ular materialist is still a ways off, a comparative vocabulary goes a long way in keeping theological elements from forming anti-intellectual barriers to critical scrutiny. Taking the lead from practitioners of comparative analysis in other fields (Martin Jay’s and Gary Gutting’s intellectual histories, Peter Hallward’s surveys of recent French philosophy, and in a different sense, Karen Armstrong’s and Robert Wright’s historical syntheses of religious thought) we might develop a better understanding of how the terms of philosophy—ineffability, utopia, multiplicity, presence, or the other, for example—have decidedly secular coordinates as a vocabulary for music’s intellectual history.72

Jankélévitch and the Dilemma of Decadence

MICHAEL J. PURI

The musical-philosophical thought of Vladimir Jankélévitch is still news to us, despite its availability for well over a half century. It is new largely because we Anglophone musicologists have yet to peruse it in breadth and depth: indicators of his limited reception within this community include the translation into English of only two of his many monographs on music—Ravel (orig. 1939; trans. 1959) and Music and the Ineffable (orig. 1961; trans. 2003)—as well as the publication of only a small number of texts in which musicologists have made substantial use of his work.73 Even for scholars who have already spent some time with it, however, it may continue to feel new because its concepts and methods contrast in varying degrees with those peculiar to our disciplinary habitus. Thus, as we begin a process of rapprochement with Jankélévitch’s work, I suggest that we acknowledge an initial ambivalence toward it and act accordingly, neither affirming it immediately for its possible redemption of our perceived shortcomings, nor rejecting it wholesale for its unpalatable alterity, but rather critically examining its elements for potential strengths and weaknesses.

One of its most distinctive aspects is its dedication to French art music from about 1870 to 1940 and a penumbra of related repertoire: mainly Russian and Spanish music of the same period, as well as the work of a few important precursors (Chopin and Liszt). Jankélévitch produces a detailed and insightful physiognomy of this repertoire, especially insofar as it articulates numerous counterideals to what he regarded as the flawed Romantic (and largely Austro-Germanic) legacy in music and musical criticism; these counterideals

72. See Jay, Marxism and Totality; idem, Downcast Eyes; Gutting, Thinking the Impossible; Hallward, “The One or the Other”; Armstrong, History of God; and Wright, Evolution of God.

73. See Jankélévitch, Ravel, trans. Margaret Crosland (1959); and idem, Music and the Ineffable. Current musicological scholarship that places Jankélévitch’s thought at the center of its inquiry includes texts by Abbate: “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” and In Search of Opera; as well as Rings, “Mystères limpides”; and Puri, “Memory and Melancholy in the ‘Epilogue’ of Ravel’s Valses nobles et sentimentales.”
include inexpressivity rather than expressivity, understatement rather than hyperbole, obliquity rather than directness, fragmentation rather than continuity, concision rather than elaboration, irony rather than sincerity, and so forth.\textsuperscript{74} However, the narrowness of this focus also casts doubt upon any attempt to extend the reach of these categories by applying them to other repertoires. Further, it raises suspicions that the musical philosophy Jankélévitch evidently derived from the chosen repertoire unduly elevates the latter’s idiomatic qualities to general principles—among which, “charm” and “ineffability”—that are supposed to express our fundamental experience of and relation to all musics. Even if we were to assent to this leap, would we necessarily have to embrace and even try to replicate Jankélévitch’s methodology? As compelling as his rhapsodic essays may be in their effort to reap the rewards of what Michael Gallope in this colloquy calls “quodditive freedom,” they also seem to distance themselves from more mundane matters that are nevertheless essential to some of our own, present-day research methods: incorporation of historical fact, music’s situation within a thick cultural context, and the ideological critique of attendant discourses, including one’s own.\textsuperscript{75}

As untroubled as the surface of his prose seems to be, nevertheless I suspect that he was anything but oblivious to the consequences of these choices. A case in point is the dilemma that the topic of decadence posed for him—a topic equally promising and threatening to his ongoing musical-philosophical project. On the one hand, decadence lay at the crux of his concerns in its dual identity as both a general and a specific cultural phenomenon. When spelled in both English and French with a capital “D,” it was a literary and artistic movement in France that flourished from about 1880 to 1900 (with an extended dénouement) and proved formative for musicians like Debussy and Ravel.\textsuperscript{76}

The Decadence upheld the countercultural impulse inherent in the more general notion of decadence by embracing hedonism, aestheticism, and ironic...

\textsuperscript{74} For an account of Jankélévitch’s musical preferences, see Revah, “Sur la partialité en musique.”

\textsuperscript{75} While Jankélévitch’s musical writings are undoubtedly sui generis—the result of an imaginative encounter among music, philosophy, and literature that can never be reproduced—I would nevertheless propose that their methodology bears at least an affinity to that of Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), fellow philosophy professeur at the Sorbonne and author of books such as \textit{L’eau et les rêves}; \textit{L’air et les songes}; and \textit{La poétique de l’espace}. Although Jankélévitch does not espouse Bachelard’s phenomenology, he nevertheless shares his interest in identifying the archetypal images (or gestures, or elements) that govern the texts under consideration (for Bachelard, usually literature) and using these archetypes to generate a seemingly boundless array of intertextual associations and philosophical claims. Accordingly, they are vulnerable to the same criticisms of historicism and subjectivism. For a useful review and critique of Bachelard’s method, see Hans, “Gaston Bachelard and the Phenomenology of the Reading Consciousness.”

\textsuperscript{76} Three indispensable sources on French Decadence and cultural decadence in general are Bernheimer, \textit{Decadent Subjects}; Calinescu, \textit{Five Faces of Modernity}, 151–221; and Pierrot, \textit{Decadent Imagination}, 1880–1900. For an extensive treatment of decadence from a current musical perspective, see Puri, \textit{Ravel the Decadent}. 
self-awareness, among other attitudes, all of which interested Jankélévitch. On the other hand, if he tried to situate potentially Decadent musicians too firmly within this context, he would risk bogging down his narrative in the “quidditive” details of history and aesthetics; as he made clear in the preface to Stefan Jarociński’s book on Debussy, he preferred to maintain a certain distance from periodizations or classifications (in this case, Symbolism, Impressionism, and Realism), apparently to support the claim of this music—or really any music—to a transcendence of historical particularity. Moreover, delving any further into the history of French Decadence would require acknowledging the strong influence on this movement of Richard Wagner, whose presence was anathema to Jankélévitch and his musical-philosophical project. But, most of all, I suspect that he did not want to associate his beloved music too strongly with decadence in general, since its connotations (whose negativity only increased as the fin de siècle and its exaltation of the nonutilitarian faded away) were simply too widespread and enduring for him single-handedly to override. Thus, with respect to decadence and similar themes the alternative to l’ineffable was not l’indicible but l’interdit—that which he forbid himself from saying.

Jankélévitch did, in fact, directly confront decadence in an essay he dedicated solely to this topic in 1950, which he may have undertaken in a personal attempt to come to terms with it (rather than merely performing an exercise in cultural criticism). Here, he describes decadence in broad terms as “extreme civilization” and characterizes it by a decline in instinct, creative vitality, virility, and innocence, as well as an increase in self-consciousness and irony, artificiality of life, complexity of needs, and refinement of taste. Moreover, a decadent civilization is one devoted to “ruminating over itself” (se recueillir) and is bound to the past through an obsessive, archivist memory rather than

77. Books by Jankélévitch in which he addresses these themes at length include L’ironie; L’aventure, l’ennui, le sérieux; La mort; and L’irréversible et la nostalgie.
78. “This [scholarly vacillation among Symbolism, Impressionism, and Realism] only goes to prove . . . the relativity of the various categories and headings under which we were hoping to classify Debussy. He himself had a horror of ‘concepts,’ and would no doubt have been the first to express astonishment at being thus bandied about between various conflicting ‘isms.’ . . . Symbolism, in the profound sense in which Jarociński understands it, is still linked with Impressionism through the paradox of certain elusive external similarities. It is not easy to explain how this contradiction between sensorial discontinuity and the continuity of dreams—between scattered and disparate qualities and the fluidity of a dream—can ever be resolved. Yet, in fact, it is resolved, in the way that music sings, in the mystery of the inexpressible and the ‘je ne sais quoi’”; Jankélévitch, “Preface,” in Jarociński, Debussy, xiii and xiv.
79. A standard account of Wagner’s association with the Decadence is Koppen, Dekadenten Wagnerismus.
80. Jankélévitch, “La décadence,” 362. All translations into English are mine, unless otherwise noted. A revised version of this article appears in idem, L’austérité et la vie morale. Although the revisions are not extensive, nevertheless they are potentially interesting to us for their references to music.
envisioning the future through ardent hope. In art, decadence manifests itself in preciosity, ornamentation, virtuosity, the fetishization of means as ends in themselves, and the exploration of various dichotomies at their extremes—majuscule vs. minuscule, expressivism vs. formalism, frenzy vs. immobility. One of the few redeeming effects it can claim is an uncommon lucidity, the consequence of a hypertrophied self-consciousness.

Music did not play a central role in his essay on decadence, but his musical writings on the chosen repertoire, which stretch across the length of his career, nevertheless indicate a strong awareness of the implication of this music in decadence, as well as a conflicted conscience about how he ought to deal with this. Evidence of this mindset is notable in La vie et la mort dans la musique de Debussy (1968). Soon after declaring in the Introduction that “everything is agony and decadence” in the fin-de-siècle French artistic world in which Debussy was embedded, he pulls back slightly to assert that “there is more in Debussy than a literary neurasthenia.” In like fashion—but in reverse order—he follows up the claim that “the appeal of the decline and not-Being has nothing specifically Debussyan about it” with the statement that “what Debussy’s music suggests to us, above all, is the disintegration and dissolution of matter.” As the first chapter draws to a close, he reaffirms the decadent interpretation of Debussy’s music on behalf of its predilection for noons and afternoons: “The decline begins at noon . . . noon sounds the slow onset of night; and, more generally, the maximum in all things announces the onset of the decadent ebb.” But this interpretation is unsettled again once we remark that, in a revision of this chapter for Debussy et le mystère de l’instant (1976), he changed its title from “The Decline” (“Le déclin”) to “The Descent Underground” (“La descente dans les souterrains”), thereby replacing a direct reference to decadence with one that somewhat conceals itself beneath erudition—here, an allusion to the underground vaults in act 3, scene 2 of Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande.

The presence of decadence was even stronger in his 1939 monograph on Ravel. As in the Debussy volumes, in this book he explicitly associated decadence with languor, lassitude, and twilit effects in the composer’s early works, especially those written during the Decadence. Implicitly, however, there is a large overlap between his description of Ravel’s music in this book and the account of decadence he would later provide in the 1950 essay. One instance
of “extreme civilization” is the composer’s “gluttony for novelty” (gourmandise de nouveauté), which resulted in a harmonic language “completely dominated by an insatiable curiosity that compels him toward the rarest combinations and increasingly quintessential aggregations”—a classic decadent scenario in which hedonism produces overrefinement.\(^87\) Another manifestation is its artificiality, which Jankélévitch deems “the most distinctive trait of Ravel’s craft.”\(^88\) In addition, a retrospectivist attitude is supposed to lie behind the multiple examples of pastiche in this repertoire, while, according to Jankélévitch, nothing is more characteristic of Ravel than the fact that he was incomparably “lucid and clearly aware of his own intentions.”\(^89\) Instead of Romantic introspection and confession, Ravel demonstrates in both his life and his art an “extreme modesty” or “shamefulness” (pudeur) that exhibits itself in “repressed desire, reticent friendship, strength that does not show all its power at once”—all fundamental aspects of that embodiment of decadence, the Baudelairean dandy, which we know Ravel to have emulated throughout his life.\(^90\) Further, when interrupted in his sublimity, the dandy produces a music that oscillates between “frenzy” and impassivity.\(^91\) In these and other respects Jankélévitch finds Ravel’s music to draw inspiration from the rococo eighteenth century, the era of “the most exquisite refinements of politesse, luxury, and pleasure,” thereby becoming an “oasis . . . a series of intermittent escapes beyond life and reality.”\(^92\)

While Jankélévitch had not yet published his 1950 essay on decadence by the time he wrote his book on Ravel, he nevertheless managed to trace the outlines of this concept in the composer’s music. Even in 1939 he appears to have realized what he had done, noting midway through the book that Ravel’s “instrumental perfection, manual dexterity, and absolute domination of material are ordinarily symptoms of decadence.”\(^93\) But, even more strongly than in Debussy’s case, he strove to shield Ravel from this charge, drawing attention instead to a dimension of unmediated expressivity in his music (a “precious movement of his heart”) while also identifying what he would later call the “three alibis” of Ravel’s pudeur: “naturalism [which] helps him to conceal himself, exoticism to conceal this naturalism, and pastiche to conceal this exoticism.”\(^94\)

\(^{87}\) Jankélévitch, Maurice Ravel (1939), 47 and 82, resp.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., 91 and 122, resp. For a detailed account of dandyism in Ravel, see Puri, “Dandy, Interrupted.”

\(^{91}\) Jankélévitch, Maurice Ravel (1939), 58. Cf. the passage from “La décadence” in which he asserts that “frenzy and collapse [l’enlisement] . . . are the two fundamental types of decadence” (356).

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 58 and 63, resp.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 94.

\(^{94}\) Ibid., 94 and 103, resp. Jankélévitch’s substitution in 1956 of “les trois exposants successifs de sa ruse, les trois alibis de sa pudeur” (120) for the 1939 “les trois exposants successifs de sa fraude” (103) is one of many revisions apparently motivated by his self-interdiction against criticism of such a paragon in French art and culture.
These three attempts to be “elsewhere” (the literal meaning of the Latin *alibi*) do little to mitigate Ravel’s decadence: The seamless simulation of the real (naturalism) can qualify as a goal of technical perfectionism; exoticism is a basic strategy of decadent escapism; and the layering of concealments is standard protocol for the dissembling dandy. A different strategy adopted elsewhere by Jankélévitch to distance Ravel from decadence is equally unsuccessful. When discussing the *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1913) he uses the set of *mélodies* to draw a line in the sand, declaring it to break decisively with the “decadent languor” of the composer’s earlier pieces by means of its clearer textures and more incisive harmonies. Although the *Trois poèmes* is certainly a mature work, it is nevertheless just as decadent as any other piece in Ravel’s *œuvre*. How, indeed, could the eponymous “sigh” of “Soupir” be any more languorous, whose initial ascent toward the Ideal only heightens the melancholy effect of its subsequent collapse back upon the Real? Further, Ravel’s settings of “Placet futile” and “Surgi de la croupe et du bond” are as exquisitely precious are they are erotic. Simply put, if one is searching for a shining example of decadence in Ravel’s music, there is no better candidate than the *Trois poèmes*.

Decadence, like ineffability, is only one of many possible entry points into the thought of Vladimir Jankélévitch, but it is a quite productive one: Its direct relevance to fin-de-siècle French music gives us the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills specific to our discipline to a critique of his musical writings; since he also addresses it in his nonmusical writings, it allows us to broaden the scope of our critique to include his work as a whole, a methodology befitting such wide-ranging thought; as a highly ambivalent concept, it helps to expose tensions and opacities within an *œuvre* that might otherwise seem perfectly transparent in its motivations. But adopting these critical positions should not prevent us from enjoying the insights he offers us on every page; further, the blind spots we find could also be mirrors in which to recognize ourselves, as James Currie suggests in this colloquy. In the long process of rapprochement with Jankélévitch’s thought, removing it from a pedestal may ultimately bring it closer to us.

95. Ibid., 28.
96. I am simply paraphrasing the decadent interpretation of fountains that Jankélévitch offers in *La vie et la mort dans la musique de Debussy*: “The fountain itself—and this already appears in the third ‘Poème de Baudelaire’—is more a collapse (écroulement) than a bursting-forth (jaillissement)”; 26.
97. In addition to “decadence,” there are other concepts in JankélévITCH’s philosophy that we could explore to gain further insight into his understanding of Ravel, among which “conscience,” “irony,” and the “lie.”