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A lesson in orchestration, or a not entirely genuine dialogue between two famous composers

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In the catalogue of Maurice Ravel's compositions, we can find many symphonic works originally written for piano. Years later, the composer would successively arrange them for symphony orchestra with the intention of making their sound more attractive. His craftsmanship in dealing with a large orchestra meant that he became renowned as a master of orchestration. That status is confirmed if only by the fact that, of the many arrangements of Modest Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, it is Ravel's transcription that continues to be the most highly regarded by critics, and the most popular with performers.

Ravel's scores are a real treasure trove of knowledge about instrumentation and could easily be used as complete manuals, containing many valuable hints for composers. The more deeply I study Ravel's symphonic scores, the more convinced I become of the truth of this claim.

The present text represents a quite unusual methodological approach, since the discourse takes the form of a conversation between master and pupil. This method of presenting the sometimes complex issues of composition technique – rooted in Plato's dialogues and successfully employed in Baroque treatises (e.g.

Thoinot Arbeau's treatise on dance *Orchésographie*, from 1589, Johann Joseph Fux's essay on counterpoint *Gradus ad Parnassum*, from 1725) – may prove useful also today. A bipolar approach to identifying a composer's intentions (especially when – as in Ravel's case – he is also responsible for the instrumentation of his piano compositions) may be a more accessible way of showing which issues need attention when examining scores from the point of view of orchestration technique.

The situational context of the dialogue was created to make the form of the discussion more appealing. However, this fictional account has a degree of probability, since I chose George Gershwin as Ravel's interlocutor. It is a fact that these two composers met in person in 1928, during Ravel's American tour. We also know that a few months later, while in Europe, Gershwin – a self-taught musician who often emphasised his technical shortcomings – approached a number of renowned musicians asking for lessons in composition. Besides Igor Stravinsky and Alban Berg, they included Maurice Ravel. While all of them diplomatically turned him down, those encounters were not without influence on the development of Gershwin's musical language.

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8 March 1928. The New York residence of Eva Gauthier. A banquet to celebrate the fifty-third birthday of the famous French composer Maurice Ravel (R), just completing his first American tour. Among the invited guests is George Gershwin (G), a composer of popular musicals who, after the dazzling success of his Rhapsody in Blue in 1924, became one of the precursors of the American school of composition (see Photograph 1).

R: Mister Gershwin! How nice that you found the time to come to my party. I've heard so much praise about your *Rhapsody in Blue*, and from the moment I arrived in the States I very much wanted to meet its composer.

G: But Maestro! My modest improvisation cannot compete with your *Daphnis*. I've always dreamt that, beyond Broadway hits that will last a season or two, I might write something substantial, like a symphonic poem or an opera – something that would allow my music to exist in concert halls. Your music, so subtle and sophisticated, so perfectly instrumented, is for me an unattainable ideal.

R: You should definitely rid yourself of any complexes. After all, your reputation is already established and you don't have to change direction and compose concert music. In my opinion, that could only be harmful. By following European models, you will lose the original, individual aspect of your music.



Photograph 1. Standing left to right: Oscar Fried (conductor), Eva Gauthier (singer), Manoah Leide-Tedesco (composer, conductor), George Gershwin; at the piano: Maurice Ravel, © PUBLIC DOMAIN

G: Thank you for those encouraging words. However, I would like to compose at least one weightier work. I already have a few ideas for a symphonic poem, and I'm grateful for this opportunity to ask you for a little guidance.

R: Why would you want to be a second-rate Ravel when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?

G: I'm a self-taught musician, and still today I'm conscious of the gaps in my education. I had to entrust the orchestration of *Rhapsody in Blue* to a colleague (*Ferde Grofé*) who has experience in arranging compositions for jazz ensembles. In the future, however, I would like to avoid such situations, and that is why I want to expand my knowledge, so that I can fully control all the aspects of my compositions.

R: In that case, I cannot refuse a favour to a colleague, and I'll try to share my own experiences. If you like, we could even start now...

G: What do you mean...? What about the banquet?

R: Oh, I'm really sick of these formal parties, toasts, hand-shaking and

courteous gestures. Let's go to the library in the west wing, where nobody will disturb us.

(They move to the library, and sit down in comfortable leather armchairs next to a small Pleyel piano)

R: Well, dear colleague, what kind of guidance do you expect from me?

G: I think it would be good to base it on a specific example. How would you feel about a joint instrumentation of *Alborada del gracioso*?

R: It's interesting that you should choose a work that I myself intend to arrange for orchestra (*in fact, Ravel orchestrated Alborada del gracioso in 1918*). On the shelf there should be a copy of the *Miroirs* suite that I gave to Miss Gauthier, and there are some sheets of manuscript paper on the piano.

G: If you'll allow me, I'll play the opening section on the piano. Although I already know this work quite well, I'd like to get a fresh look at it before starting an orchestration.

Gershwin plays Ravel's Alborada del gracioso. One should add here that, as an experienced 'song plugger' at the Jerome H. Remick publishing company on Tin Pan Alley, he was excellent at sight reading (see Example 1).

Example 1. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bars 1–4 (piano version), 



R: The first few bars are only a musical prelude, establishing the key and the rhythmic pattern of the accompaniment, and it also suggests the dance character of the composition. So I think the way we instrument it may affect the overall sound of the work. To which section would you assign this fragment?

G: It seems to me that both strings and winds would do equally well here. Perhaps it might be a good idea to use muted saxophones and trumpets with a subtle accompaniment of marimba, maracas and claves?

R: I see that you are not at all familiar with the European music tradition. The set of instruments you suggest might be appropriate perhaps if we were writing a piece based on Latin tunes (a Cuban overture, let's say). My *Alborada* is intended to be a stylisation of Spanish music, so we should look for sounds character-

istic of the music of that region. I wanted the texture of the accompaniment with arpeggiated chords to imitate the sound of the guitar, and you have to know that this is the basic instrument of the flamenco style, the musical emblem of Iberian folklore. What do you think, which orchestral instruments would be most effective in imitating the sound of the guitar?

G: The harp? Or perhaps *pizzicato* strings? I once heard Claude Debussy's *Iberia*, and it seems that in the last section he used precisely that effect to imitate the sound of a guitar.



R: Precisely. We'd best use both. Only we have to make the bass line sufficiently strong, since it is most important here. It would also be a good thing to emphasise the accented chord in the middle of the bar. I suggest we triple the root of the chord in the second violins, using the sound of the open D string. In that way we'll achieve the required arpeggio effect. (see Example 2)

Example 2. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bars 1–2 (orchestral version), 

R: Let's now move on to the sixth bar. I wonder how you'll cope with the triplet in the part of the right hand? (see Example 3)

G: I think we could keep the initial *pizzicato* texture, imitating the sound of a guitar, but the triplet will sound better *arco*. (see Example 4)

R: Not bad, but there's a hidden trap here. Octave shifts sound very good on the piano, but transferring them literally to the orchestral apparatus means that we lose the hidden melodic motif. Look at the twelfth bar, where the main theme appears... (see Example 5)

Example 3. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bars 1–2 (orchestral version), Example 4. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 6 (suggested orchestration), 

Example 5. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 12 (piano version), 


I think this may show how to draw this motif out of the somewhat confused tangle of chords. Anyway, listen again to this passage, played at the right tempo. The melody emerges very clearly.

And since it would be worthwhile maintaining the cohesion to the sound of this section, we can retain the *pizzicato* in the strings, cumulating the sound ma-

terial of the triplet into the form of one chord, and assigning that melodic motif to the harp and one of the woodwind instruments.

G: Which particular instrument do you have in mind? Oboe perhaps..., or clarinet? The flute would perhaps sound too delicate. It's difficult to generate a *forte* dynamic on it in the lowest register.

R: While the one-line octave register is more appropriate for the clarinet or oboe, I would suggest using... the bassoon. Its very characteristic, 'glassy' sound at the high end of the scale is in fashion at the moment. Stravinsky used it in *The Rite of Spring* and *The Soldier's Tale*, and I intend to entrust to the bassoon the high melody in *Bolero* – the symphonic piece on which I'm working at the moment. (*Bolero*, with Ida Rubinstein, had its stage premiere on 22 November 1928 at the Paris Opera; see Example 6)

Example 6. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 6 (orchestral version), 



The musical score for Example 6, Maurice Ravel's *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 6 (orchestral version), is presented in a multi-staff format. The staves are labeled on the left: 2 Fg. (Flutes), Arpa 1, 2 (Harp), Vni I (Violin I), Vni II (Violin II), Vle (Viola), and Vc (Violoncello). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 6/8. The music is marked with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The flute and harp parts feature a triplet of eighth notes. The violin and viola parts are marked with a pizzicato (*pizz.*) instruction. The score includes various musical notations such as beams, slurs, and dynamic markings.

G: Excellent. And what about the passage in bar 11 that prepares the entrance of the theme? (see Example 7)

Example 7. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 11 (piano version), © PUBLIC DOMAIN

Couldn't it be given to the violins? Like this, for instance? (see Example 8)

Example 8. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 11 (suggested orchestration), © PUBLIC DOMAIN


R: Yes indeed. As a rule such figures are assigned to strings, woodwind, harp or a combination of these sections. But I definitely prefer configurations with harp. The simplest solution would be to give this arpeggio to the harp, precisely replicating the original arrangement of the components, but we'll achieve a much better effect using *glissando*.

G: Well, yes. But as we know, in order to perform *glissando* on the harp, we need to tune all seven sets of strings, and in this case we only have four notes to score: D, A, E \flat and B \flat . So what should we do with the C \flat , F \flat and G \flat strings?

R: If we assume that this sequence is a combination of incomplete forms of the D major tonic chord with an E flat major chord on the diminished second degree of the scale, then we can successfully complete this chord with a tonic third and tune the F \flat and G \flat strings to F \sharp . By the way, this quite interesting combination arose on the basis of the Phrygian cadence, typical for most stylisations of Spanish music.

G: In that case we still have the unscored C \flat string.

R: Best to tune it to C \sharp , which seems to be the most neutral of the available sevenths and at the same time leads directly to the note D, which ends the *glissando* and begins the main theme in bar 12. (see Example 9)

Example 9. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 11 (orchestral version),  PUBLIC DOMAIN

G: I think that the presentation of the main theme (*from bar 12*) could be initiated by the oboe against the background of our ‘guitar’, that is, the strings and the harp. Quite recently I heard a similar solution in Bizet’s *Carmen*. (*the most recent performance at the Metropolitan Opera House that Gershwin might have seen took place on 13 February 1928*)

R: That’s a very good idea. However, I would suggest making the texture slightly denser in the first two bars in order to indicate the entry of the main melodic line. You can do it quite easily using a chordal accompaniment with

a ‘thrown’ (*jeté*) bow, tried and tested in stylisations of this type, based in this case on the triplet rhythmic pattern of the oboe’s melody.

G: But how to notate such a ‘thrown’ bow?

R: It’ll be enough to slur fast *staccatos* on a single note.

G: I should be able to cope until the 30th bar using the guidance you’ve given me so far. But I may have a problem in bar 31, where the first *tutti* begins. (see *Example 10*)

Example 10. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 31 (piano version), 



R: In order to keep within the convention adopted for works of a similar character, I suggest that the *tutti* should be arranged as follows: we get the horns and trumpets to play chords based on a repeated rhythm, following the rhythmic framework of the melody, while the main motif, familiar from the sixth bar, will be played by woodwind instruments, as well as violins and violas. For the bass line, we’ll use the lowest instruments from different sections of the orchestra: double bassoon, tuba and timpani, as well as cellos and double basses. In addition, we’ll emphasise the triplet rhythm by using a drum roll, the bass line by striking the bass drum, and the syncopated chords with the sound of two harps, cymbals, triangle and Basque drum. In this case, it is necessary to use a second harp; not so much to intensify the sound as to facilitate the realisation of the last chord, which demands the simultaneous retuning of two sets of strings. (*C_b to C and G_b to G, see Example 11*)

G: Don’t you think that by using so many percussion instruments at once we might overload the sound a little?

R: After the first performance of the *Spanish Rhapsody*, I was accused of being flashy and of saturating the score with the ‘sugary icing’ of percussion timbres. But I don’t take it too much to heart, since the success of the *Rhapsody* in America convinced me that audiences like this kind of orchestration very much. I’m not one of those composers for whom stage success is the main motivation, but I’d be lying if I claime to be worried by the popularity of my works.

Example 11. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 31 (orchestral version, simplified notation), © PUBLIC DOMAIN

fl. picc.
ob, cl, vni I
cor. ing., vni II
fg, vle
ff

cor. I-IV
ff

fl I-II
trb I-III
ff

arpa I
arpa II
ff

trg
ff

tmb. basque
ff

tmb. milit.
ff

ptti
ff

G. C.
ff


vc
cfb, tmb, cb
ff

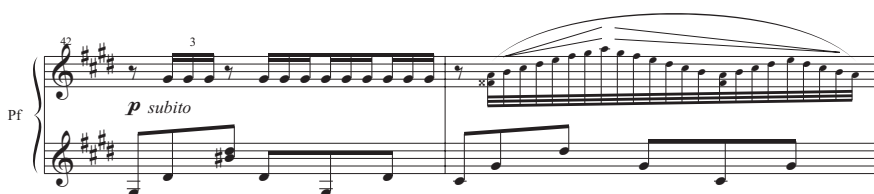
G: But in *Le tombeau de Couperin* you did make the score more chamber-like, avoiding – please forgive me – such cheap tricks, yet the work did not sound any less attractive for that.

R: It's true that in my most recent symphonic compositions I limited the palette of instrumental timbres, but we should remember that I wrote *Alborada* at a time when Chabrier's *España*, Lalo's *Spanish Symphony*, Ibert's *Escales* and the suite from Bizet's opera *Carmen* were achieving enormous success in concert halls. Anyway, let's listen to a few excerpts from those compositions, and I'm sure you'll then see what stylistic convention I have in mind. Please turn on Miss Gauthier's gramophone, and in the meantime I'll find the records.

G: It's true, when I criticised your suggestion, I didn't have sufficient understanding of works of this type. I think our *tutti* from *Alborada* arranged as you suggest will sound quite similar.

R: Let's now move on to bar 43. Together with the change of key, I introduced here the characteristic repetitions on G#. (see Example 12)

Example 12. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bars 43–44 (piano version), 



G: These could be assigned to the flutes, which perform triple *staccato* very efficiently.

R: That's true, but if we look at this section in a wider context, it turns out that in bars 47 and 48 we must, based on that figure, *crescendo* to *forte* and maintain such strong dynamics through the next two bars. As we know, the flute in the lowest register is incapable of fulfilling that task in such a way that the line of accompaniment doesn't dominate its part. So we can keep the delicate sound of the flute for performing those repetitions in bars 52–57, when the *piano* dynamic returns for a longer time. On the other hand, in bar 42, a muted trumpet will sound original; as a representative of the brass family, it has much greater possibilities in terms of differentiating the dynamics. I already used a similar effect in my orchestration of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* to illustrate the character of the poor Jew Schmuyle.

G: When working with musicians from Whiteman's orchestra, I also had an opportunity to learn about the extraordinary possibilities of the trumpet when repeating sounds quickly. In the accompaniment layer, I suppose we'll return to the guitar *staccato* of the strings?

R: Of course! And who will be entrusted with the scale passages?

G: Well, knowing what your preferences are, I'd bet on the harp in conjunction with the flute. However, I'm afraid that in view of the cadential character of this scale it won't be possible to synchronise those two parts rhythmically.

R: There is a simple solution to this problem. It will be sufficient to shorten the quaver rest and in that way fix the course of this section on the accented parts of the bar. This minor alteration won't disturb its reception in any way,

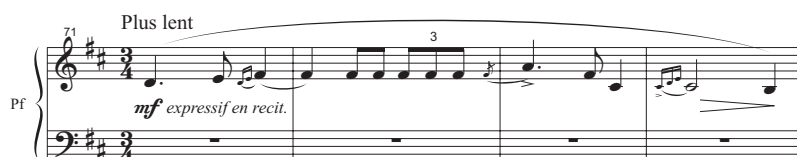
and it will definitely make it easier for the performers to find points of contact. (see *Example 13*)

Example 13. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bar 44 (comparison of piano version and its implementation in the parts of flute and harp), 



G: I think that, armed with your valuable instructions, I'll manage to orchestrate the outer sections of *Alborada*. However, I'd still have some doubts as to the middle part. Based on what we talked about to start with, I have reason to believe that you'd tend to assign the solo recitative to the bassoon. But I have to admit that I'd be more in favour of cor anglais. (see *Example 14*)

Example 14. Maurice Ravel, *Alborada del gracioso*, bars 71–74 (piano version), 



R: That's right. The dark, nasal sound of the cor anglais would be most desirable at this point, in view of both the character of the melody and the register. However, in situations where conventional instrumentations suggest themselves too plainly, I look for alternative solutions. To my mind this is the only creative approach when instrumenting completed piano compositions. For example, when

arranging Musorgsky's 'The Old Castle', at the last moment I decided to replace the bassoon solo with a saxophone, thereby going beyond the standards established by earlier orchestrators of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, including Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, whom I regard very highly for his *Scheherazade* and *Capriccio espagnol*. Guess which of the arrangements of the *Pictures* is the one most often performed today?

G: I'll try to bear that in mind when composing my symphonic poem.

R: Well, I'd say we've had enough of struggling with sound material for today. I shall follow with interest the development of your career (which has begun so promisingly). I heard you're going to Europe in a few months. Please visit me when you're in Paris. Perhaps we may have another opportunity to discuss the nuances of composition technique. I could also learn a great deal from you. In the not-too-distant future, I intend to write a piano concerto, in which I would like to use some of your textural and harmonic 'patents'. I've come to be very interested in jazz music in all its manifestations, and I've already made use of it in my works, although perhaps not on the same scale as you did in your *Rhapsody*. I think jazz is an American 'invention' and as such may 'fuel' the works of native composers seeking their identity and wishing to free themselves from the influence of Europe. I myself, with my roots in the culture of the Old Continent, seek similar inspirations in the folklore of European nations, although I always – and I earnestly advise you to do so too – try to retain my individual style of musical expression, regardless of whether I'm working on a Viennese waltz, a Spanish habanera, the fiddle virtuosity of a wandering Gypsy or even cabaret songs in a Boston rhythm.

Now let's get back to the party! We've earned a small aperitif, and Miss Gauthier will certainly have noticed our absence and be anxious about her 'guests of honour'.

ABSTRACT

This article is a rather unusual methodological proposal, because the discourse takes the form of a free conversation between master and pupil. This method of presenting the sometimes complex issues of composition technique – rooted in Plato's dialogues and successfully employed in Baroque treatises – may prove useful also today. A bipolar approach to identifying a composer's intentions (especially when – as in Ravel's case – he is also responsible for the instrumentation of his piano compositions) may be a more accessible way of showing which issues need attention when examining scores from the point of view of orchestration technique. The comparative analysis deals with the piano and orchestral versions of Maurice Ravel's *Alborada del gracioso*. The situational context of the dialogue was created to make the form of the discussion more appealing.

KEYWORDS: instrumentation, orchestration technique, texture, methodology