, was chosen because Ives was under the mistaken impression that it was a translation of verses from the same poem by Bernard of Cluny on which his teacher had based his most successful work. The most unusual number in *The Celestial Country*—a quartet for the four soloists in a meter that alternated bars of with bars of (Ex. 5-1), singled out for admiring comment by Ives's early (posthumous) biographers after his later maximalist experiments had become legendary—turns out to have been the number most clearly derivative from Parker. The middle section of the bass aria in *Hora novissima* displays the same rhythmic quirk, made even more “radical” by the occasional interpolation of measures in meter (Ex. 5-2). (Ives copied the interpolations elsewhere in *The Celestial Country*.)

Alto 50 Più mosso
f risoluto

For - ward through the

des - ert, for - ward through the toil and fight,

Jor - dan flows be - fore us, Zi - on beams with

A

light.

3 3 3

V V V V

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a single treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. It begins with a single note, a half note G4, followed by a quarter rest. The word "light." is written below the staff. The middle and bottom staves are grouped by a brace on the left, indicating they are for the left hand. The middle staff is a treble clef staff, and the bottom staff is a bass clef staff. The music in the middle and bottom staves is in 3/4 time. The middle staff features a melodic line with three triplet markings, each consisting of a horizontal line with a '3' above it and a downward-pointing arrow. The bottom staff features a bass line with several chords, each marked with a 'V' above it. The key signature is one flat, and the time signature is 3/4.

ex. 5-1 Charles Ives, *The Celestial Country*, no. 3, mm. 50-57

A tempo giusto ma con espressione

Pa - tri - a splen-di-da, Ter - ra - que flo - ri-da,

Li - be - ra spi - nis, li - be - ra spi - nis,

Pa - tri - a splen - di-da

Dan - da fi - de - li-bus Est i - bi ci - vi-bus,

ex. 5-2 Horatio Parker, *Hora novissima*, no. 3, mm. 33-47

A distinctively harmonized descending chromatic scale, which recurs in *The Celestial Country* as a sort of leitmotif, also has a conspicuous counterpart in *Hora novissima* (Ex. 5-3). Perhaps significantly, however,

Ives's attempts at contrapuntal virtuosity (like the stretto between soprano and tenor at the beginning of Ex. 5-3a) fall considerably short of Parker's impressive feats of craft, like the canon by augmentation that crowns *Hora novissima's* first choral fugue (Ex. 5-4). It may have been the recognition that he had fallen short of his model that impelled Ives to take the unexpected step of resigning his post at Central Presbyterian a week after the performance and renouncing a professional career in music. Or it may have been the faint praise that his work received in the press, the *Times* reporting that it "has the elementary merit of being scholarly and well made" and the *Courier* that it "shows undoubted earnestness of study."

110

Glo - ry, Glo - ry hon - or, _____

Glo - ry, Glo - ry hon - or, _____

Glo - ry, Glo - ry hon - or,

Glo - ry, Glo - ry hon - or, _____

110

hon or, end less

hon or done, In to

hon or done, In to

hon or done, In to

hon or done, In to

115

115

ex. 5-3a Charles Ives, *The Celestial Country*, no. 7, mm. 107-115

Whatever the reasons, the 1902 performance *The Celestial Country* was the last public performance an Ives work would receive for more than twenty years. His Second Symphony, on which he worked concurrently with the cantata, and which is now regarded as his first really characteristic work, would not be played until 1951. The twenty years of his creative seclusion, moreover, were the very years during which Ives composed the amazing maximalist scores on which his legendary reputation now rests. That combination of circumstances has given rise to a great deal of interesting speculation about the meaning of his work and its relationship to his environment.

fff
 im - pro - ba pu - ni - at,
 Met - eb the pen - ance hard,
fff
 im - pro - ba pu -
 Met - eb the pen -
fff
 im - pro - ba pu
 Met - eb the pen
fff
 im - pro - ba
 Met - eb the
fff
 ni - at, u - tra - que jus - te,
 ance - hard, Each - giv - en just - ly,
p
 ni - at, jus - te,
 ance - hard, just - ly,
 pu - ni - at,
 pen - ance hard,
dim.
dim.
p
dim.
p
dim.
p

molto legato

ex. 5-3b Horatio Parker, *Hora novissima*, no. 1, mm. 138-146

Maestoso
ff

pars me - a, Rex
Most Might - y. most

ff

pars me - a, Rex
Most Might - y. most

ff

pars me - a, Rex
Most Might - y. most

ff

Maestoso

ff

me - us, in pro - pri - o De - us
Ho - ly, How great is the glo - ry

me - us, in pro - pri - o De - us
Ho - ly, How great is the glo - ry

me - us, in pro - pri - o De - us
Ho - ly, How great is the glo - ry

me - us, in pro - pri - o De - us
Ho - ly, How great is the glo - ry

ex. 5-4 Horatio Parker, *Hora novissima*, no. 4, mm. 128-134

Some of that speculation, inevitably, has been psychological. Ives's beloved father died suddenly during the first year of Ives's study with Parker, leading (in the opinion of the psychoanalyst Stuart Feder, who wrote a full-scale psychobiography of the composer called *Charles Ives, My Father's Song*) to a sorely ambivalent attitude toward the professional success Parker represented, and which his father never achieved. To succeed on Parker's "high art" terms, Feder argued, would now feel to Ives like a betrayal of his father, the "failed village bandmaster."

Ives's autobiographical *Memos*, dictated to a secretary in old age and posthumously published, are full of gushing, somewhat guilt-ridden praise for George Ives and grudging, somewhat sarcastic comment on Parker's teaching. Some of it, particularly the remark that "Parker was a bright man, a good technician but perfectly willing to be limited by what Rheinberger had taught him,"⁹ has led to the conjecture that Ives's rebellion had a nationalistic or patriotic basis. He withdrew from professional activity, according to some of his early biographers, because (like Glinka, with whom superficial parallels were easily drawn) he found no

support in the professional world of “art” music for genuinely indigenous art.

Feder made a different interpretation, a more convincing one. Ives, in his view, was in a double bind. “Even if the performance had been [more] successful in Parker’s terms,” he writes,

Ives would have viewed it as giving in—submitting to Parker and giving up an individuality which he valued and cultivated and had shared with his father. Equally important, success in music, especially the prospect of earning as comfortable a living as Parker did, would declare Charlie once and for all superior to George.¹⁰

Under these terms, success in music would have been as intolerable as failure. The only recourse was to “give up music” altogether. Yet there was a peculiarly American dimension to Ives’s dilemma after all, because, according to historians of the period, it was a dilemma that an American would have felt then much more acutely than a European. To Feder’s psychoanalytical interpretation we may add that of the social historian Frank R. Rossiter, who sees Ives as succumbing “to enormous pressures that his society and culture brought to bear upon him, pressures that insisted he be a ‘good American’ in his attitude toward music.”¹¹ These powerful pressures had to do with gender identification and role-playing. In Rossiter’s blunt assessment, the dominant American view during what historians now call the Progressive Era (or, less approvingly, the “gilded age”) was that “classical music was for sissies and women.”¹² It was no place for an American man, especially one with Ives’s family background.



fig. 5-3 Charles Ives in Battery Park, New York, ca. 1917.

The place for an American man was business, and it was there that Ives took refuge from his musical conflicts. Most of the men in his family were in business or in a “respectable profession” like law or medicine. One of them, a cousin of his father’s, was working as a medical examiner for the Mutual Insurance Company, and got Ives a job there as an actuary after college. Ives held on to this “day job” as a fallback during the years in which he was setting his sights on a musical career. Having given up that ambition, he made insurance his career, moving out into the field as a sales agent. In 1906, he and another Mutual agent named Julian Myrick started their own firm. Within a short time Ives & Myrick was the most successful insurance agency in the country. His sacrifice of the one career and success in the other has made of Ives a potent but ambiguous symbol. “Ives, from one point of view, chose integrity over compromise,” the American composer David Schiff has written, adding that “he also chose to become a millionaire rather than an artist.”

Notes:

(9) Charles E. Ives, *Memos*, ed. John Kirkpatrick (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 115–16.

(10) Stuart Feder, *Charles Ives: "My Father's Song"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 174.

(11) Frank R. Rossiter, "Charles Ives: Good American and Isolated Artist," in *An Ives Celebration*, eds. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Vivian Perlis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 16.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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