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Stephen Zank, *Irony and Sound: The Music of Maurice Ravel*. Eastman Studies in Music. Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press and Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell and Brewer Limited, 2009. xii + 438 pp. Musical examples, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-58046-189-4

Review by Kelly Maynard, Grinnell College.

The opening scene of *Ravel*, a novel by Jean Echenoz published in 2006, places the enigmatic composer at his toilette in 1927, reflecting irritably upon the inconveniences of a slightly too-high tub and trimming his bath-softened fingernails with scissors from a delicate, lizard-skinned manicure case. Throughout the book, his decadent posture seems somehow to echo the obsessive aesthetic character of Huysmans' *Des Esseintes*. Indeed Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) was such a private person that the intimate details of his life may very well be treated best through fiction. Though the small museum dedicated to him at Montfort-l'Amaury, west of Paris, preserves the material goods surrounding his existence from 1921-1937, precious little is known about his emotional and intellectual life. In the extant historiography on Ravel, then, there is remarkable consensus about his inscrutable character and a consistent, sometimes deliberate elision between "man and musician."

For the philosopher and composer Theodor Adorno, Ravel was the "master of creating masks in sound," a figure who rejected the Romantic tradition of subjectivity in his compositions, sought nothing like originality in his works, and refused to begin from inwardness for inspiration.[1] Ravel's student and long-time confidante, Roland-Manuel, identified the composer as a technician who remained emotionally detached from his work and cultivated a deceptive public persona.[2] Vladimir Jankélévitch, another philosopher and musician who has been taken up recently among musicologists as a sort of antidote to the oppressive influence of Adorno, sounded much like the latter in characterizing Ravel as "watchfully elusive behind all [his] disguises." For Jankélévitch, however, Ravel feigned indifference heroically as a reaction against the shallow treatment most musicians received in the celebrity-driven, scandal-mongering press of the early twentieth century. Ravel's "disguises" were therefore a sign of profound personal integrity, and this quality made him a quintessentially *French* composer. Writing in the late 1930s, Jankélévitch lamented that the death of Ravel had signalled the death of innocence in France, though one suspects that he may have been referring also to developments well beyond classical music.[3]

By the 1960s, when atonality, electronic music, and *musique concrète* had become the central focus of academic study and the musico-historical record adjusted accordingly, Ravel had fallen to second-rate status among scholars. Rollo Myers, an expert on twentieth-century French music, maintained the early diagnosis of Ravel's objectivity and detachment but also highlighted his lack of innovation: "... in the hierarchy of the great creators the place of Maurice Ravel is not among the Titans." [4] And Arbie Orenstein of Queens College added regrettably that his achievements and influence were limited. [5] For these and other commentators, Ravel seemed somehow to have fallen short, especially in (perpetual) comparison with Debussy.

Stephen Zank, a student of Orenstein, has dedicated much of his career to the study of Ravel and his music, and his *Irony and Sound* is but the latest installment among several of his contributions to the field. Deliberately eschewing a life-and-works project, Zank concentrates here upon Ravel's style, seeking to explain the composer's "sturdy persistence" in musical circles since his death, despite scholarly disparagement of his influence and significance (p. 6). Irony, he claims, is one of the fundamental components of Ravel's compositional methods and has been overlooked in the extant literature. Understanding it may help explain Ravel's enduring popularity despite his second-class status.

Taking its title phrase, "Gentle Irony," from a 1907 review by the influential critic Louis Laloy, the first chapter ranges broadly through the reception of Ravel's works over a span of three decades, from the last years of the nineteenth century through to the composer's death and beyond. As Zank demonstrates, the term "ironic" could serve as an epithet, an admission of begrudging admiration, or an indicator of breathless enthusiasm when employed by French critics across the political spectrum or by reviewers across the globe. The term was apparently not used lightly and authors often pointed to Ravel's writerly influences and aspirations even as they acknowledged the conceptual problem of applying a literary idea to a piece of music. After all, Ravel was allied early in his career with the young musical and literary group, the *Apaches*, and the blossoming Symbolist movement of the 1890s. Several of his works drew from the texts of those writers or their heroes (including Verlaine, Mallarmé, Henri de Régnier, Léon-Paul Fargue, Tristan Klingsor, and Emile Verhaeren). In the course of this discussion, Zank reinforces the musico-literary overlap further by pointing to punctuation and its function in both genres, including the typographical signatures which had become increasingly popular among individuals as well as publishers (for example, at the *Mercur de France*). The assertion that Ravel would have developed his musical skills and style amidst such a rich aural and textual world brings Zank to his chapter's conclusion: "Irony *was* the punctuation of Ravel's musical thought" (p. 38, original emphasis).

So--what does music "punctuated with irony" *sound* like? How, precisely, would Ravel have achieved the musical irony with which he was associated? Since literary irony implies a deliberate action on the part of an author to manipulate his or her material, Zank settles on a definition of irony in music as a "meticulously designed unexpectedness" and traces its presence in Ravel's music in the subsequent chapters (p. 3). In chapters two, three, and four he organizes his analysis around standard compositional techniques: respectively, the use of dynamics (especially the crescendo), counterpoint (the ways in which two or more lines of music interact with and relate to each other), and registration (where a particular note or notes is placed within the total range of which its instrument or voice is capable of sounding).

That the crescendo was an important compositional technique for Ravel will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with his most popular work, *Bolero* (1928). Its relentless repetition and gradual agglomeration of instruments and color depend structurally upon a constant, extenuated crescendo. Rehearsals and performances are a technical and physical challenge for the poor snare drum player who must repeat exactly the same two-bar rhythm for roughly fifteen minutes and make each iteration just a bit louder than the last. But there are other, more complex uses of dynamics in Ravel's oeuvre, and Zank takes them up in chapter two, "Simple Sound: Ravel and 'Crescendo'." His analyses of the piano concerti (*Concerto for the Left Hand* [1930-1931], *Concerto in G Major* [1931]), reveal the ways in which dynamics play a crucial role in the structure of these works as well, employed in distinct and, yes, unexpected ways to signal to the listener a shift between sections. In the works composed under the influence of Symbolist aesthetics, Zank finds that, at the micro-level, Ravel inverts the usual placement of dynamics in relation to melodic line (for example, notes that move up in pitch but are marked with decrescendi). Whether structuring an entire work for full orchestra or shaping a three-note

phrase in a solo piano part, Ravel's manipulation of dynamics as a means of building irony into musical sound becomes clear through Zank's able analysis. Especially in the small-scale examples, it is difficult to imagine that even the most astute listener could have been aware of the tricks he has found, and he offers no evidence to show that this was the case. Reception, however, is not Zank's focus.

The meticulous care with which Ravel attended to dynamics is perhaps even more apparent in his treatment of counterpoint, a technique which became a stylistic hallmark throughout his career. Considered one of the fundamental building blocks of composition, counterpoint involves the rigorous application of strict rules in writing for multiple independent voices sounding at once. J.S. Bach is widely considered to be the most skilled of any contrapuntal practitioner. At the fin de siècle, students at the Paris Conservatoire were required to master the discipline in order to compete for the Prix de Rome, an honor which would fund an extended stay in Italy for the winner and guarantee a Parisian performance of one's work. Ravel found his niche in composition as a pupil at the Conservatoire and entered the Prix de Rome competition doggedly but unsuccessfully for four years in succession (1900-1903). By 1905, when he decided to have one last go at the Rome prize, he had begun to publish some of his most sophisticated compositions, including his string quartet, *Jeux d'eau*, and *Schéhérazade*. When it was announced that Ravel had been passed over for the final round, then, public opinion turned against the judges' perceived biases (all of the finalists were students of jury members), their conservative criteria, and a moribund curriculum at the Conservatoire more broadly. For many it seemed inconceivable that Ravel's first round exercise (in fugal writing, a subset of contrapuntal technique) could possibly have been inadequate, given his blossoming international reputation as a composer of considerable talent. Ultimately, the scandal coincided with the resignation of the Conservatoire's director, Théodore Dubois, and the installation of Gabriel Fauré in his place. Zank uses an analysis of one of Ravel's first-round fugues from the 1902 Prix de Rome competition as a point of entry into chapter three, "Opposed Sound: Ravel and Counterpoint." Moving beyond the Prix example to a broad range of Ravel's compositions, he demonstrates more commonplace uses, in themes, rhythm, harmony, modes, and tonality, as well as less familiar forms of counterpoint that inflected timbre or contributed to a musical program, narrative, or metaphor. In most cases, however, Zank leads us carefully through the technicalities to suggest that counterpoint, like dynamics, contributed to the unexpectedness and, therefore, the irony of Ravel's music.

Ravel was well-known for seeking out the most remote regions of sound in his writing for orchestral instruments, consulting frequently with professional performers to determine the limits of the possible. In chapter four, "Displaced Sound: Registration," Zank relies on a whole range of literature—orchestral, chamber, solo piano—to show Ravel not merely placing a *melodic* line in an unexpected or jarring range, but altering rhythm, harmony, and timbre to great effect. This could mean trading a rhythmic node across groups of instruments, displacing a leading tone and its resolution to separate and unusual ranges within the line of a single instrument, altering the harmonic function of a given set of notes by shifting them across multiple registers, or using instrumental groupings in unfamiliar registers to create unusual-sounding colors which confound the listener's expectations. In addition to his strong technical analysis in this chapter, Zank looks to the extra-musical for potential sources of Ravel's interest in "displacing" sound. He discusses Mallarmé's *Un coup de des* (1897) and its deliberate, groundbreaking use of graphic space for visual presentation as an analog and possible influence on Ravel's unusual registration. Perhaps even more tantalizing is the anecdote of Ravel's visit to the Pleyel piano company's showroom with his friend, the pianist Ricardo Viñes. There the two encountered the most recent manufacturing novelty: a piano with double keyboards in which one of the keyboards was laid out with the registers reversed (low notes to the right and high notes to the left). It was a remarkable technological feat, and one can certainly imagine how it might have

inspired a new way of thinking about the placement of sound. The story reminds us of the importance of material culture in the creative process.

Chapters five and six are titled and structured in the same fashion as their predecessors and attempt to address Ravel's use of the exotic and the influence of synaesthesia in his composition, respectively. However, Zank moves away from his own overall argument at this point and the meaning of these two categories for the creation of the unexpected in music becomes increasingly tenuous. Each topic merits deeper investigation, and both context and analysis suffer as a result. In the case of the exotic, for example, Zank breaks down the category into four somewhat fuzzy subheadings: oriental, bizarre, pittoresque, and a catch-all "others." Arguably, Ravel did indeed compose works which "plunder" the "exotic," including the *Chansons madécasses*, a commission setting the 1787 text written by De Parny. But the connections Zank draws between broad issues like late nineteenth-century racism or European colonial policy and specific examples like this are unclear, and his musical examples are thin on the ground.

As for his treatment of synaesthesia, Zank ranges over many of the usual suspects whose influence permeated artistic production in France by the fin de siècle—Wagner, Baudelaire, Poe—as well as the intellectual and aesthetic trends at work at the time, including a fascination with the occult and Scandinavian writers. Undoubtedly Ravel was aware of these rich veins of material, but Zank is less effective at showing their appearance in the compositions with any certainty. Here he relies primarily on *Gaspard de la nuit*, a brutally difficult work for solo keyboard, inspired by three poems by Aloysius Bertrand. His analysis is convincing as far as it goes, but again we have moved a long way from his overall argument about the presence of irony as Ravel's central stylistic mode. Both chapters seem almost to be addressing topics that counter his emphasis on irony, suggesting other lenses through which to view and interpret the oeuvre.

In his final chapter, Zank reviews the legacy of Ravel's reputation among fellow composers, reminding us of the occasional instances when his contemporaries were willing to acknowledge his significance publicly (Honegger, Poulenc, Prokofiev), as well as the more frequent cases when his work was dismissed by others (Stravinsky, Milhaud, Georges Auric), even as Ravel was consistently more generous in return. Beginning in the 1920s, a vein of criticism cropped up condemning the absence of any "school" of young composers following in his footsteps and blaming Ravel's idiosyncratic character—his "freakishness as an individual," to cite a critic of the time—for this damning lacuna (p. 275). The scholarly dismissal of his importance on these grounds stands at odds with his enduring popularity, and Zank concludes the chapter and the book with a reassertion of his thesis, now roundly supported. Ravel's works, investigated according to the categories of dynamics, registration, counterpoint, the exotic, and synaesthesia, demonstrate a "will to musical ambiguity" or a "strategy" of musical irony" (p. 281). This strategy suggests that Ravel merits greater scholarly attention than he has thus far enjoyed, and his enduring popularity outside of academic circles may be explained by it, though Zank ultimately does not try to prove this latter point.

The last thirty or forty years of musicological scholarship have done much to de-center a modernist, German-heavy, "high art" vs. "popular" reading of the historical record. This opening up of the field has allowed many new perspectives to enter the fray. One of the most fruitful threads has been a critical reassessment of French composers, their works, and their ability to write music which is both accessible and influential. Although he does not frame the book in these terms, Zank's attempt to reposition Ravel in the field fits squarely within this recent line of inquiry.

This is an accomplished, handsome, and thorough book. Zank is very comfortable ranging across the chronological breadth of Ravel's career. Though the composer's complete output is not that large, at least in comparison to the length of his career or to other composers' oeuvres, Zank has clearly mastered it fully, usually providing insightful musical examples in the course of each of his chapters. Score excerpts themselves are sprinkled generously throughout the text, supporting key points of his analysis. The book's visual presentation is very carefully thought out and pleasant to behold. The text's editing is generally good, though in the final few chapters the occasional run-on sentence, misspelling, and inconsistent date do distract from time to time. Finally, Zank provides exhaustive footnotes, which total over 100 pages to 282 pages of text.

On the other hand, there is a certain slippage in the logic of Zank's argument. He claims at the outset that there is neither historical nor contemporary scholarly consensus about Ravel's work, and that his concentration on irony will help to explain why the composer nevertheless remains popular. Yet his first chapter contains a veritable panoply of voices from the last roughly 120 years, all using the label of irony (or its cognates) to describe Ravel or his music or both. The very scope of Zank's examples in the first chapter suggests that there *is* agreement about Ravel's style among critics and scholars alike. What he does not ever really try to get at is how this particular characteristic explains lasting popularity. There is never any attempt to connect any critiques citing irony with the musical content of the works being reviewed. This is most obvious at the structural level of the book, where those many incidences of "irony" assigned to Ravel appear in chapter one and then Zank's analyses of compositional techniques are addressed only in subsequent chapters. Conclusive evidence of reception of this sort is usually very difficult to come by, but its absence might have been addressed head-on instead of being glossed over.

Furthermore, Zank seems uninterested in understanding the historical specificity of the various usages he has discovered. Occasionally he slips unsystematically into the role of the statistician, remarking on the number of times a reference to irony was made in the course of certain concert reviews without any reference to the author, the kind of paper in which the review was printed, or the political and cultural contexts in which the review was written. By the fin de siècle, the French periodical press had become so prodigious—with thousands of papers in existence and musical columns very commonplace within them—that it can be tempting for scholars to trawl through it indiscriminately and find references to any given subject or repeated uses of a term or phrase. It is much more difficult (and important) to examine each paper individually in order to understand its editors' and contributors' sympathies and positions, often worn on their collective sleeves, within the French cultural politics of the period.

Read against the grain, reviews of Ravel's music reveal as much about the perspectives and preoccupations of the critics themselves and the socio-cultural attitudes of their time as they may about the man or his music. What does irony *mean* in the highly politicized climate of official culture promulgated at the Paris Conservatoire? When used by journalists in Lyon in 1910? Or in Seattle in 1928? Surely a critic or reviewer intended something quite different when calling Ravel himself or his music "ironic" in the late 1890s as opposed to the mid-1920s. The twin ruptures of World War I and the death of Debussy in 1918, for example, meant that Ravel was forced to assume the mantle of France's most celebrated musical figure. The pressures to carry on that legacy for a badly wounded nation, to satisfy conflicting and shifting notions of just what French national music should be after 1918, surely would have altered the meaning of "irony," of unexpectedness, both for Ravel and for his critics. Several scholars including Kenneth Silver (1989, 2010), Debora Silverman (1989, 2000), Patricia Tilburg (2009), and Mary Louise Roberts (2002) have done excellent cross-disciplinary research recently to embed visual artists, writers, and performers *and* their works carefully within the appropriate political, social,

and cultural contexts during roughly the same period; similar treatment of Ravel would be welcome.

Finally, as some of the observations above suggest, Ravel is a figure ripe for investigation through the lens of cultural history. Though Zank takes great pains to separate Ravel's person from the music and concentrates on the latter, the composer's character and works remained inextricably linked in the minds and writings of most of his contemporaries and critics. One of the myriad of quotations peppering Zank's first chapter makes the case. Marguerite Babaïan, a singer with whom Ravel was working on his *Cinq mélodies populaire grecques* around 1905, wrote that "[Ravel] came to my house happy, spruced up, always with a bunch of red marigolds, and with that touch of gentle irony permeating all of his music" (p. 8). In other words, the Ravel who paused after his bath to fret about his manicure, the Ravel who created "masks of sound" and cultivated a deceptive exterior, the Ravel whose "freakish" individual character deterred any compositional acolytes, fits the profile of the dandy (p. 275). Roland-Manuel was explicit, describing Ravel as "the perfect type of Baudelairean dandy; elegantly frigid, with a horror of triviality and all effusions of feeling." [6] A generation later, Arbie Orenstein pointed out that Ravel was among the first Frenchmen to begin wearing pastel-colored shirts and he once taught a composition lesson dressed entirely in white. [7]

These are amusing anecdotes. But they also suggest that Ravel was cultivating a persona for public consumption, an activity explored in Jerrold Seigel's pathbreaking work on the figure of the bohemian in Paris in the later nineteenth century. Scott Goddard, editor of the English-language translation of Roland-Manuel's book on Ravel, picked up on this tendency in his introduction to the text: "One imagines [Ravel] perfecting a technique of living with as much application as he brought to his other technique, music. In both cases the processes were withheld from the gaze of the world." [8] Such deliberate performing of a self also brings to mind one of Ravel's contemporary composers, Erik Satie. In fact, from Roland-Manuel we learn that Ravel brought Satie's scores to his harmony class at the Conservatoire; that Ravel's father took him to meet Satie at the Nouvelles Athènes where he got advice and learned "devilment." [9] Jankélévitch saw this connection too, linking the two men's non-conformity and independence and suggesting that these characteristics were what made Ravel so elusive as a person and so disturbing. "Either Ravel is laughing at us," Jankélévitch wrote, "or else, like Satie, he is merely pretending to be indifferent." [10] It seems altogether possible that the same strategy that Zank has so ably demonstrated Ravel cultivating in his compositions, the very unexpectedness which made his *music* hard to know, is equally applicable to himself. Roger Shattuck's expert treatment of Satie in *The Banquet Years* connected the composer's enigmatic personality, his historical context, and the compositions themselves without trying to separate life and works. Until Ravel is taken up by another ambitious cultural historian, then, he remains an ambiguous and elusive figure. In the meantime, the shadowy fictional character whose death closes Jean Echenoz's novel will have to suffice: "He goes back to sleep, he dies ten days later, his body is clothed in black tails, white vest, wing collar, white bow tie, pale gloves, he leaves no will, no image on film, not a single recording of his voice." [11]

## NOTES

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, "Ravel" in Rolf Tiedemann, ed. and Wieland Hoban, trans. *Night Music: Essays on Music 1928-1962* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 94 (originally 1930).

[2] Alexis Roland-Manuel, *Ravel* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1938).

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- [3] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Ravel* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1939), p. 8.
- [4] Rollo H. Myers, *Ravel: Life and Works* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), p. 215.
- [5] Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975).
- [6] Roland-Manuel, *Ravel*, p. 35.
- [7] Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, p. 111.
- [8] Scott Goddard, "Introduction," in Alexis Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1947), p. 6.
- [9] Roland-Manuel, *Ravel*, p. 20.
- [10] Jankélévitch, *Ravel*, p. 148.
- [11] Jean Echenoz, *Ravel* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2006), pp. 123-124.

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