

THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN JAZZ ON MAURICE RAVEL

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Jazz music permeated many European styles of music after its popularization in America, especially affecting France during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Maurice Ravel and other avant-garde classical composers found deep newfound inspiration in these modern styles, not just in musical content, but in philosophy as well. Jazz affected Ravel's compositional output both before and after his travels to America, forming a unique musical perspective on syncopated and blues styles passed through various cultures across the Atlantic. His works towards the end of his life reveal an increasingly cosmopolitan style of writing, and assimilate multiple perspectives into a unifying, modern, and increasingly popular body of art music.

The strong influence of American jazz on French culture and music reveals a deeper social climate questioning many aspects of society in the post-World War I era. The genre disseminated in Paris during the late 1910s and early 1920s through frequent contact with American soldiers, creating a widespread exposure to African American musicians. Jazz challenged the traditional musical norms of French music, and was first promoted for entertainment and morale boosting.<sup>1</sup> Early French bands arranged old French chansons and dance tunes by ear, creating new syncopation in music of the traditional canon. Bands began to form, such as the Orchestre Symphonique du Palais Royal, Hot Boys Band, and Orchestra Sticklen, writing music in American style jazz idioms.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of the war, a rejection of past values and beliefs were expressed in French culture, with aesthetic preferences gravitating towards the modern and new. Lionel de la Laurience, president of the Société de Musicologie, wrote of jazz as “a collection of melodic dust, a puzzle of minute imitations, of audacious anticipations, of farcical *glissandos*, of deafening timbres or of pinching tones.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson H. Jeffrey. *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> André Schaeffner, *Le Jazz* (Paris: Editions Claude Aveline, 1926), 118.

These bold musical descriptions of unique and complex rhythmic, harmonic, structural, and timbral features underline the ongoing French attraction to foreign styles infused with the classical repertoire during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Classical composers began to break down barriers between popular and art music, as exemplified in Claude Debussy's cakewalks of the early 1900s and Igor Stravinsky's *Ragtime* (1919).<sup>4</sup> A nightclub was formed by Darius Milhaud in 1921 called *Le Bœuf sur le Toit*, and became a melting pot of artistic ideals for French musicians, artists, and writers of the time, often sharing jazz idioms with classically trained performers like Jean Wiéner.<sup>5</sup> Wiéner was a defining figure in the popularization of jazz music in France through world tours of his "Concerts Wiéner," introducing jazz and popular idioms throughout Europe. These concerts featured Billy Arnold's jazz band as well as avant-garde composition rooted in French tradition, one of which Ravel himself attended in 1921 and noted that "it was marvelous."<sup>6</sup> During this time, French musicians like Maurice Ravel wished to challenge old barriers of art, and found great inspiration through upbeat American jazz after a bitter war.

Ravel, with roots in Basque, Spanish, and French culture, came from a family of free-thinkers and of lower social standing.<sup>7</sup> His interest in jazz music became increasingly evident (after his early interactions with the genre in *Le Bœuf sur le Toit*) when studying with jazz trombonist Leo Vauchant, originally a classically trained cellist and coming from a similar background of Ravel. Beginning in 1924, Vauchant began to instruct Ravel on jazz concepts such as the flattened third and seventh and use of extended harmony in melodic improvisation over

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey, "Making Jazz French," 116.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>7</sup> John Check, "Perfection of the Life and Work the Case of Maurice Ravel," *Sewanee Review* 124, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 69, accessed September 25, 2016.

chords. Ravel “grasped this technique immediately,” and “found it [similar to] the music of George Gershwin, whom he admired greatly.”<sup>8</sup> His first overtly jazz-influenced composition, the second movement “Blues” to his *Violin Sonata* (1923-27), incorporates syncopation, ostinato, slides, pizzicato, and the blues scale in its musical effects. Wiéner, Vauchant, and the overall influence of this new jazz movement historically contributed to the unique character of Ravel’s sonata. Musically, the violin emulates strumming effects of the guitar and emphasizes slides and blue notes of the jazz players, accompanied by syncopated figures over a straight ostinato in the piano which emulate the rhythm section

(Ex. 1, 2).<sup>9</sup>

Example 1. Ravel, *Violin Sonata*, II. Blues, bar 1.



Example 2. Ravel, *Violin Sonata*, II. Blues, bar 12-13.

The opening pizzicato chords in the violin outline the traditional blues progression

using the tonic, subdominant, and dominant triads, however written a half step under (G major) the key of the accompaniment (Ab major). Creating dissonance and musical novelty from these offset harmonies typical of Ravel, he almost immediately switches the key the instruments are playing in. The violin, now in Ab, slides to the bluesy flatted seventh of the G major accompaniment. Ravel’s captivation with jazz is expressed in his direct incorporation of blues harmony, polytonality, and jazz-rhythm effects<sup>10</sup> with his original tendencies in classical

structure and experimentation with form. In an interview from “Musical America,” Ravel wrote:

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Meister, *Music Musique: French and American Piano Composition in the Jazz Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Ravel, *Violin Sonata No. 2* (Paris: Durand & Cie., 1927): 13.

<sup>10</sup> M. Robert Rogers, “Jazz Influence on French Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 1935): 64, accessed September 25, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/738965>.

“Jazz is a very rich and vital source of inspiration for modern composers and I am astonished that so few Americans are influenced by it.”<sup>11</sup> His performance tour in America and complex interactions with George Gershwin further solidify his interest in jazz.

In March of 1928, Ravel set on a tour of America, travelling in four months to 20 different cities, including New York, Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco, and Chicago. While promoting his own music to the American public, he was also introduced to the true New York jazz culture, visiting the Savoy Ballroom, Connie’s Inn, and the Cotton Club in Harlem, New York (with composers such as Duke Ellington).<sup>12</sup> He also attended a performance of George Gershwin’s new musical, *Funny Face*, and stated he was “enchanted” by the performance.<sup>13</sup> At a dinner party on March 7 at Eva Gauthier’s house, Gershwin performed his *Rhapsody in Blue* and shared conversation with Ravel, who was most impressed with “the facility with which George scaled the most formidable technical difficulties and his genius for weaving complicated rhythms and his great gift of melody.” During their meeting, Ravel also declined Gershwin’s request to study with him, expressing that his music would be a lackluster imitation and that Gershwin would “lose his great gift of melody and spontaneity.”<sup>14</sup> Ravel’s admiration and praise for the American composer reveals his preference for newer jazz idioms and virtuosity away from the traditional classical stage—an unusual respect between essentially separated composers of European art music and American popular music, speaking two different languages.

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<sup>11</sup> E.B. Hill, “Maurice Ravel,” *The Musical Quarterly* (Jan. 1927): 145.

<sup>12</sup> Louise Burton, “Fascinatin’ rhythm: When Ravel met Gershwin in Jazz Age New York,” *CSO Sounds & Stories*, May 26, 2015, accessed September 23, 2016, <http://csosoundsandstories.org/fascinatin-rhythm-when-ravel-met-gershwin-in-jazz-age-new-york/>.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 118.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

Soon after his visits to America, Ravel simultaneously began work on two piano concertos. The Concerto for Left Hand, written for Paul Wittgenstein, shows heavy influence of jazz in its rhythmic ostinato, polytonality, blues harmony, and instrumentation. On the concerto, Ravel wrote that it “contains a good many jazz effects, and the writing is not so light...a special feature is that after a first part in the traditional style, a sudden change occurs and the jazz music begins. Only later does it become evident that this jazz music is really built on the same theme as the opening part.”<sup>15</sup> This sudden change seems to begin at the Allegro in 6/8 time, with short bursts of modal planing and a regular percussive accompaniment that emphasize the ambiguity of major and minor tonality, a feature of jazz and the blues (Ex. 3). Later, the harmonic “blue” note of the flatted third (an Eb in the context of a C major accompaniment) is overtly emphasized by the bassoon (Ex. 4).<sup>16</sup>

Example 3. Ravel, *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, rehearsal 14.

Example 4. Ravel, *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, rehearsal 28.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (Yale University Press, 2011), 319.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Ravel, *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* (Paris: Durand & Cie., 1937): 11, 19.

After his experiences with jazz, Ravel's overall musical output revealed strong influences of complex and driving rhythmic figurations, and the emphasis of "blue" harmonies (flatted thirds and sevenths). Composers like George Gershwin popularized the African American jazz style throughout white audiences, building a national sense of legitimacy for serious classical composers to engage with the compositional elements of jazz through their personal voices. American jazz music permanently affected the musical culture of France in both popular music and the avant-garde, and created a fusion of styles and philosophies that continued to influence culture through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During a time of philosophical exploration after World War I, artists and musicians frequently sought out foreign inspiration for their works. Maurice Ravel openly accepted and molded these new ideas with old forms, representing a truly neoclassical composer of his time.

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