The Passion of the Passacaille: Ravel, Wagner, *Parsifal*

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The Passion of the Passacaille: Ravel, Wagner, *Parsifal*

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**Abstract:** Long considered to lie 'light years' apart, Ravel and Wagner actually have multiple points of contact. Several appear in the comments Ravel made about the German composer in his articles, interviews and correspondence. Another is a previously unrecognised allusion to *Parsifal* in the Passacaille of Ravel’s Trio (1914), which he composed shortly after writing a review of the opera’s premiere in Paris. Additional Wagnerisms can be located in *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909–12) and *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* (1920–5). More broadly, Wagner plays a central role in the ‘decadent dialectics’ of Ravel’s style.

Attempts to tell the history of French Wagnerism are typically centred around a small group of events, texts and compositions. The main events are the debut of Wagner’s music in Paris (orchestral excerpts in 1860 and an opera (*Tannhäuser*) in 1861), the opening of the Bayreuther Festspielhaus in 1876 (which precipitated many pilgrimages by French composers and critics), and the premiere of Claude Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902, which has often been considered the turning point in the liberation of French opera from Wagnerian influence. The most notable critical texts are Baudelaire’s essay on Wagner and *Tannhäuser*, which appeared in the 1 April 1861 issue of the *Revue européenne*, and the short-lived *Revue wagnérienne* (1885–8), to which Mallarmé, Huysmans, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and other prominent French literary figures contributed essays. Last but not least, the most prominent examples of Wagnerian opera in France are Emmanuel Chabrier’s *Gwendoline* (1885), Vincent d’Indy’s *Fervaal* (1895) and Ernest Chausson’s *Le Roi Arthus* (1895).

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3 The dates in parentheses are the dates the compositions were completed. All three operas received their full premiere performances at the Théâtre royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, Belgium. The premieres of *Gwendoline* and *Fervaal* occurred soon after their completion, while *Le Roi Arthus* was first performed almost a decade later in 1903. Detailed considerations of these three operas, their librettists and their composers appear in Huebner, *French Opera*, 255–85 (on *Gwendoline*), 308–50 (on *Fervaal*) and 351–92 (on *Le Roi Arthus*).
If the name of Maurice Ravel ever arises within this standard narrative, it appears in discussions of French musical parodies of Wagner.\(^4\) In addition to the examples usually cited – Chabrier’s *Souvenirs de Munich* (1886), Gabriel Fauré and André Messager’s *Souvenirs de Bayreuth* (about 1888), and ‘Golliwog’s Cake Walk’ from Debussy’s *Children’s Corner* (1908) – scholars will occasionally remember to cite the ‘Fanfare’ that Ravel contributed to the collaboratively composed ballet *L’Éventail de Jeanne* (1927).\(^5\)

Should we seek a model for the Fanfare, ‘Golliwog’s Cake Walk’ immediately comes to mind. Composed for the students of the ballet school run by Jeanne Dubost, *L’Éventail de Jeanne* was supposed to animate the limbs of her young ballerinas just as Debussy’s piece was supposed to animate the limbs of his daughter’s golliwog doll.\(^6\) However, while the Cake Walk lampoons *Tristan* and its erotic melodrama, the ‘Wagneramente’ episode in the Fanfare (Ex. 1) evokes a different aspect of Wagner – namely, the brassy pomp that was well known from such popular concert excerpts as the ‘Entry of the Guests’ from *Tannhäuser* and the Wedding Music from *Lohengrin*. Ravel could easily have composed this passage without writing ‘Wagneramente’ above it, but he would then have forfeited an

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\(^5\) The other contributors to this one-act ballet were Pierre-Octave Ferroud, Jacques Ibert, Roland-Manuel, Marcel Delannoy, Albert Roussel, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric and Florent Schmitt. According to the score for piano four-hands (Paris: Heugel, 1929; plate no. 29811), the Fanfare is meant to be played at the opening of the ballet and repeated *notatim* towards its middle, after Delannoy’s Bourrée and before Roussel’s Sarabande.

\(^6\) According to the programme included in the piano score, the ballerinas did not actually dance to the introductory Fanfare during its first public performance at the Académie Nationale de Musique (Paris Opéra) on 4 March 1929. Nevertheless, both the dance and the dancers are present by implication: the Fanfare incorporates the ballet by framing it, while also calling the fledgling ballerinas to order with its miniature reveille.
opportunity to announce his intention both to enrich children’s music with some adult irony and to participate in a vibrant and long-standing tradition of musical parody. As Chabrier, Fauré, Messager and Debussy had already shown, few things were more droll than to incorporate Wagnerian grandiosity into genres – social dance, ballet, children’s music – that were so ill-suited to it.7

The humorous effect of both the Cake Walk and the Fanfare, however, is threatened by their chronology; composed well after the heyday of French Wagnerism (about 1880–1900), they would seem to lack the topicality on which parody often feeds. Davinia Caddy has recently underscored a certain topicality to the Cake Walk by demonstrating its involvement with contemporary trends in popular French culture, including American band music, early film and the circus, as well as the more obvious minstrelsy.8 Moreover, she makes a claim for its personal relevance to Debussy, insofar as he would have identified with the clownish performer of the Cake Walk. Although Caddy does not draw the Wagnerian allusion into her argument, we could easily do so by suggesting that the reference to Tristan is the artist’s self-portrait as a young Wagnerite, especially since he knew this opera so well.9 Debussy might even be cueing our response by incorporating something like a laugh track into the score itself – namely, the pianissimo chuckling that sounds after each statement of the Sehnsuchtsmotiv (Ex. 2).

Ex. 2: ‘Golliwog’s Cake Walk’ (bb. 58–63) from Debussy, Children’s Corner (for solo piano).

It is more difficult to claim either topicality or personal relevance for the Wagnerian allusion in the Fanfare. Not only did Ravel compose it almost two

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7 Lest we think that these parodies, as instances of ‘modernist cool’, have mastered the Wagnerian legacy once and for all, Lawrence Kramer reminds us that ‘the force of symbolic investiture has a way of reaffirming itself willy-nilly’. Kramer, ‘Enchantment and Modernity: Wagner the Symptom’, in Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss (Berkeley, 2004), 114.


9 A detailed analytical study of Wagner’s influence on the French composer is Robin Holloway, Debussy and Wagner (London, 1979), while a more focused, sketch-oriented study of this phenomenon is Carolyn Abbate, ‘Tristan in the Composition of Pelleas’, 19th-Century Music, 5 (1981), 117–41. Towards the end of her essay, Abbate adduces a section from a preliminary draft of Pelleas whose text setting seems to create an analogy between Golaud’s murder of Pelleas and Wagner’s threat to Debussy as a young French composer at the fin de siècle (140). In my reading of the Cake Walk, Debussy takes revenge on this earlier oppression by skewering not only his symbolic father but also his former self.
decades after Debussy had composed the Cake Walk, but there is also little evidence of Ravel’s direct engagement with Wagner’s music.\(^{10}\) Further, its allusion is neither as extensive nor as complex as the one in Debussy’s piece, and would probably not even be recognisable without the label Ravel applied to it. Simply put, the reference is too little and too late to be effective; if historians happen to omit the Fanfare from their short list of French parodies of Wagner, we have little reason to chide them for it.

While the Fanfare may constitute a weak attempt at parody, the general claim that subtends it – namely, the incongruity between one repertoire and the other, the text and its intertext – still holds. At the risk of overgeneralisation, we can express this incongruity in a series of dichotomies: if Wagner’s music emphasises gravity, profundity and interiority, Ravel’s inclines towards levity, simplicity and exteriority; and if Wagner’s output embodies the expressivity, informality, monumentality and chromaticism characteristic of Romanticism, Ravel’s oeuvre tends towards the inexpressivity, formalism, miniaturism and diatonicism associated with neo-classical Modernism.\(^{11}\) According to this scheme, both composers are totems that, in their diametrical opposition, mark the boundaries of their respective historical, cultural and aesthetic domains: the nineteenth century versus the twentieth century, Romanticism versus Modernism, German versus French, and so forth.

It must have been this perception of absolute incompatibility that compelled Arbie Orenstein to claim in his seminal biography *Ravel: Man and Musician* (1975) that ‘the aesthetic distance’ between Ravel and Wagner ‘can perhaps be measured only in terms of light-years’.\(^{12}\) We cannot dismiss this claim out of hand, since no one has yet entertained the possibility of a direct and significant relation between the two.\(^{13}\) However, if we ever wished to re-open this cold case, a good first step would be to adopt a dialectical perspective – not to eliminate the difference between the two composers, but to make it more productive.

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\(^{10}\) As is well known, Ravel’s friend Ricardo Viñes describes him weeping at a performance of the *Tristan* Prelude on 1 November 1896. In addition, the framing harmony in Ravel’s *melodie* on Roland de Marès’s ‘La ballade de la reine morte d’aimer’ – a poem about unrequited love in a medieval era – is a half-diminished seventh chord in the same registral arrangement as the famous *Tristan* chord. While they may be interesting in their own right, they do not necessarily paint Ravel as a devoted Wagnerian.

\(^{11}\) A detailed, authoritative account of this movement is Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music from the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* (Rochester, 1996).

\(^{12}\) Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York, 1991), 122. Orenstein pairs Wagner with Beethoven in this comparison, but the relationship between Beethoven and Ravel is an entirely different matter – one which I do not broach here. A standard life-and-works account in German, Theo Hirsbrunner’s *Maurice Ravel: Sein Leben, Sein Werk* (Laaber, 1989), also claims that French musical Wagnerism had ‘long been overcome’ [la¨ngst u¨berwunden] by the time Ravel began to compose in the 1890s (108).

\(^{13}\) Stephen Zank does make a link between Ravel and Wagner, insofar as the latter helped to inspire French writers and composers to conceive of art synaesthetically; examples of such art in Ravel include *Miroirs* and *Gaspard de la nuit*, according to Zank. Nonetheless, he explicitly denies any direct influence of Wagner on Ravel, either aesthetically or musically. My contention here, however, is that such an influence can be established. See Zank, *Irony and Sound: The Music of Maurice Ravel* (Rochester, 2009), 223–67.
The two essays Adorno wrote about Ravel are helpful in this regard. In the one published in 1930, Adorno argues that the marked contrast between Wagner’s music and Ravel’s qualifies the French composer as ‘the last anti-Wagnerian of a situation in which the spell of Bayreuth had otherwise completely dissipated’.  

From a dialectical point of view, Ravel is not simply different from Wagner but represents the antithesis that sprang from the Wagnerian thesis. Moreover, in the context of the entire essay, which invests Ravel with an acute awareness of his mortality and the passing of his generation, Adorno’s description of the composer as the ‘last anti-Wagnerian’ suggests that Ravel may have had a nostalgic attachment to both Wagner and French Wagnerism, two admittedly central and potentially formative presences within his obsolescent world.  

Admittedly rather common among French musicians of the fin de siècle, the anti-Wagnerian Wagnerian – the Wagnerian malgré lui – had its most famous example in Nietzsche, and not only because he ended his diatribe against the German composer in The Case of Wagner by confessing feelings of ‘gratitude’ towards him.

A dialectical perspective is even more explicit in the unpublished essay from about 1928 in which Adorno invokes the notion of sexual desire to distinguish Ravel’s music from other repertoires, especially Wagner’s; while the German dwells on the lover’s alternation between frenzy and languor, the Frenchman attends instead to the idealised image of the beloved. However, when making this argument he describes Ravel as ‘Wagner’s last foe, since the latter’s conception of erotic music is so similar and yet so dangerously opposed to his own.’ How, we may wonder, can the two conceptions be ‘so similar’ if they oppose each other? And how can an opposition that helps to differentiate one conception from another be ‘dangerous’? The solution to these riddles resides, once again, in a dialectical, psychological and genealogical viewpoint. Born from the thetical Other, the antithetical Self incurs a debt that it can never repay, but whose compulsion to do so generates a variety of responses to its creditor, which should be familiar to us from Bloomian and post-Bloomian theories of influence: rejection, contradiction, assimilation, and parody, but never indifference. Thus strong opposition need not hold opponents ‘light-years’ apart, but can stimulate a fruitful rapprochement.

This article seeks to perform a rapprochement between Ravel and Wagner in a process that divides into three phases. First I analyse the comments Ravel made about Wagner in his articles, interviews, and correspondence. Next, I bring to

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14 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Ravel’, in Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 17, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main, 1982), 60–5, at 60. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.
light a previously unrecognised allusion to *Parsifal* in Ravel’s Trio (1914), which he began writing shortly after he attended the opera’s premiere in Paris. Finally, I track *Parsifal*’s influence on two additional works that Ravel composed on either side of the Trio – *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909–12) and *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* (1920–5) – and discuss the consequences of his engagement with Wagner for a dialectical understanding of his style. As the result of this investigation, I hope to have expanded our understanding of French Wagnerism by incorporating Ravel and his work into its catalogue of events, criticism and music.

### Laloy versus Lalo

As a young musician in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, Ravel would have encountered Wagner at every turn. In addition to the frequent performance of Wagner’s music at the Opéra and the Concerts Lamoureux, as well as at private venues such as the ‘Petit Bayreuth’ and the home of Wilhelm Enoch (Ravel’s first publisher), the German was the subject of continual discussion and debate, due in particular to critics and artists returning from their pilgrimages to Bayreuth and Munich, and to the authors of a stream of monographs on Wagner.¹⁸ Even though a twenty-one-year-old Ravel is supposed to have wept at an orchestral performance of the *Tristan* Prelude, he did not react as a public figure to Wagner’s music until Louis Laloy’s *enquête* (survey), which appeared in the April and May 1909 issues of the journal *La Grande Revue*.

In this survey Laloy prompted twelve composers to respond to another critic’s suggestion that French musicians re-establish their link to Wagner. The critic in question was Pierre Lalo, whose article about French Wagnerism and Debussyism had appeared in the 18 August 1908 issue of *Le Temps*, the daily newspaper for which Lalo had already been writing for a decade. Laloy introduces the survey with a summary that centres on the following two points from Lalo’s article: French musicians of the younger generation have rejected Wagner only to replace his influence with Debussy’s; since Debussysm produces stillborn miniatures, French music might fare better by returning to Wagnerism. Admittedly, Laloy was not neutral about either possibility. On the one hand, he was a staunch supporter of Debussy. On the other, he clearly expressed his attitude towards the German composer in the statement that Lalo ‘would like to reopen our borders to the very same Wagner that we escorted there with cries of liberation only a few years ago’.¹⁹


Laloy’s take on Lalo may not be wildly inaccurate, but it is wanting. Even if we felt that it were merely par for the course amid the factious French music journalism of that time, we should still acknowledge the considerable liability it creates for the survey. Not only does it provide the basis for the ensuing discussion, but it is also the sole source of Lalo’s arguments for everyone who did not have the opportunity to read the original article.

If we look back at Lalo’s article, we discover a number of items that Laloy failed to mention. For example, the debate about Debussy and Wagner was initiated not by Lalo himself but rather by an unnamed German asserting in a letter that contemporary French music, as represented by Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, cannot rival Wagner’s contributions either in artistic power or in historical importance. Unlike his German correspondent, Lalo is not primarily concerned with condemning Debussy and exalting Wagner but rather wishes to critique imitation as a modus operandi for young composers, due to its tendency to make the original trite and the spontaneous mechanical; he even states his position concisely in the overview at the head of the article, which reads in part: ‘Wagnerian imitation. Debussyian imitation. Disadvantages of both’ (emphasis mine). To his mind, young composers have misunderstood the lesson to be learned from Debussy’s ‘independent and original oeuvre’, which is supposed to inspire them to ‘be themselves’ rather than to ‘be Debussy’.

Laloy’s summary leads us to believe that Lalo condemned Debussy’s music, praised Wagner to the skies, and lumped together all young French composers as wayward Debussyists. On the contrary, Lalo does not subsume all of contemporary French music under the heading of Debussyism but instead leaves space for ‘independents’ such as d’Indy, Dukas and Magnard. Further, he celebrates the debut of *Pelléas* as a groundbreaking event in recent French musical history, lauds Debussy for his *sentiment poétique* (poetic feeling or sensibility), admits the potential for greatness in miniaturist art, and acknowledges the growing audience for this work. Finally, he argues that, even if *Pelléas* had not catalysed anti-Wagnerism in France, the French would have rejected Wagner anyway for the many aspects of his music that dissonated with a contemporary national perspective, including an ‘aggressive philosophical Romanticism’, an excessive appeal to complexity and profundity, and an overuse of symbolism. Although Lalo does not recommend imitating either composer, the respective consequences of these imitations differ, as he explains in the central passage of the article:

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All imitators take the wrong path, but [the imitators of Debussy] are more assured to get lost than the others, due to the exceptionality of their model. It is still conceivable to imitate someone like Wagner [imiter un Wagner], who is immense and encompasses all music; nevertheless, what has Wagnerian imitation produced? But it’s pure deviance to imitate someone like Debussy [imiter un Debussy], who is narrow, subtle and rarefied. The art of these young people can be reduced to the exploitation of certain trifling procedures, with the result that it is becoming pettier and pettier. We almost wish [On souhaite presque] to restore Wagnerian influence in France.22

This passage conveys two important aspects of Lalo’s argument that Laloy misrepresents in his summary. Lalo does not actually say that one should imitate Wagner and avoid imitating Debussy, but rather cites them in order to refer to the imitability of the types they represent; in his understanding, composers such as Wagner who draw upon a wide range of materials are easier to imitate than those such as Debussy who are more selective. Lalo also emphasises that he is not recommending to French composers that they write like Wagner: first, with the rhetorical question, ‘what has Wagnerian imitation produced?’ (implicit response: nothing of lasting value), and second, with the adverb ‘almost’, which appears in the last sentence of the paragraph. Without this qualifier, Lalo would indeed be guilty of the crime that Laloy accuses him to have committed – namely, to have called for the restoration of French Wagnerism. With it, however, Lalo negates this wish and thereby compels us to remember the reasons he has already given for this negation: mere imitation is never artistically sufficient, rarely advisable and usually sterile; Wagnerism is incompatible with French taste; a return to Wagner is practically impossible and stylistically unthinkable in the wake of Pelléas. Ironically, an error that Laloy makes in transcribing these passages – substituting the conditional ‘would wish’ [souhaiterait] for the indicative ‘wish’ [souhaite] – only ends up intensifying the negation of the wish by making it part of a contrafactual statement.23

Lalo’s misreading of Lalo’s article testifies to the fervid pitch of French musical politics during this era, as well as the tendency for its participants to retreat to their respective trenches rather than explore more moderate positions.24 Just as important, though, is the evidence it provides for the continuing ability of Wagner’s name to provoke a defensive overreaction almost a decade after French Wagnerism

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22 ‘Et tous les imitateurs font fausse route, mais ces imitateurs-là se perdent plus sûrement que les autres, à cause de la singularité de leur modèle. Imiter un Wagner, immense, et qui concentrait en lui la musique tout entière, cela se concevait encore; et pourtant qu’a produit l’imitation de Wagner? Mais, imiter un Debussy, étroit et rare, c’est pure aberration. L’art de ces jeunes gens se réduit à l’exploitation de quelques menus procédés; et cela devient de plus en plus petit, petit, petit. On souhaite presque de restaurer en France l’influence wagnérienne’. Lalo, ‘La Musique’.

23 The full contrafactual proposition, followed by its factual refutation, would read something like this: ‘If it were possible and desirable to do so, we would almost wish to restore Wagnerian influence in France, but it is not, and so we do not wish this.’ Laloy also errs somewhat in failing to recognise that Lalo’s description of Wagner as a ‘colossus’ is actually a tongue-in-cheek reference back to his German correspondent’s adulatory description of Wagner’s operas as ‘colossal art’ and ‘the work of a giant’.

24 A major account of actors and debates during this era is Jane F. Fulcher, French Cultural Politics & Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War (New York, 1999).
is supposed to have subsided. This, then, is the context in which Ravel makes his first public statement about Wagner, a statement which attests to his allegiances and those of contemporary French music at large.

Ravel and the enquête

The April 1909 publication in *La Grande Revue* of the enquête spilled over into the May issue, apparently because Ravel and Florent Schmitt sent in their contributions late. Here is the full text of Ravel’s response to the question whether French musicians in 1909 ought to re-establish their link to Wagner:

*Vraiment il y aurait beaucoup trop à dire là-dessus. Voir d'abord en Wagner ce qu'il fut surtout, un musicien magnifique. Il est trop tard. On aurait l'air de faire du paradoxe après Nietzsche, Catulle Mendès, et M. Joséphin Péladan.*


(In truth, there would be much too much to say about it. Let’s first recognise in Wagner what he was above all else: a magnificent musician.

It’s too late. After Nietzsche, Catulle Mendès, and Mr. Joséphin Péladan, we would seem to be committing a paradox.

… The wish is unique? Hardly! I rediscovered it in an old article. There’s ‘Wagner’ instead of ‘Debussy’ and ‘Rossini’ instead of ‘Wagner’. It’s signed: Scudo.)

Ravel’s text is so terse and cagey that we can barely discern the question it is supposed to answer. Indeed, Ravel’s initial claim that there is ‘much too much to say’ about Wagner and his legacy only manages to raise the text’s brevity into further relief. Different from Wagner in so many respects, Ravel surprises us by describing the German as a ‘magnificent musician’, so the little he says goes a long way.

But Ravel’s response is fundamentally a refusal to respond, which he justifies with the following reasons: the matter is too big to grapple with in such a limited space; the historical moment for such discussion has passed; and the desire to restore Wagnerism in France is merely another instance of the perennial attempt by critics to depreciate the present by invoking the past.

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26 Ravel’s general point is well taken, but it may not be factual, since I have not been able to locate any article in which Scudo makes this specific claim. In his major article on Wagner – a review of the premiere performance in Paris of the German’s music at three orchestral concerts (25 January, 1 February and 8 February 1860) – he does not explicitly pit Wagner against Rossini. See Paul Scudo, ‘Revue musicale. La musique de M. Richard Wagner’, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 26 (1860), 227–38.

27 It is probably not coincidental that Ravel is echoing Baudelaire, who also exclaims at the beginning of his essay on Wagner and *Parsifal* that, having so much to say, he could not possibly say it all. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s interpretation of Baudelaire’s claim — which clearly partakes of the aesthetic discourse of sublimity — might also help us understand the philosophical resonance of Ravel’s response: ‘The message is clear: music infinitely overwhelms the possibilities of writing’. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures of Wagner)*, trans. Felicia McCarren (Stanford, 1994), 4.
Tensions and contradictions within this response, however, compel us to examine it more closely. The dire proclamation of ‘it’s too late’ stands in stark contrast to the preceding claims about Wagner’s ‘magnificence’ and the ‘much too much’ that still remains to be said about him. Indeed, if Wagner were indeed ‘magnificent’, would he not still be worthy of discussion among critics and emulation by composers? Unfortunately, we cannot resolve the contradiction between simultaneous assertions of the timeliness and the untimeliness of this debate simply by identifying the subject of ‘it’s too late’. It is natural for us to assume that the referent is the question of reinstating Wagnerian influence on French composers, but the list of critics in the subsequent sentence challenges this assumption. If we interpret ‘it’ as referring instead to the reception of Wagner in music criticism, we have a better chance at unravelling this knotty text.

For Ravel, criticism is not only distinct from composition but can harm it. As he proposes in the final sentence of the response, critics are all too susceptible to a conservatism that likes to wedge the past against the present in an act of patriarchal suppression; given his immense authority and esteem as a historical figure, Wagner is a particularly dangerous weapon for critics to wield against a younger generation of composers. Moreover, Ravel’s description of Wagner as ‘above all else’ a musician implicitly criticises as dilettantish and possibly irrelevant any discourse focused on something other than his musical accomplishments. As Ravel surely knew, an irony lay in the fact that Wagner was the worst offender, due to the example he set among present and future Wagnerians for speculating about a wide range of topics. And yet, as Ravel probably also knew, it is not so easy to separate the musical wheat from the non-musical chaff. This truism is especially applicable to Wagner, whose ideology and ambitions were integral to his artistic production and would provide an almost inescapable context for the theory and practice of Western art at the end of the nineteenth century.

We encounter a similar dilemma upon scrutinising the sentence about the ‘paradox’. Despite its apparent intent to shut down any further consideration of Wagner, it leaves open several loopholes. First, as an artist who took a page from Oscar Wilde in claiming to be ‘artificial by nature’, and whose music was widely appreciated for its paradoxical qualities, Ravel may actually be understood to invite the revival of Wagner reception by identifying it as a paradox. Next, his selection and ordering of the three critics in terms of chronology and decreasing renown demonstrate a connoisseurship and investment in criticism that undermine his complaints about the practice. Nietzsche, whose fame allowed Ravel in 1909 to cite him solely by his last name, published his final book in 1888 and died in 1900; Catulle Mendès had just died, and the ‘Monsieur’ applied to Péladan is presumably meant to indicate that he was still alive when Ravel was writing his response. Third, to name only three critics – none of whom Ravel would have considered to be a bonafide professional musician – is to suggest that there are still many perspectives on Wagner that have not yet been aired, especially those focused on his music. Finally, his citation of this trio implies that they constitute a representative sampling of Wagnerian criticism and possibly even express the last word in Wagner reception. If our inference is correct, we are then compelled
to ask what they had to say about Wagner and how it might further illuminate Ravel’s position.

The sequence Nietzsche–Mendès–Péladan is notable for comprising a variety of attitudes towards Wagner. The most idolatrous of the three, Péladan expressed his esteem for the German composer in an 1894 survey of his operas (*Le Théâtre complet de Wagner*) and several instances of fiction (the plays *Le Fils des étoiles* and *Babylon*, and the novels *La Victoire du mari* and *Le Pantéhé*, among others).\(^{28}\) Ravel deflates this figure somewhat by referring to him as neither the famous ‘Péladan’ nor the self-proclaimed ‘Sâr Péladan’ but rather the more pedestrian ‘Mr. Joséphin Péladan’, thereby placing him once again amid the multitude of ‘middling souls’ (âmes moyennes) from whom the self-appointed czar wished to distinguish himself.\(^{29}\)

If this is what Ravel meant to do, why did he do it? At first, we may suppose that he simply wanted to distance himself from Péladan due to the latter’s distasteful idolatry of Wagner. However, it is also possible that Ravel disagreed with Péladan’s specific understanding of Wagner’s contribution as an artist; the dramatist’s claim in *Le Théâtre complet* that it is an ‘error and a lie’ to describe Wagner as ‘above all a musician’ directly contradicts the composer’s assessment in the 1909 survey.\(^{30}\)

Poet, playwright, critic and erstwhile husband of the fervent Wagnerian Judith Gautier, Catulle Mendès may have been on Ravel’s mind for having fallen to his death on a railroad track in February 1909. In comparison with Péladan, Mendès was more ambivalent towards Wagner. While the tone of his 1886 monograph *Richard Wagner* is generally celebratory, he nevertheless reminds us in the Preface of the gratuitous cruelty of ‘Une capitulation’ (Wagner’s farce about the Franco-Prussian war), lampoons the composer in the chapter titled ‘Épitre au roi de Thuringe’, and, in the Epilogue, cautions young French composers against imitating Wagner’s essentially Germanic music.\(^{31}\)

If Mendès harboured some ambivalence towards Wagner, Nietzsche swung hard between extremes, transforming himself from an enthusiastic advocate in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) to a scathing critic in *The Case of Wagner* (1888) and other late writings. Yet, despite the near-hysterical denunciation of Wagner in the latter – where he famously claims that Wagner is a ‘neurosis’ that has ‘made music sick’ – he also acknowledges the composer’s value.\(^{32}\) According to Nietzsche, if Wagner’s music is corrupt, at least it is thoroughly and unabashedly so, and thus exemplifies ‘courage, will, conviction in corruption’ (emphasis his).\(^{33}\) In ‘Nietzsche contra Wagner’ he also says that, as a pure expression of the ‘modern soul’ (âme moderne), Wagner’s music has been beneficial for

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\(^{29}\) Joséphin Péladan, *Le Théâtre complet de Wagner* (les XI opéras scène par scène), avec notes biographiques et critiques (Paris, 1894), x.


\(^{32}\) Nietzsche, ‘The Case of Wagner’, 240.

forcing him to confront modernity in its cultural decadence, and recognise himself in his complicity as a fellow decadent — a self-accusation that presumably acknowledges the hysteria in his own reaction against Wagner.\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, he supposes that Wagner's diseased music is also effective as a 'stimulus of life' that ultimately impels its subject to formulate healthier ideals over and against it.\textsuperscript{35}

Nietzsche dubs his main counter-ideal 'Mediterranean music' and describes it as 'a mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art that, like a bright flame, blazes into an unclouded sky!'\textsuperscript{36} Although, in \textit{The Case of Wagner}, he exalts Bizet's \textit{Carmen} as a prime example of this musical type, we can easily locate other plausible candidates in early Ravel, including \textit{feux d'eau} (1901), 'Alborada del gracioso' from \textit{Miroirs} (1905), the \textit{Introduction et allegro} (1905) and 'Feria' from \textit{Rapsodie espagnole} (1907). However, in each of these instances anxious, melancholy and chromatic strains, usually appearing in a piece's interior, belie a gay façade; this 'decadent dialectics' — a process of identity formation whereby decadence and its opposite produce the one out of the other — appears equally in Nietzsche, whose awareness of his own decadence not only spurs his hope for transcendence, but also periodically returns to overcloud this hope.\textsuperscript{37}

For both Nietzsche and Ravel, decadent and, by association, Wagnerian topics, are not a thing of the past but an aspect of the present that continues to aid them in their self-fashioning as thinkers and artists. This is probably the reason that Nietzsche cannot seem to end \textit{The Case of Wagner}, as is evident in its two Postscripts and an Epilogue; as cited previously, the 'gratitude' he expresses towards Wagner in the final sentence of the Epilogue implicitly acknowledges an ongoing debt that renders any conclusion merely provisional. If the motivation for this polemic initially appeared to be the desire to pronounce the last word in Wagner reception, it finishes by abandoning this goal and leaving room, instead, for the endless 'rumination' he identifies elsewhere as essential to understanding his writings and, perhaps, all writing.\textsuperscript{38} If Nietzsche was not done with Wagner, we have good reason to suspect that the thoughtful Ravel was not either. After all, this is the same person who set great stock by the request of his composition teacher,


\textsuperscript{35} Nietzsche, ‘The Case of Wagner’, 241.

\textsuperscript{36} Nietzsche, ‘Nietzsche contra Wagner’, 281.


Fauré, to re-examine a piece by Ravel that he had just rejected, in the event that he might have misjudged it.39

The other eleven responses to the survey, as well as Laloy’s summary comments, provide a further context for interpreting Ravel’s contribution. The most obvious difference between this submission and the others is its greater brevity; the only other response that comes close to its seventy-four words is the single paragraph by Raymond Bonheur, who uses 141 words merely to defer to Laloy’s better judgement on the matter. This context therefore brings Ravel’s refusal to answer the central question of the enquête into even sharper relief.

As for its content, Ravel’s response lies on the more positive end of the spectrum for declaring Wagner to have been a ‘magnificent musician’. More specifically, we can situate Ravel between two groups: one comprising Alfredo Casella and Gustave Samazeuilh, both of whom uphold Wagner’s music as still worthy of study, and another comprising Gabriel Dupont, Jean Hure and Laloy himself, all of whom seek to balance its strengths (grandeur and orchestration) against its weaknesses (ponderousness and obscurity); although Ravel gives Wagner higher praise than anyone else, it is mitigated by his judgement about the belatedness of this initiative (‘it’s too late’). At the other end of the spectrum, Florent Schmitt, Albert Roussel and three other composers express nationalist and isolationist values in rejecting Wagner and his influence on French music. Given the popularity and predictability of this protectionist brand of patriotism, Ravel implicitly rejects it by formulating his response as he did. At the same time, he preserves a measure of openness towards Wagner and his legacy. Finally, Ravel stands out for being the only one of the twelve respondents to demonstrate an awareness of Wagner’s critical reception.

Wars of succession

Ravel’s career surged over the next five years (1909–14), during which time he not only hit his stride as a creative artist but also recognised and embraced his potential as an important historical actor. In June 1909 he accepted a prestigious commission from Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, which were sensationally popular at that time in Paris, and soon thereafter witnessed the premiere performance of four of his major stage works: an opera (L’Heure espagnole) in 1911 and three ballets (Ma Mère l’oye, Adélaïde, Daphnis et Chloé) in the first half of 1912. He withdrew from the Société Nationale and collaborated with other former students of Fauré to found the Société Musicale Indépendante in 1910; as evidence for the substantial rivalry of these two societies, the SMI produced thirty-nine concerts – all brimming with premieres – to the SN’s forty-one during a period that stretched from the debut of the SMI (20 April 1910) to the beginning of the First World War (28 July 1914).40

39 This episode is reported in Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, Ravel et nous: l’homme, l’ami, le musicien (Geneva, 1945), 56.
40 A thorough comparison of these two societies, as well as a complete listing of their programmes, can be found in Michel Duchesneau, L’Avant-garde musicale à Paris de 1871 à 1939 (Sprimont, 1997).
Another testament to Ravel’s desire to play a more prominent role on the national stage in these five years is his emergence as a music critic. Considering the attitude he expressed towards this profession in Laloy’s survey, we might be surprised that he would wish to become what he had previously seemed to despise. However, we could also interpret this new career path more positively as the expression of a desire to supplement his ongoing efforts to shape musical life in Paris as a composer and concert programmer by articulating his point of view in a third form. And whenever he wished, he could also use this medium to counter the opinions of his opponents and to overturn any mistaken preconceptions his readers may have held about him.

His crusade against the critics is a common element in these essays, continuing almost without interruption from the 1909 enquête to his review of Stravinsky’s Le Rossignol in 1914. The most forceful rebuke appears in an article he wrote about Debussy’s orchestral Images and published in February 1913. He sets the tone by placing at the head of the article an epigraph by the bellettrist Antoine Bauderon de Séneçé (1643–1737), who identifies the ‘jealousy which one feels towards the moderns’ as ‘often the better part of the admiration which one shows for the ancients’. Ravel then assigns persons to the three roles staked out in the epigraph: Wagner is the admirable ancient, Debussy the reviled modern, and Lalo the jealous critic. Should the reader not recall the specific moment of Lalo’s recent offence, Ravel pointedly cites the article that provoked Laloy’s survey.

Although Ravel ultimately finds Debussy’s critics to have been unsuccessful in their attacks on the composer, he still cannot refrain from putting them in their place by describing them as ‘morose incompetents who have never felt the ardent passion inspired by these landscapes and this picturesqueness’ in the Images, and who cannot discover the musical expression of that passion in a composition.

The critique that Ravel aims at Lalo and his ilk also involves refuting the opposition they wished to establish between Wagner and the Debussyists. In a review of the Concerts Lamoureux from March 1912, Ravel not only avoids making any negative comments about the German composer but also actually marvels at the ‘extraordinary spontaneity’ of his music, ‘which synthesized all the sensibility of the nineteenth century’ and exerted a ‘powerful attraction’ upon its audience.

Ravel then dovetails his discussion of Wagner into a history of recent French music.

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41 In his essay on Wagner, Baudelaire rationalises this choice in a way that would also have suited Ravel as a cerebral artist: ‘All the great poets naturally and fatally become critics. I feel sorry for poets guided only by instinct; I find them incomplete’ [Tous les grands poètes deviennent naturellement, fatalement, critiques. Je plains les poètes que guide le seul instinct; je les crois incomplets]. Baudelaire, Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser, 29.


43 Ravel mistakenly dates the article to September 1908, but it was actually published in August.

44 Ravel, ‘Regarding Claude Debussy’s Images’, 368.

Even today, when one hears the resounding Venusberg music [from Tannhäuser], which is one of the most representative examples of Wagner’s art, it is understandable that after this explosion of passionate joy and suffering, after this roaring outburst of pagan vitality, the need must have been felt for a peaceful, even austere, retreat. In France, this meditation produced various results: first, from the Franckist cloister, there emerged a solemn procession of artists whose devotion to the will [la volonté] has only grown stronger over time. This was followed by a less organised group of young people with a fresh new spirit who let their instinct sing freely; their sensibility sought to perceive its slightest external manifestations profoundly, and with more subtlety than their predecessors.

This passage might seem simply to narrate the succession from Wagner to Franck to Debussy, but it is actually more polemical than that. Although Ravel acknowledges that the Franckists preceded the Debussyists, he nevertheless puts them on equal footing as part of the same ‘peaceful, even austere, retreat’ in France from the ‘roaring outburst of pagan vitality’ in Wagner. This equivalence provides the basis for a comparison in which one fares better than the other: while the Franckists (read: d’Indy’s Société Nationale) are overly wilful and dogmatic in their approach to art, the Debussyists (read: Ravel’s Société Musicale Indépendante) follow their instincts, which allows them greater subtlety in their art. Both groups are post-Wagnerian, but in this article the Debussyists arguably become the rightful heirs of Wagner and the Romantic spirit that he embodies; the natural ‘spontaneity’ of the latter resurfaces in the Debussyian ‘instinct’, not in the Franckist ‘will’. By appropriating the inheritance that the Franckists claimed as their own, Ravel turns the prevailing narrative upside-down.

Ravel expands upon this bold assertion in a January 1913 review of d’Indy’s Fervaal, which had just been performed at the Paris Opéra. Although he complains once again about the general tendency of critics to condemn new music for being either too Wagnerian or not Wagnerian enough, he is nevertheless forced to agree with the long-standing judgement that Fervaal is ‘entirely Wagnerian . . . by the very essence of its music, by its theatrical scheme, its philosophy, the realisation of this

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46 Three aspects of this sentence suggest Ravel’s familiarity with Baudelaire’s 1861 essay on Tannhäuser. First, he invokes Tannhäuser as the quintessential Wagner opera. Next, he seems to acknowledge Baudelaire’s testimony by referring to the audience’s astonishment at the Parisian début of its music. Finally, his metaphorical language echoes Baudelaire’s: ‘Everything that these words imply – will, desire, concentration, nervous intensity, explosion – are apparent and palpable in his works. . . . I love this surfeit of health, these excesses of will that are inscribed in his works like bitumen burning on the ground of a volcano’ [Tout ce qu’impliquent les mots: volonté, désir, concentration, intensité nerveuse, explosion, se sent et se fait deviner dans ses œuvres. . . . J’aime ces excès de santé, ces débordements de volonté que s’inscrivent dans les œuvres comme le bitume enflammé dans le sol d’un volcan]. Baudelaire, Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser, 55. Baudelaire’s take on Wagner, in turn, is based to some degree on Théophile Gautier’s review of the performance of Tannhäuser at Wiesbaden, which appeared in the 29 September 1857 issue of Le Moniteur. Gautier not only associates Wagner’s medievalism with German Romanticism, but also calls him a ‘paroxyste’ (97) – an artist who seeks to maximise the intensity of his expression. Gautier, ‘Sur Tannhäuser’, Le Moniteur, 29 September 1857, reprinted in ibid., 95–106.

philosophy, by the symbolic role of the characters and their obscure language'.

Ravel recognises that the subject matter of *Fervaal* is well suited to a Wagnerian treatment but still chides d’Indy for adopting these elements wholesale; consequently, the libretto is overly laden with symbolism and the music is excessively freighted with leitmotifs. Pressed to compare the Wagnerian original with the d’Indyian copy, Ravel exalts the former and condemns the latter.

Wagner’s own work offers the most complete example of assimilation on the grandest scale. Uniting the most diverse materials, this giant constructed a splendid and original palace, whose dimensions were proportioned to his stature. Mr. d’Indy moved into this grandiose edifice, carefully shutting its doors and windows. The fiery sun, which the architect allowed into his abode, was replaced by candles of exceptional clarity, but of less heat. In this artificial light, objects become tarnished, taking on a moribund appearance. The symbol of Fervaal proclaiming the victory of life and love while bearing a woman’s corpse towards the heights is more significant than M. d’Indy intended it to be.

Although the remaining paragraphs of Ravel’s review are devoted to praising various aspects of *Fervaal*, they do little to offset this stinging critique, which is even harsher than the comments he made earlier about the Franckists. D’Indy is no longer the leader of a ‘solemn procession’ of composers in ‘austere retreat’ from Wagner, but rather a squatter on Wagner’s estate who has violated this property by transforming its ‘splendid palace’ into a musty sarcophagus. Once again, a double negation embedded in this argument draws Ravel closer to Wagner; if d’Indy opposes Wagner and Ravel opposes d’Indy – albeit in different ways – then Ravel might actually share more with Wagner than the avowed Wagnerian himself.

**The shadow of a doubt**

However appealing and convincing Ravel’s arguments may be, they are potentially undermined by several inconsistencies in his actions. As previously mentioned, it is surprising to see the composer become a music critic after having expressed such negativity towards the profession in his response to Laloy’s survey. But it is even more disconcerting to witness his adoption of the same tactics for which he condemned Lalo – namely, using Wagner to diminish the achievements of present-day French composers. Ravel was undoubtedly aware of this contradiction, as is evident in his 1913 review of *Fervaal*. Although he begins the review by berating critics for their compulsion to belittle all new music by finding it to be derivative of the work of strong predecessors such as Wagner and Debussy,

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49 Ravel, ‘*Fervaal*’, 359–60.
he nevertheless continues by claiming that Fervaal is one of the few pieces to deserve this critique, before launching into a detailed and ultimately unflattering comparison of Fervaal with the Wagnerian music drama. But this attempt to differentiate his mode of criticism from Lalo’s ironically only brings him closer to it, since Ravel’s complaint that Fervaal suffers from its wholesale appropriation of Wagnerian elements ( declamation, philosophy, stage action, leitmotifs) echoes Lalo’s judgment about the tendency for imitation to produce trite and mechanical works. A year later Ravel would expand his critique of Fervaal into one encompassing French musical Wagnerism in general, which produced a ‘deplorable multitude of theatrical works, chamber music, and songs, whose disproportion, heaviness, and sadness were so uninspired, that they have not survived these twenty years’.  

We may be tempted to ask whether Ravel’s simultaneous rejection and emulation of Lalo rises to the level of hypocrisy, but the question that is more pertinent to our present enquiry concerns his sincerity. The more he invokes Wagner to undercut the achievements of d’Indy and his like-minded colleagues in the Société Nationale – just as he acknowledged other critics to have done in their invocation of ‘admirable’ predecessors – the more difficult it is for us to take his positive comments about the German composer at face value. Once raised, these doubts cast their shadow on other acts by Ravel whose intentions may have otherwise seemed clear. A case in point is his 7 June 1916 letter to the Committee of the National League for the Defense of French Music. In their official notice, the League called for banning wartime performances of ‘contemporary Austro-German works which are not yet in the public domain’ and for promoting the performance and publication of French music. Upon receiving a request to join the League, Ravel responded by writing a letter in which he declined the invitation and explained his decision by striking down their claims, one by one: those who wish to take ‘action’ against the enemy should join the war effort as he did, instead of trying to suppress transnational artistic exchange; the notion that music is primarily ‘economic and social’ is overly general and of limited application; the ban on German and Austro-Hungarian music would not help but rather hinder French composers by depriving them of ‘beneficial’ foreign influences such as Schoenberg, Bartók and Kodály; French music does not need special protection and is not intrinsically valuable simply because it is French; and so forth.

Wagner’s name does not appear either in the notice or in Ravel’s letter. Nonetheless, Arbie Orenstein senses his implication in this exchange and consequently ends his discussion of this episode with the observation that ‘Ravel made it a point to attend’ and applaud ‘enthusiastically’ one of the first performances of


Wagner’s music in Paris after the end of the war, presumably in continued demonstration of his opposition to the League’s xenophobia and protectionism.\(^{53}\) At first glance, we may think that Orenstein has made a leap of logic; not only did either side fail to mention Wagner but also his music was not technically at issue here, since it had already fallen into the public domain by 1916. On further review, though, the implication seems more plausible, at least on the part of the League, due to the explicit hostility towards Wagner that had been recently expressed by some of the most prominent members of the group.\(^{54}\)

Even if we were convinced that the League meant to condemn Wagner and Ravel meant to defend him, we still have reason to believe that Ravel’s fundamental motivation was not a deep attachment to the German but rather an ongoing involvement in the conflict between the SMI and the SN, whose members populated the ranks of the League, including Honorary President d’Indy. Indeed, just two years earlier he had voiced complaints that resembled those of the League. In a January 1914 review of *Francesca da Rimini* at the Opéra-Comique, Ravel scolds the company for refusing two operas by Frenchmen – *La Forêt bleue* by Louis Aubert (a fellow SMI member) and *Eros vainqueur* by Pierre de Bréville (an SN member!) – before he launches into a critique of the opera by Franco Leoni, ‘an Italian residing in London’. His grievance in this review is not only that the French operas were more deserving of production than the Italian one (which he pans as *verismo* hackwork), but also that the Opéra-Comique failed to fulfil its obligation as a national theatre which ‘receives a government subsidy specifically intended to promote works by French composers’.\(^{55}\) Although Ravel spends the second half of the review praising the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla and the production of his *La Vida breve* at the Opéra-Comique, it does not fully dispel the effect of the first half, which comes off as sharing more than a little with the xenophobia and protectionism in the League’s notice.

Ravel’s apparent praise for Wagner is further eroded by direct criticism. One object of this critique is Wagner’s orchestration, which, to Ravel’s ear, can sometimes sound like a less effective version of Meyerbeer’s ‘military music’.\(^{56}\) Another is his vocal writing, whose awkward qualities and harsh accentuation not only present a ‘dangerous example’ for other composers to follow but also seem to display ‘contempt’ for ‘the most expressive of sonorous instruments’.\(^{57}\) After having


\(^{54}\) Examples include the League’s ‘Honorary President’ Camille Saint-Saëns, whose series of articles condemning Wagner in Fall 1914 issues of *L’Écho de Paris* were collected and republished as *Germanophilie* (Paris, 1916), and its Secretary Jean Poulain (aka Octave Séré). A recent overview of French attitudes towards Wagner during the war is Marion Schmid, ‘À bas Wagner! The French Press Campaign against Wagner during World War I’, in *French Music, Culture, and National Identity*, 77–91.


taken Wagner to task in a review from 1914, Ravel makes a few concessions that can only be described as grudging: any aspects of Wagner that seem objectionable to him as a Frenchman might well be interpreted by a German as ‘virtues’; as an instance of this vice-turned-virtue, Wagner’s typically Germanic ‘long-windedness’ is ‘never entirely without significance’. 58

Thus the longer and more closely we examine Ravel’s utterances about Wagner, the bleaker is the prospect for creating any genuine rapprochement between the two. Nevertheless, a substantial possibility remains for casting Ravel’s attitude towards Wagner in a positive light: Parsifal. As we will see, several moments in Ravel’s music bear a striking affinity with aspects of Wagner’s last opera and perhaps even testify to a direct influence that Ravel intended for his listeners to recognise. First, however, we will examine the role that Parsifal played in Ravel’s career as a critic.

The Wagnerian downbeat of 1914

Midnight between 31 December 1913 and 1 January 1914 marked the expiration of the Berne Convention’s claim on Parsifal, which forbid staged performances of the opera outside of Bayreuth for thirty years after Wagner’s death in 1883. Although it was mounted elsewhere on several occasions – most famously by New York’s Metropolitan Opera in 1903 – the exceptionality of these occasions demonstrates the Convention’s overall effectiveness. 59 But this prohibition also had positive consequences. One was the special aura it conferred upon Parsifal: not only was it Wagner’s last opera, a ‘late’ work (and thus the fruit of a lifetime’s wisdom), and the sole member of a genre that the composer invented specially for it (a Bühnenweihfestpiel, a ‘stage consecration festival play’), but also the prohibition made Parsifal into the object par excellence of the pilgrimage to Bayreuth, since it was specifically intended for that auditorium and, for three decades, could only be viewed there in its integrity. 60 The prohibition also transformed 1 January 1914 into a date of worldwide significance for producers and consumers alike; every major opera house felt the pressure to stage Parsifal on or around that day, and every opera aficionado felt compelled to attend.

While the Paris Opéra may have split the event in two – placing the répétition générale on 1 January and the création on 4 January – it still made quite a stir, as is evident by the breadth of its coverage and the eminence of its reporters. In addition to professional music critics such as Gaston Carraud, Jean Chantavoine, Pierre Lalo, Louis Laloy and Émile Vuillermoz, the ranks of reviewers also included the composers Gabriel Fauré, Charles Koechlin, Alfred Bruneau, Reynaldo Hahn and Maurice Ravel. 61 As in Laloy’s enquête, the reviewers express a variety of

60 Beckett is emphatic on this point: ‘The stage history of Parsifal is unique: the presentation of no other dramatic work has been so intimately connected with a single theatre’. Ibid., 87.
attitudes that range from the adulation of Fauré and Carraud to the qualified enthusiasm of Bruneau and Raymond Charpentier to the negativity of Adolphe Boschot and Chantavoine. Although Chantavoine complains about various aspects of Wagner’s music – it is dragging, overly repetitive and inconsistent in quality – the most common object of criticism is the fundamental impropriety, above and beyond the legal Convention, of any attempt to perform Parsifal outside of Bayreuth. For both Hahn and Boschot it is a profanation that strips the opera of its mystery and piety. Vuillermoz makes the same claim but in a more complex manner. He acknowledges the inevitable loss of Parsifal’s mystical aura upon being transplanted to the Opéra, while simultaneously threatening to deflate this aura with an apparently sarcastic reference to Mesmer’s theories of animal magnetism: ‘You need so many climatic and atmospheric conditions, so many felicitous acquiescences of a complicit nature for the mysterious fluid of the Beyond to propagate to our nerves, for the air that we breathe suddenly to become a good conductor of the natural electricity!’  

Like the article by his fellow Apache Vuillermoz, Ravel’s review of Parsifal, which was published in Comœdia illustre´ on 20 January, also uses a bit of erudition sarcastically to distinguish its point of view from that of cultish Wagnerians; even after he admits never having been to Bayreuth, he is nevertheless happy to relay the report that ‘Parsifal is performed there somewhat like the Eleusinian mysteries.’ In general, however, the article is quite positive. It divides into two parts: a historical survey of Wagnerism and anti-Wagnerism in France, and a glowing review of Parsifal’s premiere at the Opéra. In the latter Ravel praises all the musicians – the soloists, chorus, orchestra and conductor – but criticises the staging, which he finds to be so conventional and literal that it detracts from the music’s transcendent effect. He also steps beyond this production repeatedly to exalt Wagner in various respects: ‘the genius of this great artist’ deserves recognition from musicians and non-musicians alike; even if one were to separate Wagner’s music from its accompanying texts (libretti, treatises, critical essays, etc.), it will still be full of ‘charm and richness’; those, like Ravel, who opposed Wagnerian influence in France, nevertheless cannot deny his ‘prodigious creativeness and profound musicality’; in the case of Parsifal, the opera is ‘magic’, amounting to ‘four hours of wonderful music’ whose highlights include the ‘marvellous Good Friday music’ and the ‘sublime’ redemption at the end.

Once again, if we had not collated the comments Ravel actually made about Wagner but merely relied on Orenstein’s claim that the two composers stood ‘light-years’ apart, we would probably be disoriented by Ravel’s effusive comments about Parsifal. Roger Nichols, one of the few to have commented on this review, wards off any potential disorientation by emphasising certain aspects of the first

62 ‘Il faut tant de conditions climatériques et atmosphériques, tant d’heureux acquiescements d’une nature complice pour que le fluide mystérieux de l’au-delà se propage jusqu’à nos nerfs, pour que l’air que nous respirons devienne soudain bon conducteur de l’électricité naturelle!’ Ibid., 308.


64 Ibid., 376–8.
half and downplaying the second. First, he argues that Ravel’s lengthy introduction about the history of Wagner in France makes it ‘obvious’ that the composer was ‘not entirely comfortable’ in reviewing this music. He then gestures towards the second half upon suggesting that Ravel’s ‘emotional reaction to Parsifal was little different from that to the Tristan Prelude in 1896’, but he immediately overrides this suggestion by redirecting attention back to the first half. Here, Ravel appears to be ‘convinced of the damage the Wagnerian influence had done to French music’ and aware of the fact that ‘to him, technically and aesthetically, Wagner had very little to say’.67

I do not dispute Nichols’s claim about Ravel’s discomfort. Indeed, the level of equivocation in the first half of the review – as encapsulated in the oxymoronic interjection ‘fortunately, alas!’ (heureusement, hélas!) that appears in the midst of this section – borders on the extreme: Wagner’s vices may also be his virtues; his music is both the instigator and the victim of the dilettantish commentary (littérature) that surrounds it; musicians should have been the first to weigh in on Wagner, but even if they had, they would not have recognised his worth; anti-Wagnerism among the French was justified, but by now it has degenerated just as much as Wagnerism; Parsifal is not as entertaining as Offenbach, but it is less ‘annoying’ than the Missa solemnis; and so forth.

Among Nichols’s claims, however, I am less satisfied with his conclusion that ‘technically and aesthetically, Wagner had very little to say’ to Ravel. I propose instead that we interpret Ravel’s 1914 review of Parsifal as an expansion of the first two sentences from his response to the 1909 enquête: the first half acknowledges that there is ‘much too much to say’ about Wagner, while the second impels us to ‘recognize in Wagner what he was above all else: a magnificent musician’. In the first half, Ravel is not necessarily dismissing Wagnerian influence tout court, but rather is criticising French imitation of Wagner; if only they had injected a goodly amount of inspiration, lightness, levity and proportion into their ‘uninspired’, ‘heavy’, ‘sad’ and ‘disproportionate’ pieces, they would presumably have benefited, rather than suffered, from this influence.68 Further, I do not think we need to interpret the preamble in which Ravel provides a history of Wagner in France and equivocates about his legacy as merely an indication of personal discomfort. Rather, I would describe this section as a serious attempt by a critic deeply invested in music and its reception history to lay some groundwork for any future consideration of this phenomenon. In so doing he encounters an ambivalence about the composer similar to that which many scholars still feel today. Moreover,

65 Roger Nichols, Ravel (New Haven, 2011), 162.
66 Ibid., 163.
67 Ibid., 163.
68 This understanding of the effect of artistic influence accords with the one Ravel expressed in his 1928 lecture to the Rice Institute, whereby the potential benefit of such influence depends not only on its ‘quality’ but also ‘even more upon the strength of the personality’ that receives it – that is, the strength to withstand this influence without being engulfed by it. Maurice Ravel, ‘Contemporary Music’, in A Ravel Reader, 40–9, at 44.
I find it more fruitful to attend closely to, rather than gloss over, the many positive comments Ravel makes about Wagner in this review, for, as we have seen, they form part of a broader effort by Ravel to measure both the greatness and the limitations of the German composer. Although Ravel’s ongoing feud with d’Indy and the Société Nationale somewhat vitiates this effort, the following discussion of the ‘Passacaille’ from Ravel’s Trio seeks to redeem it.

The passion of the Passacaille

Notations on the manuscript of Ravel’s Trio for piano, violin and cello, which was his major compositional project of 1914, indicate that he began this piece on 3 April – three months after the premiere of Parsifal in Paris – and completed it on 7 August, five days after the mobilisation of French troops. The Trio is in four movements: a relatively concise initial sonata form, an expansive scherzo entitled ‘Pantoum’ (presumably after the Malayan verse-form that various nineteenth-century French poets had dabbled in), a slow movement with the neo-Baroque title of ‘Passacaille’ (passacaglia), and a virtuosic ‘Final’. Although we know that Ravel patterned the ‘Forlane’ in Le Tombeau de Couperin after an example of this dance from François Couperin’s fourth Concert royal (1722), no one has found a convincing model – whether in the recent or the distant past – for the Passacaille.69

In order to solve this riddle, I am proposing that we look to Wagner and his Parsifal, an interpretation that hangs upon the phrase reproduced in Example 3. As the sixth phrase of the Passacaille, it lies exactly at the centre of the movement, which comprises eleven eight-bar phrases that – true to the classical passacaglia format – follow one another without break. Example 4, in turn, reduces this phrase to its harmonic progression, which has the following features:

1. It is a descending, root-position, circle-of-fifths sequence which nearly completes three cycles of the sequence in connecting its initial G♯ in the bass with the D pedal that underlies phrase 7.
2. It is a highly chromatic passage with numerous harmonic extensions (ninth, eleventh and thirteenth of varying tonal membership), semitonal voice-leading, and a bass line which passes through the chromatic aggregate more than once.
3. The mid-phrase reintroduction of the Passacaglia’s primary motive in the piano forms part of a configuration that places a chromatic line in the soprano, another chromatic line a major third below in the alto, and a 10–7 intervallic pattern between the outer voices.

69 Scott Messing has come to the same conclusion, although he does advance J.S. Bach’s Passacaglia in C minor for organ as a somewhat plausible candidate. See Messing, Neoclassicism in Music, 50. By calling the Passacaille another ‘Hommage à Rameau’, Vladimir Jankélévitch points towards Debussy and his two medievalist sarabandes from Pour le piano and Images. See Jankélévitch, Ravel (Paris, 1956), 44. In this essay I largely bypass the Debussyan middleman to focus on a direct relation between Ravel and Wagner, who was the main musical inspiration for medie- valism in Debussy, Satie and other fin-de-siècle composers.
4. The passage abounds in harmonic substitutions – progressing from dominants (D) to subdominants (S, usually a half-diminished seventh chord) that elide the expected tonics (T) – and increases the frequency of these substitutions around the reintroduction of the primary motive and its ensuing stretto.\(^70\)

Instances of these individual techniques can be found throughout Ravel’s music. The piano suite *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), for example, features chromaticised fifth-sequences (‘Le gibet’, b. 25), elided tonics (‘Ondine’, bb. 27–8), chromatic descents in major thirds (‘Le gibet’, bb. 21–2), and intensifications over a stepwise bass descent (‘Ondine’, bb. 62–6, and ‘Scarbo’, bb. 556–63). But the way Ravel constellates these elements and sets this constellation within a weighty texture makes the passage in Example 3 one of the most extraordinary moments in his music. The model I am proposing for this passage is Example 5.

\(^70\) The brackets in Example 4 symbolise the elision of the expected tonics.
Example 5 is a version of the Heilandsklage, the ‘Savior’s Lament’ that is supposed to express, through the travails of the Christ-figure Amfortas, the suffering of humankind in its sinfulness. This particular version is called Wehelaute, or ‘Sounds of Pain’, and is featured in the ‘March to the Castle of the Grail’ in Act I of the opera. By reducing the Wehelaute to its harmonic progression, Example 6 helps to highlight its similarities to the passage in Ravel:

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Ex. 4: A harmonic reduction of phrase 6 of the Passacaille.

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Ex. 5: The Wehelaute from Wagner, Parsifal, Act I, ‘March to the Castle of the Grail’.

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Example 5 is a version of the Heilandsklage, the ‘Savior’s Lament’ that is supposed to express, through the travails of the Christ-figure Amfortas, the suffering of humankind in its sinfulness. This particular version is called Wehelaute, or ‘Sounds of Pain’, and is featured in the ‘March to the Castle of the Grail’ in Act I of the opera. By reducing the Wehelaute to its harmonic progression, Example 6 helps to highlight its similarities to the passage in Ravel:

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1. It is a descending, root-position, circle-of-fifths sequence which completes one cycle of the sequence in connecting the bass D♯ in the first bar with the cadential D in the last.

2. It is a chromatic passage which features a chromatic octachord in the melody and modulates between tritone-related keys (G♯ minor and D minor).

3. It is voiced to configure a chromatic descent or ‘lament’ in the soprano, another chromatic lament a major third below in the tenor, and a 10–7 intervallic pattern between the outer voices.

4. It counteracts the predictability of the harmonic sequence by substituting half-diminished seventh chords for tonics – outright on the downbeat of bar 2, and more gradually in bar 3, which also occurs in the corresponding bars of phrase 6.

The two passages are, of course, different in many important respects, including melody, harmonic complexity, meter, length, dynamic shape, instrumentation and genre. And even if Ravel had cut and pasted the *Wehelaute* motive directly into the Passacaille, the philosophical argument could still be made that the two passages are essentially different, insofar as they draw their identity and meaning from their strongly differing contexts. As significant as these qualifications may be, however, they do not ultimately dissuade me from making the following five claims, each of which builds upon the previous one, and most of which rely on simile and synecdoche to establish relationships among the entities involved.

1. **Phrase 6 in Ravel’s Passacaille is indebted to Wagnerian harmony, especially that found in the *Wehelaute* from *Parsifal***.

   The harmonic technique involved here is not the general use of half-diminished seventh chords, but rather the one exemplified in the *Wehelaute*, whereby a half-diminished seventh chord replaces a chord with an expected tonic function within a descending circle of fifths. The product of this technique is something we might call a ‘ruined tonic’, whose ruination is immediate on the downbeat of bar 2 in both phrases, but is more gradual in bar 3, as if we were witnessing the tonic decay in real time. Given the intended meaning of the *Wehelaute*, its effect is probably best described as ‘excruciating’ – that is, it expresses the agony of Christ’s crucifixion.

2. **Just as the central phrase of the Passacaille is indebted to the *Wehelaute*, so, too, is the Passacaille as a whole indebted to the March to the Castle of the Grail in *Parsifal***.

   The overarching basis for this claim is the arch-like design of both pieces, as well as the similar role of the highlighted phrases in their respective contexts; like phrase 6 in the Passacaille, the *Wehelaute* emerges in the middle of the piece...
before giving way to a reprise of the A section (the march). Further comparison reveals other similarities: both have slow, processional tempi, with the March marked ‘slow and solemn’ (langsam und feierlich) and the Passacaille set to a ‘very broad’ (très large) quarter note = 40; thematic pentatonicism is as fundamental to the March (in its anticipation of the bell theme into which it eventually flows) as it is to the Passacaille, and lends both an elemental and primordial quality; the seemingly infinite, quintessentially Wagnerian cycling of both the march and the Wehelaute themes back into themselves is matched by the looping of the eight-bar passacaglia theme back into itself; in both pieces, these circles are inscribed within a larger circuit that transports us from one pole to its opposite – from the jaunty march to the anguished Wehelaute in the Wagner piece, and from the sombre passacaglia theme to the similarly tortured phrase 6 in the Ravel movement – and back again. Finally, as an instrumental number, the March is well suited for emulation by an ensemble such as the piano trio.

3. By assuming the March as its referent, the Passacaille is not only indebted to a specific movement in Parsifal but pays homage to the opera as a whole. One basis for this claim is the important role the March’s Wehelaute plays in establishing the characteristic sound of the entire opera, as Robin Holloway has persuasively argued. Another is the synecdochical relation of the March to the overall plot of Parsifal. If we take the libretto at face value, the March merely represents the journey that Parsifal and Gurnemanz make from the

72 Merely the arch-like Gestalt of the Passacaille would have brought Wagner to mind for many listeners. Jules Champfleury and Hector Berlioz, who played an important role in the early reception of Wagner in France, both noted his preference for this formal shape in their responses to the 1860 premiere of his music in Paris. Berlioz, for example, described the Lohengrin Prelude in a manner evocative of the Passacaille: ‘It’s actually a slow, immense crescendo which, after having attained the highest degree of sonorous force, returns to its point of departure, following the reverse path, and ends in an almost imperceptible, harmonious murmur’ (C’est en réalité un immense crescendo lent, qui, après avoir atteint le dernier degré de la force sonore, suivant la progression inverse, retourne au point d’où il était parti et finit dans un murmure harmonieux presque imperceptible; Hector Berlioz, ‘Concerts de Richard Wagner, la musique de l’aventur’, in A Travers chants, études musicales, adorations, boutades et critiques (Paris, 1862), 291–303, at 296.) See also Jules Champfleury, Richard Wagner (Paris, 1860). Maurice Kufferath borrows Berlioz’s resourceful technique of illustrating the musical Gestalt of the Lohengrin Prelude in the text with a pair of angle brackets (< >), but he goes further to apply it to the opening Prelude of Parsifal. He argues not only for an overall climax at the Heilandsklage, but also for its autonomy as a piece of programme music, insofar as its motivic sequence effectively summarizes the plot of the entire opera. See Kufferath, Parsifal de Richard Wagner. Légende-drama-partition (Paris, 1890), 224.

73 Baudelaire’s description of Wagner’s music as ‘prudently concatenated’ can also be productively applied to the Passacaille, whose phrases dovetail neatly into each other, despite the difference in content from one to the next. Baudelaire, Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser, 47; emphasis his.

forest surrounding the Castle to the Castle itself. However, in the sequence of its associative themes – March, \textit{Wébelante}, Communion – the music marks the stations of the hero’s journey, as well as our own. It carves a path that brings us before the abject suffering of Amfortas, reveals it to be the human condition, and inspires us to participate in the healing of this suffering and the redemption of this sin. The Passacaille revises its putative model by omitting the promise of redemption – possibly in order to fulfil it in the festive ‘Final’, as I argue below.

Another way to relate the Passacaille to \textit{Parsifal} is as a musical pendant to the enthusiastic review he published in \textit{Comœdia illustre} earlier that year. In this case we can explain it as the recipient of various ideas he had had about the opera but either did not fit into the review or occurred to him after he had completed it. But we can also consider it to be the most direct way that one \textit{Tondichter} could pay homage to another: in tones, not words.

4. \textit{The Passacaille is not merely an homage to Parsifal, but also leads us on an imaginary pilgrimage to Bayreuth.}

Having admitted in his 1914 review that he had never actually been to Bayreuth, Ravel creates the Passacaille as compensation and wish-fulfilment.\footnote{A literary analogue to Ravel’s pilgrimage-in-music is Téodor de Wyzewa’s novel \textit{Valbert ou Les Récits d’un jeune homme} (Paris, 1893), in which a young Frenchman and an older Russian nobleman encounter each other at the Bayreuth festival and re-enact, in more modern terms, the relationship between Parsifal and Amfortas. A performance of the third Act of \textit{Parsifal} is the occasion for the novel’s anagnorisis, whereby the on-stage demonstration of ‘wisdom through compassion’ \textit{(durch Mitleid wissend)} allows the young man finally to comprehend the suffering of the unloved Valbert. Édouard Dujardin’s ‘Amfortas, paraphrase moderne’ is also a bit of creative writing closely related to the Passacaille, due to its spotlight on Amfortas’s suffering. See Dujardin, ‘Amfortas, paraphrase moderne’, \textit{Revue wagnérienne}, I (1885–6), 310–13.}

According to this fantastic scenario Ravel is Parsifal, Bayreuth is Monsalvat, and Wagner is Amfortas lying at the centre of the Hall of the Grail Knights – an archetypal figure who, like Tannhäuser and Tristan, has been wounded by desire.\footnote{One could also push this analogy further and argue that Ravel is identifying with Wagner in the way that Parsifal identifies with Amfortas. And, if we take seriously my proposal in \textit{Ravel the Decadent} that Ravel was a queer composer, this identification could also have a homoerotic basis; as Mitchell Morris has shown, such discourse has historically thrived on Wagner, due in large part to the centrality of male suffering in Wagnerian subjectivity. See Morris, ‘Tristan’s Wounds: On Homosexual Wagnerians at the \textit{fin de siècle},’ in \textit{Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity}, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana, 2002), 271–91. Discussion of the specific association between \textit{Parsifal} and homosexuality at the end of the long nineteenth century can be found in James Kennaway, ‘Degenerate Religion and Masculinity in \textit{Parsifal} Reception’, \textit{Current Musicology}, 88 (2009), 35–62, as well as in an issue of \textit{The Opera Quarterly} devoted to \textit{Parsifal}, which features historical texts about homosexuality by Oskar Panizza and Hanns Fuchs (\textit{The Opera Quarterly}, 22 (2007), 321–44).} Ravel would then have realised the cryptic remark with which Gurnemanz begins the march by translating time into space – hence the ‘very broad’ (\textit{très large}) stride of every beat in the Passacaille.\footnote{I am not the only one, of course, to conflate Bayreuth with Monsalvat. In a short but evocative account of his pilgrimage to Bayreuth, the novelist Édouard Rod described how his journey through the surrounding landscape, with its ancient forests, not only conjured up the Middle Ages, but also prepared his soul for the ‘religious chords which accompany the March of the Knights of the Grail’ \textit{(accords religieux qui accompagnent la marche des chevaliers du Graal)}. Rod, ‘Souvenirs wagnériens’, \textit{Revue wagnérienne}, I (1885–6), 204.} By the beginning of phrase 6 we can hear the groans of Amfortas-Wagner, and by the beginning of phrase 7 our ears are
ringing with the climactic version of the secondary motive of the Passacaille, whose dissonant harmonisation and gradual, three-octave descent bring to mind Kundry’s scream.

5. *The ultimate object of homage in the Passacaille is neither Parsifal nor the pilgrimage to Bayreuth, but Wagner in his full, stereotypical glory.*

No contemporary figure in fin-de-siècle Europe was more strongly associated with the medieval and the legendary than Richard Wagner. Replete with Romantic musical medievalisms (chant-like monophony, unmitigated parallel fifths, slow tempo, lugubrious affect), the Passacaille has already manifested its Wagnerian tendencies by the middle of its second phrase. Ravel’s handling of material in the interior of the piece is also highly evocative of Wagner. While the first appearance of the secondary motive in phrase 5 turns the music briefly towards major, its recurrence brings a doleful chromaticism to phrase 6 and outright anguish to phrase 7. The periodic return of a dirge within a slow, triple-meter march is the hallmark of the Pilgrim’s Chorus from *Tannhäuser*, whose recurring B section laments the ‘burden of sin’ (*der Sünden Last*). The simultaneous combination of the form of *Tannhäuser* with the sound of *Parsifal* elevates the reference in the Passacaille beyond any particular opera, aiming instead at the unique essence of Wagner’s contribution to Western music.

In the penumbra of Parsifal

Ravel may have thought he was paying his final respects to Wagner in the Passacaille, but he would soon encounter them again, albeit in masquerade. In 1918 Ravel received a libretto from Colette that he would eventually set as the text for *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*. Over the course of this ‘lyric fantasy’ the Child undergoes a Parsifalian process of maturation that transforms an initial impulse to do violence to animals (cf. the thoughtless killing of the sacred swan by the ‘pure fool’ in Act I) into a compassion that moves him to dress their wounds. The propinquity of this narrative to the prophetic fragment from *Parsifal* – 'wisdom through compassion’ (*durch Mitleid wissend*) – would probably not have been lost on either Ravel or Colette; unlike Ravel, she had made numerous pilgrimages to Bayreuth and had seen *Parsifal* many times before she received the commission for *L’Enfant*.


79 Nietzsche makes the same argument in *The Case of Wagner* – albeit with more critical intent – when he uses *Parsifal* as the main symptom through which to diagnose Wagner as the decadent artist par excellence, as reflected in his statement that ‘Wagner had the virtue of decadents, pity [*das Mitteiden*]’ (Nietzsche, *Case of Wagner*, 246). More generally, Wagner appears in the Passacaille as Baudelaire’s ‘man of passion’, a typology which Lacoue-Labarthe explicates as follows: ‘Wagner is [for Baudelaire] essentially a *pathos*, a subject as *pathos*’ (Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta*, 28).

80 A detailed examination of Colette’s attitude towards Wagner, especially as expressed in her novels, is Ursula Link-Heer, ‘Willy und Colette in Bayreuth’, in *Von Wagner zum Wagnerismus*, 485–510. Link-Heer does not, however, make the connection I am making between *L’Enfant* and *Parsifal*. Peter Kaminsky does refer in passing to a moment from *Parsifal* in discussing the Child’s maturation process in *L’Enfant* – both Amfortas and the Tree complain about their wounds – but does not further investigate this coincidence. Peter Kaminsky, ‘The Child on the Couch; or, Towards a (Psycho)Analysis of Ravel’s *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*’, in *Unmasking Ravel*, 318.
Resonances with *Parsifal* also occur in music by Ravel that predates the Trio. A clue can be found in a comment Vladimir Jankélévitch makes at the end of his *Ravel* book about the final chorus in *L'Enfant*, which he finds to convey 'the supreme message of innocence: gracious redemption through pity, the infinite value of a charitable impulse'. Jankélévitch does not mention *Parsifal* – and probably never would, given his deep aversion to Wagner – but it is difficult not to notice when its moral is being paraphrased, unwittingly or no. In addition, the connection he makes in the same paragraph between the chorus of *L'Enfant* and the Daybreak (*Lever du jour*) from *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909–12) is productive for our enquiry, insofar as it prompts us to ask a general question: if *Daphnis* resembles *L'Enfant*, and *L'Enfant* resembles *Parsifal*, might *Daphnis* resemble *Parsifal*? A cursory comparison between the two reveals some rather conventional similarities: both have a tripartite division, with *Parsifal* falling into three Acts and *Daphnis* into three ‘parts’ (*parties*), and both follow an ABA’ format in which the A’ section returns to the same setting and cast of characters from which the B section departed (Klingsor’s Castle in *Parsifal*, and the Pirates’ Camp in *Daphnis*).

A more unusual resemblance between *Parsifal* and *Daphnis* is their shared employment of nature’s reawakening at the beginning of the third and final part, with the Good Friday Music (*Karfreitagszauber*) in Wagner’s opera corresponding to the Daybreak in Ravel’s ballet. This observation brings us back to Jankélévitch’s comment, which, in assimilating the Daybreak to the final chorus from *L'Enfant*, also associates it with the Parsifalian message of the latter, ‘gracious redemption through pity’. In order to explore the possibility of a meaningful affiliation between the Daybreak and the Good Friday Music – the famous excerpt from *Parsifal* that Ravel proclaimed in his review to be ‘marvelous’ – I have juxtaposed central passages from these pieces in Examples 7 and 8. As we can see, both incorporate lush textures and soaring melodies into a major, triple-meter context, as is common for pastoral music. In addition, both emphasise the second beat in a manner evocative of the sarabande; while the dance’s calling card – the dotted quarter note on beat two – only appears in the interior of the fourth and ninth bars of the Daybreak excerpt, this rhythm has nevertheless been reverberating in the listener’s inner ear since the *tutti* climax that began the movement (rehearsal 157) and spawned its primary theme, and will recur in even more dazzling fashion at its conclusion (rehearsal 168).

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82 Marcel Marnat senses an affinity between *Daphnis* and Wagner (both *Parsifal* and the *Ring*) on the basis of their representations of nature, but does not pursue this hunch. See Marnat, *Ravel* (Paris, 1986), 338.
83 Momentarily setting aside the referent of the Good Friday Music, we can make at least two further associations between Wagner and the Daybreak. First, the Daybreak clearly belongs to the genre of Wagnerian ‘transformation music’ (*Verwandlungsmusik*), since it paints the gradual scenic change from night to day and from the Pirates’ Camp of Part II to the meadow of Part III. Second, the ornamental figuration in the strings, winds and harps that persists throughout the Daybreak (but is not shown in Ex. 8) can be understood as a state-of-the-art version of the ‘Forest Murmurs’ (*Waldweben*) from *Siegfried*. Henri Gauthier-Villars noted as much in his review of the 8 June 1912 premiere of *Daphnis* at the Théâtre du Chatelet: ‘What melodic effusion and expressive fragment take us by surprise with their facility and their “Gemüt”, which are by
definition so little Ravelian! By the same token, certain effects seem too easy to anticipate, such as the interlude of the final tableau, this swarming and charming description of daybreak in which groups of nine triplet quavers [in the piano-vocal reduction, not the orchestral score] burble above a broad melody. It evokes Siegfried’s forest so indiscreetly that we actually feel queasy when we do not hear the expected entrance of the Forest Bird.’ [‘Telle effusion mélodique, tel fragment expressif surprennent par leur facilité et leur “gemuth” [sic] si peu raveliste par définition! Certains effets semblent également trop peu imprévus, tel l’interlude du dernier tableau, cette grouillante et charmante description du lever du jour où gazouillent des groupes de neuf triples croches au-dessus d’une large mélodie, et qui évoque si indiscrètement la forêt de Siegfried qu’on éprouve un véritable malaise à ne pas entendre entrer le thème attendu de l’Oiseau.’] Gauthier-Villars, Review of Daphnis et Chloé, in Collection des plus beaux numéros de ‘Comœdia illustre’ et des programmes consacrés aux Ballets et Galas Russes, depuis le début à Paris, 1909–1921, ed. Maurice de Brunoff and Jacques de Brunoff (Paris, c.1922), n.p.
The most striking element shared between Examples 7 and 8, however, is the use of the same half-diminished seventh chord on E₇# to interrupt the flow of the music – a gesture of negation that epitomises the Wagnerian sound from Tristan on. The dissonance and chromaticism of this chord in both contexts help to represent the sudden intrusion of a painful memory into consciousness. In Parsifal it marks Gurnemanz’s recollection of Christ’s crucifixion on Good Friday, and in Daphnis it marks the hero’s recollection of Chloe’s violent abduction by the pirates, both of which are soon mitigated by subsequent events: Gurnemanz’s narrative about Christ’s redemption of humanity through his self-sacrifice, and Chloe’s reunion with Daphnis. However, from a broader symbolic perspective – one which implicates the listener as a sympathetic participant – the chordal intrusion can feel to us as if we were suddenly recalling, and even re-experiencing, the original fall from grace. Accordingly, the resumption of the D major music soon thereafter feels like the miraculous restoration of paradise – or, to quote Jankélévitch, a ‘gracious redemption’. This interpretation also calls to our attention the similarity of the Grail motive to the median cadence in the opening ‘Danse religieuse’ of Daphnis (Ex. 9); the fact that it attains the pure diatonicism of the Dresdener Amen in its final bars only sweetens the achievement. Instead of overlooking this similarity or dismissing it as mere coincidence, we can now appreciate it as a potential invitation by Ravel to view the ballet through the lens of Parsifal.

The Good Friday Music takes place in two keys: B major and D major, respectively. I chose to excerpt the latter because, in comparison to the former, it is more similar to the passage from Daphnis in four respects: tonally (both are in D major), harmonically (their punctuating dissonances are identical), formally (both are reprises), and rhythmically (they progress quickly to their dissonant harmonies, unlike the passage in B major).

The dotted rhythm in the timpani that follows in the wake of the dissonant harmony on E₇# is presumably a reference to the ‘Figure of Pain’ (Schmerzensfigur) at the centre of the Communion theme. The percussive motif appeared at the end of the Act III Prelude (apparently to quash the Prophecy Motif and its promise of salvation), while the Figur sounded most recently at Parsifal’s previous outburst (‘O Wehe! Des höchsten Schmerzentags!’) during the Good Friday Music.

The half-diminished seventh chord is, after all, the harmony that sets their Love Theme – in homage to Tristan, perhaps – and the one based on E₇# appears in the middle (bb. 17–18) of the ballet’s Introduction.

By imputing a musical dimension to Gurnemanz’s narrative about Good Friday as a ‘day of pain’ (Schmerzentag), I part ways with Alain Patrick Olivier, who finds no representation of pain in the music during this episode in Parsifal. See Olivier, ‘Commentaire musical et littéraire’, in Parsifal, Wagner, L’avant-scène opéra, 213 (Paris, 2003), 82.
A dialectic of two decadences

A new appreciation of Wagnerism in Ravel also helps to deepen our understanding of the decadent dialectics at work in his music. To be sure, Wagner’s decadence is not identical with Ravel’s: while the former emphasises psychological interiority, the latter cultivates a perfect exteriority which can be interpreted as a musical expression of the composer’s dandyism. Ultimately, however, the opposition between these two decadences leads not to their mutual exclusion but to a dialectical interaction that manifests itself in three tropes. As I have discussed elsewhere, in the trope of the ‘interrupted dandy’, an expressive outburst momentarily shatters a prevailing calm and transforms the imperturbable dandy into an interruptable figure whose psychological interior could re-emerge at any moment.\(^\text{88}\)

A prime example is the ‘Light and Graceful Dance of Daphnis’ from Ravel’s ballet. Here, an apparent allusion to the Desire motive from \textit{Tristan} within an agitated inner section (the ‘interruption’) signifies the lust of a dandified Daphnis for Chloe and its destabilising effect on him.\(^\text{89}\)

Having laid the groundwork in this article for a broader consideration of Wagnerism in Ravel, we can now add two further tropes. In the trope of the ‘interrupting dandy’, a moment of aplomb disrupts a stretch of quasi-Wagnerian abandon, as appears in the sudden and short-lived reversion to the initial waltz within the bacchanalian ending to \textit{La Valse}. In the trope of the ‘dandy’s last word’, a final gesture in a piece distances itself from preceding complications within that piece. A relevant instance appears in ‘Nahandove’, a song whose multiple debts to \textit{Tristan} and its particular brand of nineteenth-century eroticism – its prominent half-diminished seventh chords, surging textures, ecstatic repetitions and languorous dénouements – are dissolved in a coda that reprises the opening only to idealise and miniaturise the song, along with its grand, Wagnerian emotions. It is as if, in a dandy’s paradox, the primary reason for the lover’s rendezvous with the beautiful Nahandove were not to experience it in the present but to re-experience it in retrospect, transfigured by nostalgia.

These dialectical ruminations bring us back to the 1928 essay by Adorno that we discussed in the introduction. Adorno was at least half-right: Ravel does, indeed, create alternatives to Wagner’s ‘panic archetype of love’, but he also likes to pit one type against another in an overt display of decadent dialectics within his own oeuvre. Wagnerism in the Passacaille transforms the Trio into an important and complex example of such a display.\(^\text{90}\) The tipping point between thesis and

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\(^\text{88}\) See Michael J. Puri, ‘Dandy, Interrupted: Sublimation, Repression, and Self-Portraiture in Maurice Ravel’s \textit{Daphnis et Chloé}’, \textit{Journal of the American Musicological Society}, 60 (2007), 317–72, which is reproduced as Chapter 3 in Puri, \textit{Ravel the Decadent}.

\(^\text{89}\) This dialectics is closely related to the dialectics of ‘shame and grace’ that Ellis Hanson attributes to Wagner and the interpretation of his music by figures of the French Decadence. See Hanson, \textit{Decadence and Catholicism} (Cambridge, 1997), 27–43.

\(^\text{90}\) A psychoanalytical stance impels us to draw certain conclusions from imputing the dandy’s interruption to the Trio. If we treat both the interruption and the dandified material it interrupts as autobiographical gestures, and if we interpret Amfortas as a figure which attracts homosexual identification, then the \textit{Wehelaute} reference in the Passacaille becomes a confessional gesture on Ravel’s part that, as a return of the repressed, gives voice not only to his sexual desire, but also to the pain he suffers upon repressing it.
antithesis is the moment of transition between the Passacaille and the Final, when
the dark night of the former gives way to the ethereal dawn music that begins the
latter. One way to understand this transition is as a musical re-enactment of the
historical reaction that Ravel asserted in his March 1912 concert review, where
he described post-Romantic French composers as beating a ‘peaceful retreat’
from Wagner and his violent expressivity. Along similar lines, the playful opening
measures of the Final make it an excellent candidate for Nietzsche’s ‘Mediterrane-
nan music’, which, as previously discussed, he conceived to be the antidote to
Wagner’s operas: a ‘mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial
art that, like a bright flame, blazes into an unclouded sky!’

The qualities of Nietzsche’s ‘Mediterranean music’ turn our thoughts once
again to the dandy. This character first makes its presence felt in the Trio at the
end of the first movement, where he pronounces his ‘last word’ with a surprising
swerve into a C Lydian, ‘distant’ (lointain) pianissimo version of the primary theme
in the coda. The subsequent three movements, in turn, showcase the ‘dandy’s
interruption’ at the level of the suite, with the penitent and anguished Passacaille
interrupting the ‘mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled’ tenor of its surround-
ing movements, the Pantoum and the Final. As with all dialectical instances of
this trope, however, the section that follows the interruption as its conclusion
and resolution actually contains the seeds of its own undoing. In advancing from
the Passacaille into the Final we have not transcended Wagnerism but exchanged
one of its modes for another. To appropriate, once again, the language Ravel
applied to Wagner in the March 1912 concert review, the ‘passionate suffering’ in
the middle of the Passacaille is followed by the ‘passionate joy’ of the climactic
secondary theme in the Final. Admittedly, the theme does not sound like some-
thing Wagner would have composed. Nevertheless, with its high, fortissimo
trills in the strings, thunderous pianism and Fauvist harmonic juxtapositions, it is a
‘roaring outburst of pagan vitality’ that can stand toe to toe with any comparable
passage in Wagner. After all, it is a virtual facsimile of the climactic theme from
one of the shining examples of pagan vitality in French musical Modernism –
namely, the bacchanale that ends Daphnis.

A kinder, gentler giant

Wagner was an ineradicable part of Ravel’s cultural and artistic inheritance, due
not only to widespread Wagnerism in France during his youth, but also to the
incorporation of Wagnerian elements into the work of his two strongest French
musical influences, Chabrier and Debussy. As I have argued here, we can also
link Wagner directly to Ravel, especially through the influence of Parsifal on both
Daphnis et Chloé and the Trio. At first glance, it may seem strange that Ravel would
draw on Wagner so late in his career, since Wagnerism in other French composers
is often understood as an aspect of their early style which they needed to over-
come in order to find their own voice. One way to explain this choice is through
circumstance. In the case of Daphnis, Wagner was a model for the Gesamtkunstwerk
that Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes envisioned for their artistic enterprise;\footnote{For further discussion of the relation between the collaborative ideal of the Ballets Russes and Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, see Lynn Garafola, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes (New York, 1989), 45.} with regard to the Trio, the Parisian premiere of Parsifal, which Ravel reviewed enthusiastically for Comœdia illustre, took place right before he began to compose the piece.

These two circumstantial reasons may be compelling, but they only paint part of the picture. Instead, I prefer to view Ravel’s musical and critical engagement with Wagner around 1909 as the consequence of a surge in professional ambition, which also manifested itself in his assumption of new identities as a concert reviewer and organiser. Moreover, it promised to mitigate the perception that he could only compose small-scale, unserious works.\footnote{Pierre Lalo, in particular, harped on these points. Although it postdates the composition of Daphnis, his review of the 19 May 1911 premiere of L’Heure espagnole is highly apropos here; in it he describes the opera as the Ring cycle ‘viewed through a microscope’. For a useful survey of attitudes towards Ravel in the press of his time, see Christian Goubault, La Critique musicale dans la presse française de 1870 à 1914 (Geneva, 1984), 400–8.} Even more fundamental, it helped to fulfil his ardent desire for continual growth as an artist. As he argued in his 1928 lecture titled ‘Contemporary Music’, exposure to external influences, especially those originating outside one’s national music, expands the ‘horizon of the aspiring artist’ by providing new means of ‘emotional expression’ and paths for creative exploration.\footnote{Ravel, ‘Contemporary Music’, 44.} He mentions Wagner as a central case but, to our surprise, casts him as the recipient of influence (by Liszt) rather than its source. Although Ravel may well have intended this comment simultaneously to rattle the common sense of his audience and take the German down a peg or two, I would rather interpret it as an attempt to bring out the softer side of Wagner. By this I mean that we view Wagner neither as a ‘giant’ living in the ‘palace’ of his Valhalla-like oeuvre, nor as a transcendent genius – isolated in his originality, untouched by worldly considerations, and unbending in purpose, hammering out leitmotivic music in his study just like Siegfried reforging the shattered Nothung in his cave – but rather as an impressionable artist of his time who was shaped by his contemporaries just as much as he shaped them. It is also primarily a softer, Parsifalian aspect of Wagner’s ‘emotional expression’ that filters into Ravel’s work, as exemplified by the heartbreaking sounds of suffering in the Passacaille and the heartwarming hymn to redemption in the Daybreak. But the softest touch of all may have been Ravel’s, who wove Wagnerian strands so dexterously into his music that, for the past one hundred years, no one has been the wiser.