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'L'un fait oublier l'autre': Pierre Boulez and Maurice Ravel

MAURICE RAVEL occupies a large place in the discography of Pierre Boulez but in his writings only a small one. Indeed, in the three volumes of Boulez's collected writings Ravel appears only rarely. By contrast, Boulez wrote several great articles about Debussy, including a survey for the Fasquelle music encyclopaedia (1958), and the notes accompanying his first recordings of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1970) and some of the great orchestral pieces (1973). Yet when a four-LP set of major orchestral works by Ravel came out a few years later, the sleeve notes were written by other authors.

Even so, Ravel is not entirely absent from Boulez's writings. In the early 1990s he spoke quite extensively about the older composer to the Dutch musicologist Maarten Brandt.¹ Boulez was similarly voluble in a conversation with the English francophile Roger Nichols.² Another important source is *Un certain parcours*, the book accompanying two concerts which Boulez conducted in Paris in May 2010, consisting of pieces by various composers chosen by Boulez which mean a lot to him as a composer.³ Among the compositions programmed was the third movement from Ravel's piano cycle *Miroirs* (1905), 'Une barque sur l'océan', orchestrated by its composer in 1926. The final source I wish to discuss in this article is not a verbal commentary at all, but an orchestration, of Ravel's *Frontispice*.⁴

The conversations with Brandt and Nichols were not Boulez's idea at all but, apparently, when confronted with a competent and respectful interviewer who knows how to ask the right questions, he can be just as revealing, about himself and his subject, as in those texts on matters he initiated himself.

He told Maarten Brandt that he admired Ravel for his 'high conception of the métier', the supremacy of content over form, and an approach to form in which a classical form in the long run goes hand in hand with an unpredictable structure in the detail. (Boulez used similar words for the music of Alban Berg). Ravel had a 'modern vocabulary, certainly as far as harmony is concerned, although these in themselves modern ideas are always clothed in what I would call an academic structure'. Boulez especially likes the pieces Ravel wrote before 1920, in particular *Shéhérazade*, the String Quartet, *Miroirs*, *Gaspard de la nuit*, *Daphnis et Chloé*, *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, the Piano Trio and the Sonata for violin and cello.⁵

1. Maarten Brandt: *Wegen naar Boulez* (Kampen, 1995). The conversations were held in English in Paris and published in Dutch in the Netherlands. Unfortunately the English original was lost (information from Maarten Brandt to the author) and the extracts from the interview presented here have been translated by the author.

2. Nichols drew on this in his contribution to Deborah Mawer, ed.: *The Cambridge companion to Ravel* (Cambridge, 2000) and the revised edition of his Ravel biography (New Haven, 2011).

3. Pierre Boulez: *Un certain parcours* (Paris, 2010).

4. On loan from Universal Edition.

5. Brandt: *Wegen*, p.42

Boulez made comparable statements to Roger Nichols:

For me what is important is works like *Shéhérazade*, *Miroirs*, *Gaspard de la nuit* or *Ma mère l'oye*, where he has no restriction, with a certain spontaneity. After the War, the second period is, for me, much less attractive, although very attractive from the outside. He tends to be too much self-restricted, he doesn't want to go out of himself. After the Trio you don't find the same deep feeling as before, but more a kind of stylistic game, which is absolutely extraordinary. Only in the second song of *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* does he go back to something very genuine.⁶

These remarks, probably all made during the 1990s, testify to an ideological attitude without compromise. It doesn't surprise us that they come from a man who admires the post-tonal and pre-dodecaphonic Schoenberg, the pre-neoclassical Stravinsky, the post-1850 Wagner, and the Debussy of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* onwards, and who wrote 'Schoenberg est mort', which was actually an attack on Boulez's dogmatically inclined teacher René Leibowitz.⁷ It is equally unsurprising that Boulez limits himself to abstract ideas which he doesn't expand in detail, just as in his writings on Wagner, Debussy and the Second Viennese School,⁸ maybe because he wants to leave the full analysis to others, or maybe because he also wants to present the hidden and visible aspects of the music in his performances.⁹

These quotations also clarify to a certain extent his Ravel discography. His recordings of the piano concertos (both with Zimerman and Aimard, the Concerto for the left hand also with Entremont) exhibit a rigidity which resembles older French masters such as Bour (Wayenberg), Münch (Février) and Fournet (Doyen),¹⁰ but they also have a stiffness these older recordings lack. This stiffness, maybe the consequence of a certain lack of ideological affinity, perhaps explains why he never recorded Ravel's operas, although he did perform them in concert though not in the theatre. Judged from Boulez's point of view, *L'heure espagnole* comes too close to the conventions of opera buffa, in spite of its refined orchestral and harmonic furnishing; *L'enfant et les sortilèges* stands too close to the forms of the period in which it was created – actually more an ideological than a musical argument, but nevertheless for Boulez a very important one (and for us not a new one, since he had already used it in 1958 when stating his preference for *Wozzeck* over *Lulu*), which he repeated when defending his admiration for 'Une barque sur l'océan', being, in his words, not affected by actual circumstances. This stiffness is absent in both his recordings of such favourite Ravel pieces for orchestra as *Daphnis et Chloé*, *Ma mère l'oye* (the complete ballets), *Rapsodie espagnole* and the overture to *Shéhérazade*. In all these works, especially the first two, the unconventionality of the forms provokes his instinct for architecture. The more unpredictable the form, the more well-balanced his explosions are. The refinement in phrasing and sound can be both a goal in itself and made entirely subservient to the mastery of the structure.

6. Mawer: *Cambridge companion*, p.242.

7. When Charles Rosen gave his interpretation to Boulez, Boulez immediately agreed: Charles Rosen in conversation with the author, London, January 2007.

8. The big exception is of course his article 'Stravinsky demeure' about the rhythmic procedures in the opening section from *The rite of spring*.

9. Ed Spanjaard, one of the best conductors of Boulez's music, believes just as Boulez one gets to know a piece much better if you conduct it (in conversation with the author, September 2013).

10. Recordings by French pianists and non-French conductors are not included, but some of them, especially Blancard/Ansermet and Casadesus/Ormandy, confirm this approach.

The recent remarks by Boulez to musicologists about Ravel, more or less forced but nevertheless given, bring us to the question why Boulez waited so long before presenting his ideas about his predecessor. A first explanation might be that Boulez the young composer (that is, until the first version of *Pli selon pli*, before he started to conduct extensively) was primarily fascinated by the main ideas of Stravinsky, Webern and Debussy and by the question of how to present them in his own language and his often short and collage-like mosaic forms. For the development of 20th-century music, Boulez believed that Debussy was much more important than Ravel 'from a certain point of view, trying to get completely out of earlier formal frames, more inventive also in the rhythmical aspect'.¹¹ In a documentary, *All in one hand*, about Paul Wittgenstein, the pianist for whom Ravel wrote his Concerto for the left hand, Boulez (who is seen here rehearsing the concerto with Aimard) declared that Ravel was always on the search for something new, which might explain why, of all the music Ravel wrote after 1920, this composition pleases him the most. The strong classical element in Ravel's music can have hardly pleased the composer who was in his early years a declared enemy of classicism, let alone neoclassicism.

A second explanation might be that Boulez the later composer, influenced by Boulez the experienced conductor who often had to deal with long, sometimes very long pieces such as symphonies and operas, started to show more interest in big forms and how to organise them. Although *Pli selon pli* is Boulez's longest piece so far (about 70 minutes), it has a fundamentally different, quasi-fragmented form full of abrupt changes at all levels than later and shorter pieces such as *Répons*, *Dérive II* (especially the later versions), *sur Incises* and ... *explosante fixe* ..., which are, more clearly, conceived to fully exploit the basic material in which continuity of sound and sometimes also of rhythm is of prime importance and functions as a middle ground to the foreground contrasts and surprises.

This development as a composer explains his growing fascination for the music of Ravel, more for its essentials than for its surface. To Maarten Brandt he said about 'Le gibet', the central section of *Gaspard de la nuit*: '[Ravel's] use of harmony is truly very original, occasionally exceedingly complex, very rich and differentiated. In this case Ravel has, from the perspective of acoustics and resonance, developed the harmonic language even further than Debussy, and that means a lot.'¹²

Brandt saw at this point a clear similarity with Boulez's recent works. 'When I look at your most recent compositions, especially *Répons*, one of the striking features is your preference for long, unambiguous, very complex, colourful and refined harmonic "trajectories". Here I see a connection with Ravel's "Le gibet".' Boulez agreed: 'For me Ravel is without reserve one of the models, seen from this point of view. He was one of the French

11. Mawer: *Cambridge companion*, p.247.

12. Brandt: *Wegen*, p.42.

musicians, at least in those years, who had an enviably sharp sense for these matters. And for that I can only admire him endlessly.¹³

In the case of 'Le gibet' Boulez limited himself to admiration 'from a distance'. He never played the piece (at least not in public), didn't make an orchestral version of it and never discussed or performed the version made by his countryman Marius Constant, although he frequently conducted Ravel's orchestral versions of piano works such as 'Une barque sur l'océan', 'Alborado del gracioso', *Le tombeau de Couperin* and *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and recorded all these works twice. Apparently these appealed to Boulez the conductor more than Boulez the composer.

Boulez took a step further (not a requested statement, but one given at his own initiative) with 'Une barque sur l'océan.' *Un certain parcours* contains a written explanation from the composer (an oral one was presented for the channel Arte which recorded and presented both concerts on television). Boulez discovered the orchestration in the early 1970s, thought highly of it and immediately decided to conduct and record it. 'Son [Ravel's] habilité pour la transcription est étonnante, et il est difficile d'imaginer quand on entend ses pièces pour orchestre qu'elles sont écrites spécifiquement pour le piano: l'un fait oublier l'autre. Quant à la poétique des *Miroirs* dont fait partie "Une barque sur l'océan", on peut dire qu'elle relève de l'exception: formellement classique, le vocabulaire harmonique qu'elle utilise est rien moins de formel. Il ne donne pas l'impression, comme plus tard dans son évolution, de vouloir être 'actuel': il est lui-même, indépendamment de la circonstance.'¹⁴

This doesn't seem to me the entire answer. Already long before Boulez started his career as a conductor of symphony orchestras, Ravel was known and admired as a superb orchestrator. His remarks therefore must have a personal reason. In a verbal introduction to the orchestral version of his *Notations* (performed at a 1984 BBC Proms concert by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer), Boulez compared his approach to the orchestra with that of Debussy, especially in *Jeux*. For both composers orchestration is not merely giving sound to a texture that doesn't change (as he mentioned it then, 'simply a thing you do'), but creating new textures with new combinations of sounds (in the case of *Notations* based on the material from the *Notations* for piano, and in the case of Debussy's *Trois ballades de François Villon*, played at the same Proms concert and explicitly praised by Boulez for this very reason, based on the songs for voice and piano).

Seen from this perspective Debussy was, according to Boulez, a much more creative composer than Ravel. The latter nevertheless wrote for orchestra 'with great genius in finding the right colour, but he doesn't change the writing. He is very literal.' In this introductory speech, Boulez

13. *ibid.*, p.43.

14. *Un certain parcours*, p.40.

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mentioned only one exception to this rule: the final episode from Ravel's orchestration of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, 'only because Ravel wants a big sonority'. The second exception, not mentioned by Boulez in 1984, is 'Une barque sur l'océan', which might explain why Ravel, basically having another agenda, was not happy with the orchestral version and withdrew it after a single performance in 1926.¹⁵ The observation 'l'un fait oublier l'autre' is an apt description for the entire piece – not just an episode – and distinguishes it from almost all the other orchestrated piano pieces by Ravel, with the exception of a brief episode from 'Alborada del gracioso' in which (at bars 179–80) he replaces glissandi in the piano with new orchestral and melodic motives.

Can Boulez's admiration for 'Une barque sur l'océan' clearly be connected with his 1984 statement about orchestration? In the case of *Frontispice*, a brief piano piece by Ravel for three pianists, we don't have a written or verbal explanation, but we have Boulez's orchestration of the score (made a few years later), which is a much bigger proof of commitment, especially since it wasn't commissioned.

Ravel wrote the piece in 1919 and allowed it to be published in the same year, but he didn't give it any attention afterwards. His favourite pianists didn't promote it, with the exception of Jacques Février who recorded it with two friends in the early 1970s (while other music for more than one pianist, such as *Mo mère l'oye* and *Hobanero*, was played and recorded frequently). As far as I know the first recording after Février's was made in 1978 by three American pianists: Paul Jacobs, Teresa Sterne and Gilbert Kalish (LP Nonesuch H-71355). The sleeve notes by Roger Howat contain still the best description of the piece, even after more than 30 years: 'Ravel's *Frontispice* [...] consists of 15 bars in slow tempo. [...] Written after World War I, but before Ravel's better-known experiments with polytonality [...] *Frontispice* remains his most radical example of these experiments. [...] It is probable that the impetus behind *Frontispice* was the prelude to the first part of *Le socre du printemps*. The polyphony consists of six independent lines, each with its own tonal or modal identity, each with its own rhythmic scheme. For example, the piece starts out with a figure consisting of five eighth-notes, followed by a second line in 4/4 time, but in irregular phrase lengths.'

Boulez already knew this piece in the 1950s, since he programmed it in a Domaine Musical concert in March 1954 at which (most likely) Paul Jacobs was one of the three pianists;¹⁶ so the question has to be why Boulez orchestrated this piece so late in his career and why his fascination at this stage was so great that he even made two versions, one for ensemble in 1997 and one for orchestra in 2007.¹⁷ *Frontispice* is a very short piece for two pianos and three pianists. Two pianists play four motives, repeated with variations,

15. Nevertheless, the orchestration was published posthumously in 1950 by Eschig and recorded in 1957 and 1962 by André Cluytens. Boulez's discovery was therefore a discovery for himself and not for the world, although the orchestration was hardly played and discussed after Ravel's death.

16. This was the only performance of a piece by Ravel in the concerts of Domaine musical during Boulez's reign.

17. The manuscript of the orchestral version was his contribution to the *liber amicorum* for François Lesure: Joël-Marie Fauquet: *Musiques—signes—images: liber amicorum François Lesure* (Genève, 1988), p.23–32.

while the third pianist plays stylised bird imitations in bars 6–10. Only the second pianist plays chords (the top note in the chord is the fifth to the bass note). After the motives have given us the harmony in horizontal manner, bars 11–14 give them vertically with the intensity growing by presenting them fuller and louder, until the chord in the final bar.

Looking at Ravel's hidden principles which Boulez found interesting, *Frontispice* is very similar to 'Le giber'. It combines, to use his words, exceedingly complex harmonies with a form uniting a classical form in the long run with an unpredictable structure in the detail. The structural similarity between *Frontispice* and the opening section of *Le sacre du printemps* must certainly not have gone unnoticed by the author of 'Stravinsky demeure'.

This structure allows Boulez to intensify the independent lines through their changing orchestration, and to grow from relative transparency to solid intransigence.¹⁸ Boulez increases the intensity by several means: (1) repeating the same melodic motives with a different group of instrument. Motive 1 (the right hand of piano I) is first played by the clarinet, afterwards by wind instruments; (2) presenting several instruments in the same register in which they don't come off at their best. Motive 2 (the left hand of piano I) is divided between several instruments, including trombone, playing softly in its middle register. The exception is the bird-motive, first played by the piccolo, later in dialogue with the first violin; (3) combining a regular movement (here motive 4, the left hand from piano II, constantly played by the strings) with a repeated motive (motive 3, the right hand from piano II, divided over several brass instruments); and (4) using several instruments for the same motive, which increases the sense of fullness and intensity. In the chord and the appoggiatura in the final bar the un-transparency is not only presented through polytonality, but also through the instrumentation: celesta, vibraphone, harp and piano (a Boulez signature) but all playing in a middle or low register, while Boulez usually presents them in their best register.

Maybe, *Frontispice* was for Ravel a stylistic game, but it certainly wasn't for him an experiment without consequences. In it he said goodbye to the clear, classical structures of *Le tombeau de Couperin*. The dark harmonies of *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* have remained, but Ravel combines them in *Frontispice* with a new structure, complex because of its polyphony and growing ever denser through the varied repetitions of motives. The suggestions of atonality are not the results of chordal thinking, as in his music from the 1920s, but of polyphonic procedures. The lines in themselves are certainly not atonal. In his Duo for violin and cello transparency is mainly the result of only two instruments, and in his later works (especially the concertos) Ravel manages to combine polytonal harmony with the long phrases and predictable structures of the classical masters he admired.

18. The arrangement for ensemble is written for piccolo, flute in G, oboe, cor anglais, clarinet in B \flat , clarinet in A, bass clarinet in B \flat , two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, keyed glockenspiel (+ tamtam), celesta, vibraphone, marimba, tubular bells, harp, piano, three violins, two violas, two violoncelli, contrabass.

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Even if one describes it as 'a curious experiment' (Roberts) or as 'minor and somewhat atypical' (Orenstein),¹⁹ it has a clear and important place in Ravel's stylistic development.

Boulez certainly didn't describe *Frontispice* in terms of restriction, spontaneity, going out of himself and going to back to something very genuine, but its combination of dark harmonies, the invitation to use his favourite group of instruments in an uncommon way and the polyphonic structure resulting from the layering of different motives must certainly have appealed to him. Boulez hoped to give Ravel's piece a wider audience by orchestrating it. Although the orchestration has indeed been performed several times by different ensembles, its popularity is yet to come and a professional recording is still to be made, probably because it demands an ensemble both large and partly unconventional for a very short piece.²⁰ The arrangement has the sound and the sense of complexity and development of his later pieces, though in miniature form.

Fortunately, the reputation of both has started to improve. Recent literature on Ravel more and more deals with Ravel's hidden (real or presumed) emotional turmoil (for instance the writings of Mawer,²¹ Roberts²² and Puri²³), especially at the end of World War I when major changes took place in both his private life and his musical style. And the arrangement would, in terms of style and instrumentation, perfectly fit in a programme with Boulez's *Improvisations sur Mallarmé, Éclat, Dérive I and II*, Ravel's *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* and Stravinsky's *Deux poèmes de Balmont* and the *Trois poésies de la lyrique japonaise*, as partly happened in 2013 in Amherst (Buffalo) and hopefully will happen at concerts celebrating Boulez's 90th birthday in 2015.

19. Paul Roberts: *Reflections: the piano music of Maurice Ravel* (Milwaukee, 2012), p.121; A. Orenstein: *Ravel, man and musician* (New York, 1975), p.188. Roy Howat in his excellent and exhausting *The art of French piano music* (Yale, 2009) doesn't mention the piece.

20. Although Ravel is very precise in his tempo indication ($\text{♩} = 58$), the durations differ greatly: from one-and-a-half minutes (Février & co. and Jacobs & co., the right tempo) to more than two minutes (the Kontarsky brothers). Universal Edition gives Boulez's version as two minutes.

21. Deborah Mawer: *The ballets of Maurice Ravel* (Aldershot, 2006).

22. Roberts: *Reflections*.

23. Michael Puri: *Ravel the decadent* (Oxford, 2011).