Musical examples, bibliography, index.

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Michael James Puri has filled a lacuna in Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) scholarship, treating a composer whose music is easy to recognize but hard to explain. “Serious attempts to get to the heart of this music — how it works and what it means,” Puri explains, “have appeared all too seldom” (3). The title of the book perfectly summarizes its thesis: Ravel was heavily indebted to a French literary and cultural movement known as “Decadence,” which Puri writes with a capital D. Puri argues that understanding the themes of memory, sublimation, and desire in this literary movement leads to an understanding of the genius of Ravel.

Puri structured his book very clearly. His introduction discusses Decadence; Chapters 1, 2, and 3 explain Ravel’s approach to memory, sublimation, and desire; and Chapters 4, 5, and 6 carefully analyze several pieces of Ravel’s music to show the interplay of these themes. Finally, in his conclusion, Puri relates Ravel to one of the most famous poems of the Decadence movement, Mallarmé’s “L’après-midi d’un faune,” and Debussy’s musical interpretation of it. Puri brings to this book a close knowledge of Ravel’s music. He discusses each topic thoroughly, using numerous musical examples.

Puri begins his argument by sorting through many different interpretations of
Decadence, a word described by David Weir as “annoyingly resistant to definition.” Puri says that “Decadence” received its name from a sense of cultural and social decline in France after the country was defeated in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and suffered a “national trauma” (5). As a result many lost their religious faith and turned to individualism, indulgence, and melancholy. The Decadent movement began in the 1880s, when Ravel was growing up. Its main representatives included Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, J.-K. Huysmans, and Stéphane Mallarmé. Puri notes that this movement was a part of the fin-de-siècle in both senses of the term: chronologically it came at the end of the nineteenth century, and culturally it was characterized by pessimism, melancholy, and a kind of degeneracy.

Many historians portray the Decadent movement as disappearing quickly, lasting only from 1880 to 1886 (7). It might be hard to argue that a movement that ended when Ravel was eleven influenced his whole life, but Puri addresses this problem immediately. He argues that although Decadence as a cultural campaign lasted only a few years, it continued to grow as a literary movement and lasted at least until 1900. In fact, he says that some important authors like Marcel Proust and James Joyce continued to deal with Decadent themes even into the 1920s. In this regard Puri follows David Weir, who writes that “decadence as an aesthetic program extends well into the modernist period,” as seen in writers such as Proust. In addition to helping his argument, showing that Decadence still held sway in Ravel’s adulthood allows Puri to make use of Proust’s understanding of memory to interpret Ravel’s music. (Puri has expanded on this point in an additional article.) In fact Proust was a devotee of Ravel’s, and showing that a writer with Decadent interests felt a connection with Ravel’s music helps Puri’s case. Some readers might be suspicious that Puri had to stretch the definition of Decadence to cover so many different authors over fifty years in order to make his argument for Ravel as a Decadent artist. Nevertheless, Puri supports each step in the argument effectively, building on additional recent scholarship in the process.

Puri takes two approaches to arguing his case for the influence the Decadent movement had on Ravel: biographical and musicological. The biographical way is clear and direct, and Puri spends relatively little time on this part of the argument. Ravel himself wrote about how he was influenced by Decadence, and he incorporated some of the ideas and the works by authors associated with the movement into his


2 Ibid., 154.

compositions. For instance, in 1931 Ravel said that “his entire generation came of age” through a novel by the Decadent Huysman, and Ravel’s song “Sur l’herbe” is a setting of a poem by the Decadent Paul Verlaine. (11).

Most of the book takes the second, musicological approach. In an often dense and technical style, Puri analyzes a number of portions of Ravel’s music to reveal its Decadent characteristics. Regarding memory, Decadent writers viewed a world in “perennial decay,” moving between nostalgia, melancholy, and fantasy, where the past breaks into our present unpredictably. Puri sees this characteristic in two main dimensions of Ravel’s music. One is the way it often reaches back into the history of music for earlier musical phrases, harmonies, and styles. Another is what Puri calls Ravel’s “thematic cyclicism,” meaning that themes in one section or movement are recalled, sometimes hazily, in a later section or movement, or phrases in one measure are cited a few measures later, as if they were returning in memory.

Puri uses Ravel’s Sonatine as a central example. The name Sonatine and some of its structure and harmonies are classical. In fact, Ravel’s piece is sometimes regarded as neoclassical. Puri maintains, however, that Ravel not so much returns to the classical as nostalgically recalls it in this work. As for thematic cyclicism, the Sonatine demonstrates this technique when the melody in the right hand recurs a measure or two later in the left hand and the listener experiences the recurrence as an involuntary memory of what the musician played earlier. Also the finale obliquely recycles earlier themes and episodes. This example and several others effectively illustrate and strengthen Puri’s point.

Puri defines the next characteristic of Decadence, sublimation, as the “transmutation” of desire or another strong feeling “into something higher, purer, or more sublime,” and it therefore needs to be considered in connection with desire (84). There are several places in the ballet Daphnis et Chloë where erotic, violent, or crude passages are suddenly replaced by quieter, more thoughtful, or gentler music. For instance, after the two main characters gradually develop a strong desire for each other, Daphnis reveals sexual desire and jealousy in a “geste brusque” —agitated music and sharp dance movements --- that is then abruptly replaced by a waltz serenade. The music thus expresses first Daphnis’ desire, then the sublimation of his desire. In the finale “musical tropes of primal energy, massive movement, and sexual desire: chromatic surges, dynamic swells, and wavelike contours of various proportions” are juxtaposed with gentle idyllic music (179). Strong sudden contrasts of this kind are very familiar in Ravel’s music, and Puri is persuasive in interpreting them as a clash between eroticism and sublimation in a Decadent manner.

Here Puri reconnects the musicological discussion with his biography of Ravel, who was himself a model of sublimation. Puri considers how Ravel apparently lacked a sexual life. Indeed, Ravel has often been described as a “dandy,” a word sometimes
used in the Decadent movement for a person who strives to attain “uninterrupted sublimity,” or, as Baudelaire put it, someone who “lives and sleeps in front of a mirror” (100). Puri argues that Ravel had an eccentric, “dandyish” lifestyle and way of dressing that could be seen as part of his very successful sublimation of desire. In this respect Ravel was a kind of hero of Decadence, and his music can be seen as a reflection of his character.

In his last three chapters Puri brings together his three themes of memory, sublimation, and desire to show their value in interpreting Ravel’s important musical works. For instance, the finale of *Daphnis et Chloë* and *La Valse* display desire (in sensual sections), sublimation (in more tender sections), and memory (in the use of recycled themes and backward musical glances). In showing the reader how the three main themes of literary Decadence appear musically in these works, Puri is effective in supporting his case.

In his conclusion Puri analyzes Debussy’s *L’après-midi d’un faune*, which deserves a place in the book because Ravel thought it was “the pinnacle of modern French music and possibly of the Western classical-music tradition as a whole” (191). In fact Ravel transcribed the work for piano in 1910 and then years later drew from it in his “Pan’s Remembrance” from *Daphnis et Chloë*. Puri ends the book by arguing that Ravel’s *Boléro*, which seems to sound nothing like Debussy, is actually inspired by *L’après midi d’un faune*, as seen in *Boléro*’s sensuality, its sublimation, and its very recurrent theme. The point is at first surprising, but is enlightening through its identification of the similar spirit of the two pieces.

Puri acknowledges that the building blocks of his interpretation are not entirely new. Many writers have interpreted Ravel in relation to the themes of memory, sublimation, and desire, but they have used other words with very similar meanings such as introspection, aestheticism, and sensuality. Thus these themes “have been hiding in plain sight all along,” he says (8). Moreover, many others have noted that from a young age Ravel loved Decadent writers. Puri is the first, however, to argue that Decadence was the basic inspiration for Ravel’s entire work.

The book effectively demonstrates that Ravel’s music can be interpreted in the light of Decadence. It is less clear, however, that the influence of Decadence is the only likely source, or even the most likely source, for Ravel’s musical inspiration. To prove that Decadence was the only plausible source for Ravel’s techniques would require Puri to show that music without a Decadent background lacks these techniques. Earlier composers, however, did use techniques similar to those that Puri finds in Ravel. A

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Bach fugue also re-states and adapts motives every few measures. Tchaikovsky, too, recycled the same theme in all the movements of his Manfred Symphony and in his Symphony No. 5 in E minor. Puri suggests that Ravel may be unusual in bringing back themes in a way that feels like an “involuntary mode of memory,” but he does not explain how recycled themes in other composers are different (52). Does a reprised theme in Tchaikovsky, for example, seem more predictable or voluntary than one in Ravel? Similarly, abrupt changes between agitated loud music and tender quiet music happen in many Romantic compositions, and even in earlier music, such as Rameau’s ballets. What is different about Ravel’s music that requires a unique explanation?

Puri could also have strengthened his argument by relating it more closely to other interpretations of Ravel. He focuses so much on the literature that inspired Ravel that he overlooks some of the possible musical influences. For instance, Ravel himself identified André Gédalge, his teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, as the source of “the most precious elements of my technique,” and Barbara Kelly sees Gédalge as “a crucial link” between Ravel and “key aesthetic and musical priorities of the period.” Puri does not mention him. Similarly, there is more evidence than Puri acknowledges for the influence of neoclassical ideals on Ravel. Ravel’s first biographer, Alexis Roland-Emmanuel, described Ravel’s music as neoclassical and much-influenced by Rameau and Chabrier, and Theodor Adorno called Ravel the “last true representative” of the French classical-music tradition. Camille Saint-Saëns is another possible influence on Ravel. Nichols notes Mendelssohn’s influence; Ravel edited Mendelssohn’s piano works, in nine volumes, over a period of three years, and praised the Violin Concerto and Songs Without Words.

Puri’s focus on the sources for Ravel’s music risks underestimating the influence of the musical marketplace for which Ravel wrote. Deborah Mawer highlights Ravel’s love of technical virtuosity that thrilled his audiences, resulting in a freedom on his part to incorporate many different sources that would produce a strong effect, including the blues, ‘homage, national dances, ‘jazz’, musical machines, bells, and so on, which also

\[\text{Citation:} \ 5 \text{Zank, 86; Barbara L. Kelly, “Representing Ravel: Artificiality and the Aesthetic of Imposture,” in Peter Kaminsky, ed., Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 41—55, and 44.} \]

\[\text{Citation:} \ 6 \text{Kaminsky, 42, 45, 47; Michael J. Puri, “Adorno’s Ravel.” In Peter Kaminsky, ed., Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 63-82.} \]

\[\text{Citation:} \ 7 \text{See the discussion in Zank, 43-44.} \]

\[\text{Citation:} \ 8 \text{Roger Nichols, Ravel (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 180.} \]
cross generic boundaries.” Nichols, too, stresses that Ravel may have been oriented to
the artistic marketplace. Thus Daphnis et Chloë shows his “enthusiasm for composing
luxury objets d’art” for a commercial audience. Many interpreters note Ravel’s
“exoticism,” and while Puri recognizes this feature in Decadence, he does not discuss its
commercial appeal for audiences in a country that oversaw a global empire. As
postcolonial theorists point out, exoticism “constitutes its objects; it does not just depict
them.” From this point of view, Ravel was not simply developing the notion of
Decadence, he was also serving French imperialism.

To say that Puri has focused on the particular impact of literary Decadence on
Ravel and has less to say about musical influences and market influences is not a
criticism. Ravel was a complicated creative genius, and no single book could do him
justice. Pierre Boulez denied the possibility of any single interpretation of Ravel’s
music, especially since it developed and changed over Ravel’s lifetime. Puri succeeds
in demonstrating that Decadence has to be a part of our understanding of Ravel.
Because this study is focused and thorough, it demands a great deal from readers, and
to benefit from it fully, the reader will need to know Ravel’s music very well, have the
musicological sophistication to work with scores and advanced theory, and be familiar
with French cultural history. Ultimately, given its technical precision and thoroughness,
Ravel the Decadent is an enlightening study of high quality, and is likely to be the last
word on its subject for some time to come.

9 Deborah Mawer, “Musical objects and machines,” in Deborah Mawer, ed., The Cambridge

10 Nicholls, 148.

11 Kaminsky, 165, 172; Lloyd Whitesell, “Erotic ambiguity in Ravel’s music,” in Deborah Mawer, ed., Ravel Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 74-91, on 83; Robert Ortledge,

12 Matthew Head, “Musicology on Safari: Orientalism and the Spectre of Postcolonial Theory,” in

13 Roger Nichols, “Ravel and the twentieth century,” in Deborah Mawer, ed., The Cambridge
For further reading:


