Study of Ravel’s Stylistic and Textual Characteristics through the Menuet from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

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ABSTRACT

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This paper will demonstrate how Ravel adopted the characteristic styles of the menuet in his menuet from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. This menuet form originated in the Baroque period. Ravel chose the menuet form because of its elegance and simplicity with obvious respect to its country of origin, France. To understand Ravel’s new compositional ideas and his re-creations through the Baroque style, I compare the dance of the menuet and his menuet in the fifth movement of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in 1917.

First, I introduce the background of the menuet, highlighting the dance and form. Secondly, I present the background of his menuet; as well as analyze its rhythm, form, and dynamics. Lastly, I describe Ravel’s life to find the reasons why he chose the Baroque style for his menuet.
The Dance of Menuet

Allemande, Bourree, Chaconne, Courante, Forlane, Gavotte, Gigue, Loure, Menuet, Musette, Passacaille, Passepied, Rigaudon, Sarabande, and Tambourin are French Baroque dances. Some of them are forgotten, and some of are still alive in the performances of the dancers today. The Menuet was a popular social dance in France from the seventeenth century until the French revolution in 1789. There are two ways to refer the same dance: “minuet” and “menuet.” “Minuet” is used widely in books, articles, and original scores. The origin of the word “menuet” is not clear. It may come from “menu,” which means slender or small in French. Ravel, a French composer chose the Baroque style, and used this “menuet” based on Baroque suites.

This returning to the Baroque period is called Neo-Classicism which refers simplicity, clearness, the symmetry of its phrases, its persistent rhythmic bass pattern, and pervasive use of modality. This paper is to study about the step and form of the menuet that influenced Ravel’s neo-classical composition style. This neo-classical influence is evident in his menuet in the fifth movement of Le Tombeau de Couperin. To prove how he adapted the menuet steps and forms into his own style, and why he used the Baroque style, I will research the characteristic step-unit patterns of the form of the menuet. Then, I will analyze his menuet from Le Tombeau de Couperin to find why he returned to the Baroque style in his own composition.

The historical record, Beauchamp-Feuillet notation, (a system of dance notation in 1700, was commissioned by Louis XIV, modified by Pierre Rameau in 1725) made spread of the menuet dance from France to Europe in the eighteenth century. Therefore, the specific steps and movements became available to upper class people in France. These steps and movements were used about sixty years in the Baroque period. Because of the Beauchamp-Feuillet publication, proper relationship between steps and accompanying music became possible.
Pierre Rameau modified the Beauchamp-Feuillet notation in 1725, after its publication in 1700. He recorded seating (how participants were supposed to sit in the hall), and dancing (when, how, and who would be performed). These performances are ritual occasions because they honor the Presence (the Presence refers as the highest ranking persons who sit at the top of the hall such as the king). To honor the Presence, one couple would dance the menuet while observers and the Presence would watched the dancer’s accomplishments. Dancers show their personal adornments by manner, dress, and the actual dance to society. On the other hand, the observers actively participate by judging the steps and gestures of the couple. After the dancers honor the Presence, they move along an imaginary letter Z (before 1700, this figure was a letter S for the Sun King, Louis XIV) with the steps in menuet. To show the climax of the dance, dancers give right hands, then left hands to each other, especially, the presentation both hands, then reverse Z. This reverse was for honoring the Presence. ¹

The publication of the Beauchamp-Feuillet notation made the menuet a popular influence to Baroque composers. In fact, many Baroque composers used the menuet in their compositions. For example, Johann Sebastian Bach used twenty-eight menuet dance rhythm in his compositions include his partita, suites, and chamber music. Henry Purcell’s menuets appear more than the other Baroque dances in his works. Because of the amount of compositions of menuet in Baroque period, following composers used the characteristic of menuet: triple meter, moderate tempo, and simple harmony.

Musicologists, Judith Cobau and Julia Sutton, say although there were many step-patterns by many dancing masters and regional tradition during the eighteenth century, the pas de menuet was the most common form of the simplest basic step-unit pattern. In the pas de menuet, the

characteristic steps are established in two-bars with six beats. Musicologist, Eric McKee says, “…in order to feel two bars of the minuet as one metrical unit, dancing masters often instructed their students to count in 6/4 rather than 3/4, despite the moderate tempo.” In the *pas de menuet* in six beats, there are four small steps. It includes individual steps, hops or springs, and four changes of weight such as “right foot-left foot-right foot-left foot.” Importantly, the bending knees was termed “sink,” and was for preparing the first downbeat with a “rise.” Thus, the rising motion with the entire body was on the downbeat of music. In other words, dancers begin to move with an accent on the first beat of the four step-unit within the six beats.

People danced the *menuet ordinaire* in the ballroom of palace. The *menuet ordinaire* features *figures*, which are combined step-units that form symmetrical floor patterns to honor the Presence. *Figures*, symmetrical floor patterns, include four to eight step-units with eight to sixteen bars of music (four-four dance steps make eight bars of music, eight-eight dance steps make sixteen bars of music). Thus, the traditional repeat sign in the musical score of the *menuet* is to adjust to the sixteen-bar *figures* dance patterns with the two bars step-unit of *pas de menuet*. Instead of the traditional method, dancers and composers sometimes enjoyed a cross-rhythm between dance and music. Ravel used repeated eight-bar musical strains in the opening of his *menuet* in the fifth movement of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. He adapted rhythmical characters based on the characteristic step-unit *pas de menuet* patterns, and used this repeated eight-bar strain to adjust to the *menuet ordinaire*, and employed the cross-rhythm between dance and music.

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3 Ibid, 236.
Musical Character in Ravel’s Menuet

Menuet from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Ravel’s rhythmical characters of interest in Neo-Classicism it found in the use of 3/4 two-bar hypermeter, appoggiatura, and persistent rhythmic bass patterns with pedal fifth in this dance form. Eric McKee says, “Bach employs a variety of techniques to project a two-bar hypermeter. In general terms, it is achieved by consistently placing some sort of phenomenal accent on the downbeats of every other bar. A phenomenal accent is any musical event that gives emphasis or stress to a moment in the musical flow (Lerdal and Jackendoff 1983, pp. 17-18).” Since Bach’s menuet has accents on the downbeats within two-bar hypermeter patterns in six beats such as ONE-two-three-FOUR-five-six, I found a similarity with 3/4 as the time-signature, appoggiatura in the bar 1 and 5, the accents in the bar 5 and 6 when analyzing Ravel’s menuet (see mm. 5-6, figure 1).

Figure 1. Maurice Ravel, *Menuet, V. Le Tombeau de Couperin*, mm. 1-6.

Also, Oliver Messiaen mentions the pedal fifth in both Rameau’s and Ravel’s musette (second part of menuet) as a similarity of compositional technique which refers as Ravel’s Neo-Classicism (see figure 2, and 3). This persistent rhythmic bass patterns with pedal fifth are seen

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5 Maurice Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (France: Durand, 1918).
6 Oliver Messiaen, *Analyses of the Piano Works of Maurice Ravel* (France: Durand, 2003), 100.
in both of their menuets.

Figure 2. Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Musette en Rondeau, Pieces de Clavessin avec Une Methode* 1724, mm. 1-8.

Figure 3. Maurice Ravel, *Menuet, V. Le Tombeau de Couperin*, mm. 33-40.

Traditional Form and Innovative Dynamics

Although Ravel’s music has innovative expression with modern harmony, the forms employ traditional Baroque menuet. The menuet in *Le Tombeau de Couperin* consistently uses sectional ternary form. There are three parts in the menuet that were influenced by this form. Ravel’s menuet consists First part (mm.1-32), Second part (mm. 33-72), Third part (mm.73-104), and Coda (mm.105-128). All the three parts are made of periods A, B, and C. Instead of using a trio in the traditional menuet form: menuet-trio-menuet, Ravel introduces the musette dance melody for the middle section: menuet-musette-menuet. In the first part, and the third part, both are menuet, he concludes in G Major. In the part two, musette, he uses D Minor.

In both of the first part (menuet) and the second part (musette), subtle contrasts in dynamics
such as pianissimo to mezzo piano, and piano to pianissimo, were applied. Even the soft
dynamics marking, Ravel says “play measures 9-12 with intensity in spite of the pianissimo
indication (Figure 4).” In the second part, musette in D Minor, Ravel employed the pedal fifth
from the Rameau’s musette, and created his own new style in dynamics by using persistent
rhythmic bass patterns with the pedal fifth. Fortissimo appears once after the three times repeat
of eight bars with continuous homophonic progression in the second part of the musette melody.
This is Ravel’s innovative expression by using dramatic tension with the repetitive melodic turns
(Figure 5). Especially, using fortissimo is likely Romantic style, and different from the Baroque
style. However, performers should to strive for a consistent tempo rather than use rubato in the
Romantic style. In fact, Vlado Perlmuter, Ravel’s student, says, “Ravel asked me to play the
musette in the same tempo as the menuet and give a lot of breadth to the following episode, mm.
73-81, part three.” Thus, Ravel employed some ideas of form from the Baroque period with his
own new style in dynamics.

Figure 4. Maurice Ravel, Menuet, V. Le Tombeau de Couperin, mm. 9-12.
Rhythm

In the menuet from Le Tombeau de Couperin, Ravel adapted rhythmical characters based on the characteristic step-unit pas de menuet patterns. To prove the danceable sense from pas de menuet in his menuet, I present rhythmic patterns such as tenuto, accent, and appoggiatura which link to steps and gestures of menuet dance. The steps and gestures in his menuet refers “four changes of weight” (right foot-left foot-right foot-left foot), “sink” (bending knees), and “rise” (rising entire body) motion.

In the first part, mm. 1-32, there are gentle accents with tenuto among many of the beat patterns when also use homophony. Three to seven simple harmonic notes together with tenuto, and accent articulations with appoggiaturas are most likely representation of gestures and elegant steps of menuet. In the opening, mm. 1-8 (Figure 6), there are clearly matched moments of emphasis as the composer uses tenuto signs:

mm.1-2 : ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR-five-six,

mm.3-4 : one-two-three-four-five-six,
mm.5-6 : ONE-two-three-FOUR-five-six,

mm.7-8 : and ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR-five-six.

Figure 6. Maurice Ravel, Menuet, V. Le Tombeau de Couperin, mm. 1-8.

This continuous four emphasized beats appear in the first and last six beats in the period A, mm.1-8. Since he used quarter notes and tenuto markings together most in these four continuous stressed beats, the small steps of the menuet dance are felt vertically. The last of the two bar phrases, which conclude with a cadence in B Major, seem to be a formal dance gesture. Such a gesture would be an appropriate greeting for nobility or the most important guests at the gathering. This conclusion in B Major comes at the end of eight-bar. Furthermore, Ravel uses repeat sign at the eight-bar strain, he composed this eight-eight bars period to adjust to the sixteen-bar dance pattern of figures of ordinaire. This combined step-units, figures is used to honor the Presence with forming symmetrical floor patterns.

By contrast, Ravel created a horizontal phrase structure by using less tenuto markings in the period B of the first part (Figure 7). By using less tenutos, there are less emphasis and stress to
the musical flow. Also, three bar phrases appear twice at the beginning of this period B as a symmetrical melodic phrases. These irregular phrases make a cross-rhythm between dance and music (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Maurice Ravel, Menuet, V. Le Tombeau de Couperin, mm. 9-14.

There are three types of tenuto in this period B of the first part. First, marked on down beats such as measure 10 and 13 (Figure 8). These tenutos are on the first beat of the second bar of three bar phrases such as one-two-three-FOUR-five-six-seven-eight-nine. Thus, these two tenutos are for emphasizing the swellings of three bar irregular phrases those make a cross-rhythm between dance and music. McKee mentions conflicts between the dance and the music, “In terms of the functional dance, the six-beat-long menuet step always begins on the upbeat with a “rise from a sink.” Thus, the last beat of every other bar would be felt, physically, as a pick-up into the downbeat of the next bar. This conflict between the dance and the music provides a sense of continuing motion across the phrase boundaries, which always begin at the downbeat.” 7 Thus, these three bar phrases in mm. 9-14 are employed by Ravel to give a sense of continuing motion between the dance and the music.

7 McKee, 254.
Secondly, tenuto marking on the third beat in three-bar phrase is used once at the measure 12 (one-two-THREE-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine). Dynamics marking in one beat range appear in this bar: crescendo on the second beat, and decrescendo on the third beat immediately (Figure 9: mm.12). Technically, it is impossible to make the dynamics within one beat on piano since the voices decay right after the moment of ringing the piano strings. Thus, this tenuto is the psychological intensive expression created by Ravel. In addition, this tenuto in the measure 12 gives a contrast between the two of three bar phrases those are almost repetitive phrases.

Thirdly, three continuous tenuto markings with homophony at the end of the period B (as same as the end of the period A), appears in the m.22. Since there are wider range of dynamics (both crescendo and decrescendo) among here (Figure 10: mm. 21-24.), the three continuous tenuto markings are for making expressive shape for this conclusive phrase. The three tenutos at the end of the period A is like simplest small step of \textit{pas de menuet}. The period B is more
disjunct steps, using six notes together in three octaves, and wide range dynamics.

Figure 10. Maurice Ravel, Menuet, V. Le Tombeau de Couperin, mm. 21 and 24.

There are two accent markings at the fifth beats of two-bar phrases of mm.17-20 (ONE-two-three-four-FIVE-six). These accents appear immediately repeated in two-bar phrase with ascending step wise motions as melody before the conclusive four bars phrase at the end of the period B.

Oliver Messiaen mentions Ravel’s craftmanship in his composition regarding these two bar phrases. “The second-fourth motif, E-D-A, in bars 19-20, is immediately repeated in contrary motion as B-C#-F# (rising).” The E-D-A is descending motif like “sink” (bending knees), the B-C#-F# is ascending like “rise” (rising body, spring on the downbeat) in the step of pas de menuet. In addition, the first beat of the “rise” note “B” for the B-C#-F# has accent in both hands part. Thus, the note “B” is one of the downbeat of pas de menuet within six beats step pattern. In the pas de menuet, dancers rise their entire bodies on the downbeat of music. Ravel adapted the menuet steps in both descending and ascending motive in bars 19-20 (Figure 11).

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8 Messiaen, 100.
Figure 11. Maurice Ravel, *Menuet*, V. *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, mm. 19 -21.

Background of menuet from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Oliver Messiaen analyzes how ritualistic and elegant the recapitulation (third part) of Ravel’s menuet: “…marrying the first theme and the musette, this time in major dress.” 9 *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a eulogy to Ravel’s friends who had died fighting in World War I. This offertory, menuet is dedicated to the memory of Jean Dreyfus, the son of Dreyfus who took care of Ravel during the war. Ravel chose the Baroque style for its elegance and clarity to show respect to his friends. During the years of World War I, he enlisted as a soldier, seven of his friends lost their lives in the war, and his mother died. Ravel expressed his sorrow in a letter that he sent to his old friend, Maurice Delage. He desperately wanted to stay with his poor mother who had been sick:

If you only knew how I suffer…Since this morning and without respite, the same horrible, cruel, idea…if I left my poor old mother, it would surely kill her… Yes, I am working (on the Trio) with the sure ness and lucidity of a madman. But as I work, something gnaws at me, and suddenly I find myself sobbing over my music! Naturally, when I come down and face my poor mother, I must appear

9 Ibid, 99.
quite calm and even amusing…but will I be able to keep it up? This has been going on for four days, since the tocsin. (Aug 4, 1914)  

In this letter to his friend, Ravel expressed his worry and anxiety toward his mother. However, the stylistic and textual characteristics in his menuet are entirely controlled emotions, not full of overt grieving. Thus, his deepest grief was translated into traditional Baroque forms which refers Neo-Classicism. Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt says, “Not that he was incapable of feeling emotion, but he resisted giving such sentiment expression except in his music.”  

This menuet is an elegant offertory. The cover page of Le Tombeau de Couperin also reveals that Ravel intended this work to be an offertory. An urn-shaped Baroque style vase with laurel leaves stands on the center of a pedestal, decorated solemnly with a flowing elegant drape. The Baroque style is present in both the music and this vase. The vase is decorated by laurel leaves same as appoggiatura in the menuet. Laurel leaves were crowned to the highest status in ancient Greece and Rome, and appoggiatura is musical ornaments.

   Stuckenschmidt was a freelance music writer. He wrote on Arnold Schoenberg, Boris Blacher, Ferruccio Busoni, and Maurice Ravel.
12 Maurice Ravel, Le Tombeau de Couperin (France: Durand, 1918), Cover Page.
Figure 12: Cover Page of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by Maurice Ravel
Conclusion

Ravel adapted the respected Baroque style in his menuet. He obviously showed its elegance of dance and simplicity of music by adapting use of 3/4, two-bar hypermeter, appoggiatura, and pedal fifth in this dance form, but also added complexity such as three-bar phrases in the charming menuet melodies. In contrast, he used dramatic dynamics in the nostalgic musette melodies. Both his menuet and musette are elegant, simple, and light.

The simplicity and elegance in rhythmical characters (using 3/4, six beats phrases, tenuto, accent, and appoggiatura) appear based on the traditional menuet steps in the six-beat. This six-beat step pattern always begins with a “rise from a sink.” Thus, tenutos appear frequently on the first beat in the six-beat patterns. The irregular phrase structure (three bars phrases) is the complexity that is employed by Ravel for contemporary approach to the dance and the music.

Ravel had the highest, most profound respect for the Baroque style. He dedicated this work with his deepest respects to his friends who had died fighting in World War I. Therefore, Ravel chose the Baroque style for its elegance and clarity to show respect to his friends. He embraced three dance movements, a forlane, a rigaudon, and his menuet along with his grief in order to create dance and music in the Baroque style. He also concealed his sadness into the vase. The many appoggiaturas sparkle in his menuet like jewels like the dancers who show their respects to the Presence in the way their dress. The various types of tenuto are carefully marked on the “rise” (the downbeat of *pas de menuet*) as if Ravel meant to give dancers a chance to make gentle steps in order to show off their personal adornments. Also, the Baroque style vase on the cover page is decorated by laurel leaves with respects as if he decorated his menuet by the appoggiaturas. He concealed his grief in the most beautiful and respected musical style he valued, the Baroque style.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


