Chapter Three

Adorno’s Ravel

Michael J. Puri

It is not surprising that philosopher, sociologist, cultural critic, and musicologist Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69), steeped in the Western European art of his era, should have written about Maurice Ravel and his music. What is surprising, is the insightfulness of this writing, given Adorno’s well-known devotion to the Austro-German repertory, a tradition with markedly different aesthetic priorities. It is not difficult to imagine reasons for these valuable texts having been overlooked for so long. For Adornians, they would likely have seemed insignificant and ephemeral when set alongside his voluminous writings on Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, and others. For Ravelians, Adorno’s cultural credentials would immediately disqualify his writings on the French composer from being taken as seriously as, for example, those of the philosopher Vladimir Jankelévitch, who wrote about not only Ravel, but also his compositional kinfolk, Debussy and Fauré.

Whatever the actual reasons for this neglect may have been, this essay seeks to bring it to an end by collating and assessing Adorno’s commentary on Ravel, which is scattered across decades of published and unpublished texts. After surveying this commentary, I demonstrate ways to appropriate it for musical analysis before concluding with some methodological reflections.

Adorno’s Ravel

Adorno’s most extended discussion of Ravel is an essay first published in a 1930 issue of Anbruch, the Viennese journal that Adorno edited from 1928 to 1930. This essay was later incorporated into the collection Moments musicaux (1964) with only minor revisions; the relative invariability of the text over thirty-four years suggests the consistency of Adorno’s understanding of Ravel over the course of his career. In several ways, the "portrait" of Ravel painted by Adorno in the 1930 essay recalls Albrecht Dürr’s melancholic, a figure sunk...
in thought while the things of this world crowd in upon him. Like the melancholic, Adorno’s Ravel has sovereign command over his cultural inheritance but is stricken by the knowledge that it has grown obsolete and can no longer support faith in its continued reality. The potency of this music derives paradoxically from its sense of impotence before the passing of the past—which, however, only increases Ravel’s commitment to inscribe the “disappearing figures of his historical moment” before they completely disappear. The notion of this music as a “prosthetics of memory” binds the 1930 essay to an earlier, unpublished fragment on Ravel from around 1928, in which Adorno sets the composer alongside Marcel Proust in his ability to “extract the fragrance” of the past and incorporate it into his art.

The imaginative scenario that crowns the 1930 essay also helps strengthen the connection between Ravel and Proust. It describes five o’clock in the afternoon—a twilit, presumably autumnal moment emblematic of Ravel’s music—when children of a privileged class make one last round outside before evening falls. Recalling the youthful games of Marcel, Gilberte, and their companions on the Champs-Élysées described in Remembrance of Things Past, this carefree romp is overshadowed in both Proust and Ravel by the same factors: the constraining space of play, the vigilant eyes of the governnesses, and the nostalgic mind of the narrator, all of which are potential symbols and executors of history in Adorno’s scenario. Both delighting retrospectively in the Western European classical musical tradition and mourning its imminent demise, Ravel’s music is the sound of freedom and innocence under negation.

According to Adorno, much of Ravel’s music can be explained by its membership in French musical impressionism. Characteristic features of impressionism listed in Adorno’s “Nineteen Essays about New Music” (1942) include the use of a “floating sound” that depends on suspension and displacement rather than progression and development, the application of infinitesimal sonic “dabs” (Tupfen) that combine to produce an iridescent and highly differentiated soundscape, an emphasis upon harmony and homophony rather than melody and polyphony, and an embrace of tonal elements and small forms. Generating works that appear to radiate freedom and innocence in their openness to tonality, overt cultivation of beauty, and improvisatory, quasi-spatial approach to form, impressionism nonetheless is undermined, in Adorno’s eyes, by its bad conscience toward history. As he argues in Philosophy of New Music, impressionism’s “suspension of musical time consciousness corresponds to the entire history of the bourgeoisie, which, no longer seeing anything in front of itself, denies the process of history itself and seeks its own utopia through the revocation of time in space.”

Disavowing history and its immanence within the artwork as temporal progression, impressionism can avoid descent into “crass infantilism” only by somehow “composing” out consciousness of its own mortality. For Adorno, this is exactly what Ravel did, except perhaps in his earliest works, such as Jeux d’eau. Adorno continues by claiming that Ravel was not uniformly successful in transcending the liabilities of impressionism, since the peculiar modality he developed in his music ultimately did little to overcome impressionism’s static tendencies. Nevertheless, Ravel acknowledges the obsolescent of the tonal tradition by framing his impressionism within an aesthetics of the accidental and unreal. Among other things, it is his particular situation in history that makes such irony and insight possible; his position at the outermost periphery of impressionism allows him retrospectively to grasp its successes and failures.

Impressionism is only one aspect of the larger French classical-music tradition of which Ravel is the “last true representative.” The concept of tradition that Adorno invokes in discussing Ravel deals with compositional technique generally as “the heritage of handicraft” and specifically as “instrumental peinture.” The latter term refers to multiple phenomena at once: the influential role that French painting played in the development of late-nineteenth-century French music; the inclination of French music toward a painterly, rational-spatial arrangement of its elements; the perfection and transparency of sound produced by mastering this art of arrangement; the flexibility to transpose this music from one instrumental setting to another; and the ability of the artwork to survive and even accommodate the vicissitudes of history by virtue of its complex substantiality. The latter attribute of peinture is an index of the artwork’s “vitality,” which is “lodged deep within, under layers concealed in earlier phases which manifest themselves only when others have withered and fallen away.” The “Forlane” from Le tombeau de Couperin beautifully illustrates peinture by absorbing this hermeneutic-historical principle into itself. That is, as an antiquated form “plucked bare” (entblättert) by its astringently modern harmonies, the vitality of the “Forlane” lies, for Adorno, precisely in its estrangement from and vulnerability within the present.

The clarity with which Ravel understood his position within history and society helped him transcend it. A member of the petty bourgeoisie, he nevertheless cultivated an aristocratic persona in his music that renounced fundamental ideals of bourgeois art, including unmediated expressivity, sincerity, creativity, originality, organicism, interiority, and depth, all hallmarks of the romantic, “form-giving personality.” By invalidating these ideals through his double persona as both aristocrat and Wunderkind—whose very existence demystified the bourgeois myths of artistic autonomy and experience—Ravel was paradoxically able to access new truths and disclose new depths by embracing the essential falsity of art and valorizing the surface over the interior.

These assertions have potentially profound consequences for the way that we incorporate Ravel into narratives of music history. Most commonly compared with his contemporaries Debussy and Stravinsky (Adorno makes the comparisons himself in his 1930 essay), Ravel might actually be more tellingly associated with Chopin and Richard Strauss. Indeed, Adorno’s following description of Straussian modernism might apply just as well to the French composer:
The chatter about Strauss's superficiality is irresponsible; all the depth of his music lies in the fact that its world is itself all surface, that it floats freely on the surface of the world, instead of letting the remainder of an albeit fragmentary external reality slip away in the futile hunt for an interiority that is itself completely unreal.\textsuperscript{24}

Adorno's 1928 essay on Ravel, in turn, suggests that an artist's esteem for exteriority might be motivated as much by class identification as by modernist worldview. Rather than locate eros in the ecstasies and sufferings of the lover, as Wagner does in his music dramas, both Ravel and Chopin devote themselves to the image of the beloved and allow it, rather than narcissistic self-consideration, to guide their forays into musical erotics.\textsuperscript{25} For Adorno, the turn inward and emphasis on the subject are quintessentially bourgeois, the turn outward and emphasis on the object aristocratic.

Abnegation of the self and devotion to the other bring to mind the medieval knight, who also figures centrally in Dürer's woodcuts. In fact, Adorno seems to have just such an entity in mind when describing Chopin's careful guidance of beautiful themes across the landscape of his music as an aristocratic act of "chivalry"—a chivalry, however, of a melancholic sort peculiar to Ravel, as well as to Chopin.\textsuperscript{26} With thoughts on duty and melancholy we spiral back to our original point of departure while simultaneously arriving at the core of Adorno's understanding of Ravel: the interpretation of his music, particularly its childlike moments, as the "aristocratic sublimation of mourning."\textsuperscript{27} In the immediate context of this utterance, "sublimation" refers to the transformation and externalization of a negative emotion felt deeply by the artist into a more positive affect represented in the artwork, as well as the gain in poise and beauty that such a transformation entails.\textsuperscript{28} One example of this procedure for Adorno is the modulation of a world-weary melancholy into the innocence of childhood, as in \textit{Ma mère l'oye}. In another example, melancholy makes its presence-as-absence felt even more acutely: the first movement of the Sonata for Violin and Piano (1923–27) sublimates a whole bucolic world into only a few symbolic elements—its air, its trembling.\textsuperscript{29} Upon distilling a wealth of experience into an idealized, even sentimentalized image, sublimation shades into nostalgic memory.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Viewing the \textit{Valses nobles et sentimentales} through an Adornian Lens}
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Adorno's writings on Ravel represent criticism unchattered by analytical detail.\textsuperscript{30} This aspect brings them closer to a general readership while simultaneously distancing them from a practice he despised: the reduction or reification of music to the elements of a theoretical system, as mentioned above. This is not to say that Adorno rejected analysis as such; on the contrary, he believed unequivocally that "all criticism which is of any value is founded in analysis," a claim well supported by the frequent and elegant mediation between the two modes in his monographs on composers, as well as in numerous essays and articles.\textsuperscript{31} Unfortunately, the lack of any analytical examples in his writings on Ravel, apart from the occasional reference to musical materials (to the key of G major in \textit{Le tombeau de Couperin} or to sonata form in \textit{Jeux d'eau}, for example), makes it difficult for scholars to figure out how to build on these ideas or to appreciate them as more than idiosyncratic musings.\textsuperscript{32}

At the risk of putting an overly positive expression on the face of this (in) famously negative dialectician, I propose that it is indeed possible to develop a constructive understanding of Ravel that is at once Adornian, analytical, and illuminating. Rather than simply attempt to reverse Adorno's creative process by reconstructing the analytical findings that might have led to and justified his critical conclusions in his two essays on Ravel and elsewhere, I combine his general dialectical method of reasoning with some of his specific claims about Ravel to formulate a new perspective on this music. My strategy, therefore, is to engage Adorno's ideas creatively in the spirit of a "critical approach to tradition,"\textsuperscript{33} an enterprise that he advocated for its ability to disencumber a system of thought from any "mystical authority" that has accrued to it,\textsuperscript{34} and embrace it in its \textit{Aktualität} ("currency" or "relevance") rather than its supposedly original, univocal, and fixed meaning.\textsuperscript{35}

The repertoire that I have chosen to analyze here, Ravel's \textit{Valses nobles et sentimentales} (1911), might seem more susceptible to Adornian dismissal than recuperation. Indeed, Adorno's single reference to it in \textit{Philosophy of New Music} is hardly celebratory. It occurs within a disparaging discussion of Stravinsky's \textit{Le sacre du printemps}, which "takes its pleasure openly in a profligate splendor that would have been easily understood in the Paris of Ravel's \textit{Valse noble et sentimental} [sic]."\textsuperscript{36} At first glance, in this sentence Adorno appears to judge the \textit{Valses} as merely a mirror of \textit{fin-de-siècle} cultural decadence in all its "profligate splendor," an embodiment of prewar hedonism so "easily understood" by its bourgeois audience that it could hardly be imagined to harbor any critical potency. However much we want this passage to comply with this interpretation, it nevertheless refuses to do so: it is in no way clear that Adorno is claiming here the validity or sufficiency of this verdict. In fact, the all-too-easy understanding of the \textit{Valses} as decadent excess might be another self-serving delusion of the bourgeoisie, which characteristically does not recognize its own critique, especially one so subtly construed in the midst of the unsuble frenzy of cultural consumption during the \textit{belle époque}.

A section from the 1930 essay on Ravel supports these conjectures as germane to Adornian thought. Asserting Ravel's music to be the "portrait" of the bourgeoisie's more privileged stratum, Adorno wonders why, then, it does not prefer Ravel's music to the relatively meretricious products of Strauss and
Stravinsky. In mulling over the possible causes for this phenomenon, Adorno selects two: lacking either self-awareness or an “aesthetic power” (ästhetische Kraft), society may no longer recognize its own likeness, and thus remains deaf to the intimations of its mortality in this music; or, this stratum might experience a cognitive dissonance with the utopian vision of a free society conjured up by this music. Considering this evidence of Adorno’s own interpretative position, it would probably be foolish to conclude that he shares with the bourgeois its understanding of the Valses as simple “profligate splendor” without any deeper, critical dimension. Indeed, the epigraph from Henri de Régnier that Ravel cunningly chose for the Valses has the special capacity to support both uncritical and critical understandings at once. While the one might take at face value the direct applicability of “le plaisir délirieux et toujours nouveau d’une occupation inutile” to the Valses, the other might discern—and savor—the irony in Ravel’s choice.

To my knowledge, Adorno does not discuss the Valses anywhere else in his musical writings. Left to our own, we will do well to formulate an Adornian interpretation of this piece by first considering its relation to tradition—the tradition of the nineteenth-century waltz. With the Valses Ravel places himself in a compositional lineage whose most important members include Schubert, Chopin, and the Strauss family. Though named in homage to Schubert and his sets of “noble” and “sentimental” waltzes, the Valses nobles et sentimentales is an uninterrupted suite of eight waltzes for solo piano that encompasses the breadth of the tradition, from the shorter Schubertian phrases of Waltz III and the Chopinesque chromatic textures of Waltz V to the Straussian grandeur of Waltz VII. As the following passage indicates, the influence of the Strauss waltz did not disqualify the Valses for Adorno’s serious attention.

The music of Johann Strauss is set off from the art music of the time through its “genre” (“light music”), but this separation is not total; his waltzes leave room for harmonic differentiation and, furthermore, they are formed thematically out of small, contrasting units never subject merely to empty repetition. It is the surprising connection of these fragments which gives the Strauss waltz its charm, its “pungency” (Pikanterie), relating it at the same time to the tradition of Viennese classicism, from which it is derived via Strauss senior, Lanner and Schubert.

Every comment here about Strauss’s waltzes applies equally well to the Valses, regardless of the degree to which they literally sound like Strauss. Particularly remarkable in this context is the exquisite craft displayed in the transitions between one waltz and the next. Take, for example, the passage linking Waltzes III and IV, which may have been the most significant transition for Ravel: it is the only inter-waltz transition in the manuscript for the orchestral version that he marked “Enchaînez” (link together). At the beginning of Waltz IV Ravel shrewdly undermines continuity in multiple parameters—dynamics, meter (including the hemiolas on both sides of the double bar line) motive, rhythm, melodic pitch, tessitura, and texture—with a piquant shift in harmony. This compositional sleight-of-hand, shown below in example 3.1, neatly exemplifies the mastery of métier that Adorno associated with Ravel.

Example 3.1. Ravel, Valses nobles et sentimentales, transition between Waltz III and Waltz IV

In part, the reason that Ravel’s transitions between waltzes are so effective is that they acknowledge and negotiate the demands of a specific impulse in the waltz tradition: the creation and interrelation of different musical characters (generally, one character per waltz in a suite). This aspect of traditional composition is very important for Adorno, since:

The articulation of music in terms of characters is what makes possible their principle of individuation. They are the qualitative element, not dissoluble into musical generality. The tendency to rationalization, however, that places Western music in the general movement of Enlightenment, is one that moves in the direction of quantification, reducing the individual element to an indistinguishable, interchangeable part of the whole, into which it goes without remainder.
Looming over the tradition of musical characterization, however, is the threat of its imminent demise, which Adorno determines to be its "inevitable condition at this stage in history."43

Ravel's design of the *Valses* reflects an understanding of musical character, the waltz, and their mutual fate quite similar to Adorno's. In Waltz VIII, which the composer entitled "Epilogue," all of the previous seven waltzes (except Waltz V) return haphazardly and in fragmentary form. As shadows of their former selves, they bear witness to the obsolescence of the nineteenth-century waltz; their centrifugal dissipation into nothingness is staved off only by their subsumption into Waltz VIII. Despite the smoothness with which the sustained, slow *pianissimo* of Waltz VIII assimilates the citations of the previous waltzes, a tension is nonetheless palpable, even electrifying: standing at the brink of oblivion, the waltzes hold fast to their individual characters, which remain as unmistakable in Waltz VIII as they were before it. Such twilit struggle between memory and oblivion is a dialectic as quintessential to Adorno as it is to Ravel.44

This site of dialectical tension is counterbalanced by another at the opposite end of the *Valses*. Combining the clear-cut rhythms of the waltz with strange, strident harmonies, the opening measures of Waltz I present the central "problem" of the suite as one of stylistic schizophrenia: its simultaneous pull toward the familiar and the esoteric. This dialectic comes to a head in the retransition of Waltz I, as shown in example 3.2.

![Diagram](image)

Example 3.2. Intensification of the retransition in Waltz I and two measures of its reprise (mm. 53–62)

After the opening of the B section, the waltz increasingly withdraws into a hermetic harmonic idiom—what we will call its "harmonic esotericism"—only to be restored to its initial vitality by a version of the initial gesture of the piece, one that now begins the retransition. However, before Waltz I is able to reshape this gesture to align more faithfully with the opening measures of the piece and thereby initiate the reprise, it undergoes an eight-bar intensification. Structured metrically and motivically as a Schoenbergian sentence, this phrase begins hesitantly, with the melody of the "basic idea" and its varied repetition ascending only three semitones each while their bass lines vacillate among various root progressions. Nonetheless, in the "continuation" the elements finally come into alignment: the melody rises consistently by semitone, the bass line latches onto a descending circle of fifths (one that will actually complete a full chromatic cycle at the downbeat of the reprise), the rhythm proceeds solely by quarter notes, the dynamics increase without intermediate fluctuations, and the harmony rotates through a cycle of three basic chord types, marked by Arabic numerals in example 3.2.

At the end of this orderly sequence a moment of chaos intrudes. As indicated in the bracket in example 3.2, in the second and third beats of measure 60 the melody suddenly breaks its chromatic ascent, moving up by the root interval of the circle-of-fifths sequence. Simultaneously, the harmony plods on chords X and Y (a transposition of X up a perfect fourth), two chords that not only challenge our present-day classificatory schemes, but would also have been difficult for the audience attending the 1911 premiere to comprehend aurally.45 The rhetorical placement of this moment augments its hermeneutic force: right before the reprise sounds to confirm the waltz in its formal and tonal conventionality, the harmonic esotericism that has been building up during the retransition finally overflows the bounds of the sequence to expose the instability of the *Valses* as a stylistic experiment. In other words, content is inextricably bound up with form; the one receives its meaning from the other. For Adorno, attention to this dialectic was a crucial aspect of analysis, insofar as "that which is going on underneath [formal schemata] is not simply a second and quite different thing, but is in fact mediated by the formal schema, and is partly, at any given moment, postulated by the formal schema."46

It is equally Adornian to claim that harmony's challenge to form in Waltz I should be understood not as a rejection of tradition, but rather as an example of tradition's critical impetus, which stays true to itself by unsettling, or even exploding, its own self-assured continuity.47 The strange and strident harmonies of the first four measures of Waltz I now seemingly accounted for by the retransition's esoteric sequence as its natural outgrowth, the beginning of the reprise can be heard paradoxically as the simultaneous celebration of both convention and its contravention. Initiating Waltz I as well as the entire set in unforgettable fashion, the dialectical image projected by these measures represents in *nuce* the status of the *Valses* as a whole.
Having determined the critical role that harmonic esotericism plays in the historical profile of this piece, we may now address the history of this esotericism itself—thereby suggesting, among other things, that it is not merely the result of ahistorical compositional caprice. Indeed, we may even be able to locate a potential source of the retransition’s X and Y chords in a piece of incidental, esoteric music by Erik Satie, the first of the preludes for the Rosicrucian play *Le fils des étoiles* (1891; example 3.3).

If, reading registrally from bottom to top, we transposed the first and third notes of the U and W chords in example 3.3 down a semitone—which would also increase their dominant potential and harmonic dynamism, so to speak—they would be identical to chords X and Y in example 3.2. Now, there is no doubt that Ravel knew this piece and was thinking about it during his composition of the *Valses* in early 1911. A friend and admirer of Satie since his teens, Ravel not only chose to feature Satie’s early piano music in one of the first concerts of his newly founded society, the Société Musicales Indépendante, but also performed it himself in a January 16, 1911 program which included three solo works by Satie: the second *Sarabande*, the third *Gymnopédie*, and the preludes to *Le fils des étoiles*.¹⁸

This concert may have brought Satie a recognition he had never before experienced, but it fulfilled other goals as well. First, it clarified the aesthetic identity of the fledgling SMI, which sought to promote works—like Satie’s—of a less monumental design than those favored by its rivals, the Société Nationale and the Schola Cantorum. Second, it allowed Ravel to pay personal homage to a composer whose aesthetic priorities had shaped his own. Premiered two months later in the SMI concert of May 9, 1911, the *Valses* continue this homage to Satie, as even the audience sensed at the time. To stimulate listeners’ participation at this concert of premieres, the organizers withheld the names of the composers, challenging the audience instead to guess them; after the dust had cleared and the votes were tallied, Satie came close to beating out Ravel for authorship of the *Valses*.

We can only speculate as to which elements of the *Valses* would have reminded the audience of Satie. The exuberant address of Waltz I could have recalled Satie’s rambunctious *En habit du cheval*, a four-hand work also performed on the January concert, but no one besides Ravel himself could reasonably have discerned in real time the allusion in Waltz I to *Le fils des étoiles*—a shame, since the transplantation of these chords from an extremely static to an extremely dynamic context is such a delightful, Chabrier-like display of witty, irreverent parody. Waltz II, however, offers other possibilities for discerning the importance of Satie’s esotericism both to the *Valses* and to our understanding of them from an Adornian perspective (ex. 3.4).

Example 3.4a presents the primary lyrical theme from Waltz II, a *valse lente* audibly indebted to Satie’s *Gymnopédies* for its sad modal sway and sparse texture (and perhaps also to the *Gnossiennes* for its exotic ornamentation). In the reprise of this theme, shown in example 3.4b, Ravel intensifies the reference to Satie: the accompaniment reproduces the rhythm of the *Gymnopédies* with greater fidelity, while the expressive indication “mystérieux” calls attention to the passage’s esotericism, an effect occasioned by the combination of strange harmonic oscillations, pianissimo dynamics, concealment of the melody in an inner voice, and ritualistic tolling on the second beat.

The intensification of esotericism over the course of Waltz II bespeaks a gradual heightening of reflexivity in the piece—not only of its debt to Satie,
but also its historical obsolescence as a waltz suite. The three themes of Waltz II, through which it cycles twice to produce its binary form, may be interpreted as representing different phases in the psychological process by which the compositional persona works through these mortal thoughts. Example 3.5 provides an overview of these themes by excerpting the first two measures of each from their debuts.

Example 3.5. Opening measures of the three themes of Waltz II: “Grief” (a, mm. 1–2), “Melancholy” (b, mm. 9–10), and “Consolation” (c, mm. 25–26)

Part of a transition from Waltz I, Theme 1 (ex. 3.5a) thematically transforms the opening two measures of the latter and, as such, overtly shifts the tone of the Valses from high-spirited celebration to an intense grief that is expressed with each augmented triad. In Theme 2 (ex. 3.5b), the anguish expressed in Theme 1 is temporarily modulated into a doleful melody before erupting once more. Instead of a second statement of Theme 2 after the reappearance of Theme 1, we hear a more light-hearted Theme 3 (ex. 3.5c), which nevertheless devolves into a Theme 2-like cadence at the end of its phrase. The transitions among the multiple phases of this psychological experience—passing through grief, melancholy, grief again, brief consolation, and melancholy once more—are so carefully shaped that the musical flow is virtually unbroken.49

A seamless vessel, Waltz II catches tears like drops of rain. The tears belong to Adorno’s Ravel, a Proustian figure beset by nostalgia for the past and the melancholy of its loss. As a musicologist, it is tempting to try to divvy up the individual numbers of the Valses nobles et sentimentales according to their apparent “nobility” or “sentimentality.” From an Adornian viewpoint, however, the adjectives “noble” and “sentimental” simultaneously describe the suite as a whole. It is sentimental in a quasi-Schillerian sense, insofar as it is acutely conscious of the historical distance that separates it from the once-living tradition of the nineteenth-century waltz. And it is noble to the extent that it exemplifies Ravel’s “aristocratic sublimation of mourning.”

Adornian Analysis

Almost three decades after Rose Rosengard Subotnik published her ground-breaking essays on Adorno—during which time numerous Adorno-related books and articles have appeared, conferences have been convened, papers presented, and panels formed—it is still somewhat controversial in American music academia to invoke this philosopher and his ideas. More precisely, it is still wholly unresolved whether Adorno represents more of a benefit or a liability for American musicology.50 Even for those who feel sympathetic toward Adorno’s views, it is hard not to be unsettled by anti-Adornian sentiment. Richard Taruskin’s exhortation that we no longer allow Adorno to “do our thinking for us” seeks to rouse our sense of autonomy and pride (and guilt) not only as independent-minded Americans but also as free-thinking heirs of the Enlightenment.51 (Recall Kant’s definition of Enlightenment as the transcendence of Unwissendheit, a state of immaturity in which we literally cannot speak or, for that matter, think for ourselves.) However compelling Taruskin’s phrase might be, it is nonetheless problematic in several respects. It implies that Adornian thought can simply and unthinkingly be parroted back as a sort of dogma, when it is, in fact, not only difficult and elusive enough to forbid such regurgitation, but also as vigorously self-critical as it is potentially doctrinaire. In addition, it wrongly depreciates an aspect of intersubjectivity that is as fundamental and beneficial to academia as it is to any other sector of the public sphere: allowing the thought of others to inflect the way we think is not equivalent to having someone else do our thinking for us.
While the preceding analysis is by no means an apology for Adorno, it nevertheless demonstrates how Adornian thought can help to generate insight—directly and indirectly—into repertory that does not fall within his usual purview of Austro-German music. Here, Adorno’s perceptions of Ravel’s critical devotion to tradition, his melancholy over its transience, and the aristocratic sublimation of this melancholy into his music have illuminated some structural aspects of the Valse. There are many promising issues that still await treatment: Ravel’s relation to French musical impressionism; his relation to Wagner (a topic almost completely absent from Ravel studies, though not justifiably so); his personal handling of motivic design; his internationalism as a modernist; the alignment of his music with aesthetics of primitivism, organicism, and contingency; and so on.

Ideas imported indirectly here from Adornian thought and applied to Ravel include the differentiated use of musical motive and character in the compositional tradition of the waltz, and a general notion of dialectics which imparts a tense dynamism to the relation of form to content, conventionality to esotericism, and memory to oblivion—somewhat contrary to Adorno’s later, more rigid understanding of French musical aesthetics as anti-developmental, which compelled him in the 1964 version of the Ravel essay to eliminate the few remaining references to dialectics in the original 1930 version. Adorno’s self-censorship notwithstanding, a broader and more thorough consideration of dialectics in Ravel’s music, whether involving these particular oppositions or others, may form another path of productive inquiry for future scholarship.52

Adorno laid out his understanding of music analysis as a whole most clearly and extensively in “On Musical Analysis,” a lecture from the final year of his life. As elsewhere in his work, one of the most stimulating aspects of this text is the way he gradually and dialectically unfolds the notion of analysis over the course of the lecture. For our present purposes, though, it is helpful to condense this discussion into its most salient methodological points. For Adorno, analysis is a necessary means to a good and practical end: it enables performers to get to know the score intimately, forces them to confront important matters of interpretation, and thus helps generate a more satisfying performance; in similar fashion it allows the composer-as-analyst to actively participate in an ongoing musical tradition as both recipient and contributor. Just as important for Adorno, however, is the ability of analysis to ramiﬁy a piece of music into both a conceptual “force ﬁeld” (Kraftfeld) and a scene of cognition whose immanent “truth content” (Wahrheitsgehalt) is released by the analytical act.

The dialectical procedure involved in such analytical practice gives rise to a performativity that assimilates analytical discourse to its object through a type of nemesia. In other words, analysis, for Adorno, should seek not merely to provide a heuristic basis for the meaningful performance of music, but also to transmute musical performance into linguistic performance. When Kofi Agawu says that music analysis today, in order to beneﬁt fully from Adorno’s legacy, must be willing to “stage ongoing enactments and reenactments of the musical work (or parts thereof) not only in actuality but, more potently, in imagination and in a manner consistent with music’s performative essence,” he appears to be responding to this impulse in Adornian thought, which wishes to open music analysis to the possibility of a discursive multivalence it is always in danger of foreclosing.53 Defining analysis elsewhere in his lecture so broadly and humanely as “the achievement of imagination through faith,” Adorno invites us to seriously consider the kinship of analysis, criticism, and poetics, all of which could reasonably fall under this deﬁnition.54 Thus, in the continuing effort to carve out a future for Adornian thought in music analysis, it is just as important to invoke his speciﬁc concepts and methodologies as it is to strive for this possibility of discursive richness. The point here is not to let Adorno do our thinking for us, of course, but rather to take him as a model for more adventurous and perhaps even more rewarding modes of analysis.

Notes

I would like to thank Carlo Caballero, Berthold Hockecker, Robert Hullot-Kentor, Brian Hyer, Martin Jay, and Richard Leppert for their helpful and thought-provoking comments on earlier drafts of this essay.


3. A contemporary study of Albrecht Dürer’s Melencolia I that is still important today is Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, Dürers Melencolia I: Eine Quellen- und Typengeschichtliche Untersuchung, in Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, vol. 2, ed. Fritz Saxl (Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Tüeber, 1923). Incidentally, Adorno would surely have known about this study in 1930, having just read (and been deeply affected by) Walter Benjamin’s Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels /The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1928), trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 1977), which cites Panofsky and Saxl’s book in several places. The constellation of melancholy, knowledge, history, and nature in Adorno’s profile of Ravel, I would argue, betrays the influence of Benjamin and, more specifically, his Trauerspiel book.


5. “Er nirgt sicher die entscheidenden Figuren seines geschichtlichen Momente.” Adorno, “Ravel,” CS, 17:61. Adorno describes Ravel here as if he were a Baudelairean “painter of modern life,” a sketch artist who has the special talent, according to the poet,

6. The notion of a prosthetics of memory has recently gained currency, largely due to the publication of Alison Landsberg's Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), which discusses the ability and consequences of the media of American mass culture to sustain and produce collective memory. The idea itself is quite old, however, dating at least back to Plato's Phaedrus, in which he criticizes prosthetic memory—in the form of writing and other aides-mémoire (including the whole rhetorical tradition of an "art of memory")—for contributing to the neglect of natural memory. For a brief but focused discussion of the latter, see Frances Yates, The Art of Memory (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 37-39.


10. "The convergence of music and painting also opens up the possibility of crass infantilism, at least in music: it is able to stave off this element only to the extent that it reflects it within itself, as an expression of decay, and composes it out, so to speak." Adorno, "On Some Relationships between Music and Painting," trans. Susan H. Gilmore, in Quellen, Musical Quarterly 79, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 68.

11. The distinction that Adorno perceived between Debussy and Ravelian impressionism seems to have become sharper over time. Upon revising the Anbruch article for its publication in Moments musicaux, Adorno altered the original statement, "[Ravel's] Impressionism was once unmediated like Debussy's" ("Einmal war sein Impressionismus unmittelbar wie der Debussy") to "[Ravel's] Impressionism was never unmediated like Debussy's" ("Niemals war sein Impressionismus unmittelbar wie der Debussy"). For the former, see "Ravel," Anbruch, 152; for the latter, see "Ravel," GS, 17:62.

12. "The early piece Jeux d'eau is one of the least dynamic and least characterized by development of any of the works produced by [French musical Impressionism], in spite of its arrangement as a sonata. Since then, however, Ravel has sought a strengthening of the awareness of harmonic progression. This explains the particular role of modality in his music, utterly distinct from its function in Brahms. The church modes provide a surrogate for the tonal degrees. These, however, lose their dynamic quality through the abrogation of the cadence. The arschem of organum and fauxbourdon effects helps produce a kind of continuation by degrees while maintaining the feeling of a static juxtaposition." Adorno, Philosophy of New Music, 139.

13. Adorno diluted slightly the pessimism inherent in Ravel's historical wisdom from the earlier to the later version of the essay, originally describing his knowledge as "hopeless" (ausweglos) rather than "complete" (vollständig). Compare "Ravel," Anbruch, 150, with "Ravel," GS, 17:63.

14. As expressed quite neatly in this concert review of L'heure espagnole from August 1932: "Ravel... holds to tradition, still on this side of the break: however, he surveys it like no one else, and his irony is its afterglow" (Ravel... hält sich in der Tradition, diesseits des Bruches noch: aber er überschaut die traditionale Region wie kein zweiter, und seine Ironie ist ihre Ahnendecke). Adorno, "Frankfurter Opern- und Konzerkritiken," GS, 19:371-72.


20. "Not a few musicians came from the petty bourgeoisie without developing its social character: the generous Ravel, the intrepid Schonberg" (Nicht wenige Musiker stammen aus dem Kleinbürgertum und entwickelten jenen Sozialcharakter nicht der generöse Ravel, der intrepidere Schönberg). Adorno, "Ad vocem Hindemith," GS, 17:244.


22. The entry on the Wunderkind in Adorno's "Musical Aphorisms" is particularly helpful for fleshing out references to this phenomenon in the 1930 Anbruch essay. The following sentence from the former summarizes the bourgeois critique embodied in the Wunderkind: "Each one that is born destroys the musical and not merely musical order in its consciousness of dignity, autonomy, and freedom" (Jedes, das da geboren wird, vertröstet die musikalische und nicht bloss musikalische Ordnung in ihrem Bewusstsein von Würde, Autonomie und Freiheit). "Musikalische Aphorismen," GS, 18:43.

23. On the point of the falsity of Ravel's music, compare the following from pages 136 and 137, respectively, of Philosophy of New Music: "Above all, Ravel's aesthetic of the sophisticated toy, the impossible stunt, the tour de force, acknowledges the verdict of
the Baudelairean of the *Paradis artificiels*, who no longer wrote ‘nature poetry.’ No music that participates in technological enlightenment can now escape this verdict. . . . Once the artificial element of music, the ‘making,’ becomes conscious of itself and acknowledges itself, it loses the sting of the lie of being a pure, primordial, and absolute sound of the soul. This is the gain in truth reaped through the expulsion of the subject” (137).

Regarding the valorization of the surface over the interior, it is intriguing to consider the degree to which the following passage by Adorno from 1952 might apply to the *Imply* Ravel, especially in light of his 1930 *Anbruch* essay: "It might be possible for the most advanced compositional production of the present—solely under the pressure of the inmanent development of its problems—to invalidate basic bourgeois categories such as the creative personality and expression of the soul of this personality, the world of private feelings and its transfigured inwardsness, setting in their place highly rational and transparent principles of construction. Even this music, however, would remain dependent upon bourgeois production processes and could not, consequently, be viewed as ‘classless’ or the actual music of the future, but rather as music which fulfills its dialectic cognitive function most exactly." Adorno, "On the Social Situation of Music," trans. Wes Blomster, in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 394.


25. Just to make the provenance of these ideas absolutely clear, this sentence summarizes a few passages from Adorno's "Ravel" (c. 1928).

26. In a passage about Chopin, Adorno proposes that "the aristocratic nature of his music may reside less in the psychological tone than in the gesture of knightly melancholy [schwerwiegigen Rührung] with which subjectivity renounces the attempt to impose its dramatism and carry it through." "Motifs," *Quasi una fantasia*, 17. For Adorno, the lack of dynamism is common to both Chopin and Ravel, whose music refuses any dialectical development.


28. In "Dandy. Interrupted: Sublimation, Repression, and Self-Porrtaiture in Maurice Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909–12)," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 317–72, I discuss sublimation in Ravel’s music extensively, taking *Daphnis et Chloé* as a prime example in which sublimation appears as both "the psychic means by which raw sexual desire is modulated to produce seemly and even beautiful gestures of courtship" and "the musical process by which noise is transformed into serenade" (321). Max Paddison outlines the basic features and functions of sublimation for Adorno in *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music*, 128–34.


30. The distinction between criticism and analysis has been a site of active contestation in music academia ever since Joseph Kerman’s initial polemics in "How we got into analysis, and how to get out," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 311–31. Representative contributions to these debates, which became particularly heated during the emergence of New Musicology in the 1990s, include an exchange between Scott Burnham and Lawrence Kramer in the Summer 1992 issue of *19th-Century Music* 16, no. 1, 70–79; several essays by Marion A. Guck (e.g., "Rehabilitating the Incorrigible," in *Theory, Analysis, and Meaning in Music*, ed. Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57–75, and "Analytical Fictions," *Music Theory Spectrum* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 217–30); and various chapters in *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially the editorial preface (v–xili) and Scott Burnham’s "How Music Matters: Poetic Content Revisited" (193–216).


34. Ibid., 80.

35. The French-derived "Aktualität" is one of Adorno’s trademark terms, foregrounded in such musical essays as "Mahlers Aktualität" (1960; GS, 18:241–43) and "Wagners Aktualität" (1963; GS, 16:543–64); the latter is now available in English as "Wagner’s Relevance for Today," trans. Susan Gillespie, in *Adorno, Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 584–602. Max Paddison defines Adorno’s use of "Aktualität" to mean simultaneously "relevance for the present and its concerns," "up-to-date," and "still in fashion." Paddison specifies the "dialectical ambiguity" of this term as follows: "On the one hand, it expresses the quintessence of the modern ephemeral. . . . On the other hand, actuality denotes a kind of practical affinity between an element of an intellectual legacy and a self-reflective contemporary situation; an affinity that resists or ignores what is intellectually fashionable and instead wants to capture an aspect of a culture’s authentic expression of what it needs." Paddison, "Editor’s Introduction: Adorno’s Actualität," in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Paddison (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 1.


38. My thanks to Peter Kaminsky for noticing this connection and sharing it with me.

39. I leave aside here the indirect, passing reference to the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* in the following sentence: "Duch de Scheinregionen von noblesse und sentiment, durch die hochromantische Kinderlandschaft führt die Tourneé seiner Musik ins Altäreische" ("The tour of his music leads through the virtual regions of noblesse and sentiment and the high-spirited landscape of children into the antique" [my emphasis].) Adorno, "Ravel," GS, 17:63.


41. This manuscript score is stored in Box 300 of the Carlton Lake Collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Center at the University of Texas-Austin; the direction "Enchaînez," which was not included in the Durand scores for either the piano or orchestral versions of the *Valses nobles*, appears in the margins of page 22. I thank the HRC for providing me access to this score.


43. Ibid., 186.

44. Another way to conceptualize Waltz VIII from an Adornian standpoint is as a piece of musical surrealism. The disintegration of the waltz suite in VIII demonstrates, like surrealism, the alienation of the past from the present, thereby "permitting social flaws to manifest themselves by means of a flawed invoice which defines itself as illusory with no attempt at camouflage through attempts at an aesthetic totality." Adorno, "On the Social Situation of Music," 396. Max Paddison discusses this passage on page 104 of *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music.*
44. It is wholly plausible, of course, to recognize chords $X$ and $Y$ as altered dominant sevenths that are related to other chords in the preceding sequence. Except for the dominant sevenths doubled in the left hand and lowered fifths, their structure is virtually identical to that of chord 2. Our ability to rationalize the structure of these chords as tonal and relate them to the preceding harmonic progression does not, however, negate my larger point that they are aurally provocative to an almost excessive extent, and thereby place the subsequent reprise—normatively, a moment that simultaneously creates and celebrates the rational and stabilizing influence of form upon musical flow—under considerable dialectical strain.


48. Ravel also appears to have orchestrated these Preludes around this time, but this orchestration has unfortunately not yet come to light. See Arbie Orenstein, Ravel: Man and Musician (New York: Dover, 1991); a slightly altered republication of the same title (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 243.

49. My impetus to invest Wals 3 with deep subjectivity and emotional sincerity comes, at least in part, from Ravel’s libretto for Adélaïde ou le langage des fleurs, the 1912 ballet version of the Valses. In this libretto, Wals 3 accompanies the scene in which the hero Lorédan is introduced in all his youthful passion and inner torment.

50. I say “American musicology,” rather than “Anglo-American” or “English-language musicology,” because it seems to me that, judging from the work of Daniel Chua, Max Paddison, Michael Spitzer, Alastair Williams, and others, the musicological reception of Adorno in the UK has been broader and deeper than in the United States.


52. One of the few gestures—and perhaps the earliest—in this direction is Randolph Eichert, "Kontrapunkte: Ravel gegen den Strich gehört," in Hommage à Ravel 1987, 193–95. Dialectical thought also informs my interpretive approach in "Dandy, Interrupted"; see, in particular, the subchapter "A Dialectics of the Dandy" (351–52), where I show how moments of sublime composure in Daphnis’s Dance subtly refer to other moments in which this composure is shattered, and vice versa.


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Part Two

Analytical Case Studies