

French Music

Gaspard de la nuit: Horror and Elegance



This paper examines Gaspard de la nuit, a composition for solo piano written by Maurice Ravel in 1908. The research concerns those aspects of Gaspard that locate and solidify it in the history of music, and make it a valuable and unique composition: its virtuosity and technical inventiveness; its basis on an earlier French poem by Aloysius Bertrand; and its function as a window into Ravel the composer and the man. One can marvel at the ways in which Ravel pushed technique to its then-limits. One can discover the amazing ways in which Bertrand's prose poetry became Ravel's highly imagistic and structured music that virtually speaks through notes. One can understand the style, working process, and personality of a brilliant and complicated man. The paper has been written for novice and knowledgeable musician alike, though if one wishes for a more in-depth experience, the author recommends a copy of the musical score to accompany the reading. Recordings of Gaspard de la nuit by pianists Jean-Yves Thibaudet or Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli are also recommended. This paper does not seek to prove anything new; it is merely a passionate exploration that, hopefully, inspires appreciation for, and sheds extensive light on, Gaspard de la nuit.

“*G*aspard has been a devil in coming, but that is only logical since it was he who is the author of the poems.”

“*My ambition is to say with notes what a poet expresses with words.*”

-Maurice Ravel (Dubbiosi).

When pianists think of *Gaspard de la nuit*, their hearts stop. Ravel's masterpiece, as famous for its depiction of Aloysius Bertrand's poems as it is infamous for stunning virtuosity, is like a realistic dream, a lucid world of darkness and terror evoked through refinement and detail. Ravel brings to life Bertrand's poems using a new and forward-looking technique, a classical form, and a vast knowledge of keyboard composition to convey the likes of mermaids, monsters and corpses. Though daring technical devices and harmonies were an integral part of Ravel's realization of the poems, the sheer technical accomplishment of the work is in itself an outstanding feat. The

music extends the capabilities of the ten-fingered, two-handed pianist, and in the process makes *Gaspard de la nuit* one of the most challenging and virtuosic compositions ever written. Yet, for all of its remarkable innovations, *Gaspard de la nuit* is confined to a strict, classical structure that is in many ways like a conventional sonata: an opening movement of moderate speed, a central slow movement, and a fast, impressive finale (Perlemuter, 1988). However, this exacting approach to compositional form did not hamper Ravel's realization of the poetry; in fact, it was with a classical form that Ravel could follow Bertrand's work like a blueprint, thematically reconstructing every dancing demon and burst of water. Ravel was a master of using the piano-- everything from scales and arpeggios to rhythms and articulations unique to the instrument-- to create specific objects and emotions. Detailed, almost tangible images make *Gaspard de la nuit* unforgettable, defining its immortality as a masterpiece which is both a brilliant and ground-breaking technical study, and a hauntingly evocative musical recreation of Bertrand's poetry.

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A Brief History Of The Composer

Ravel was born on March 7, 1875 in the Basque fishing village of Ciboure, but when he was very young the family moved to Paris. Ravel joined the Paris Conservatory at age 12, but he made most of his musical friendships outside the school. For example, he joined “Les Apaches,” a group of artists that included Manuel de Falla. One of his closest friends, however, was the pianist Ricardo Vinès, who was an important figure in Ravel's life; he even gave the first performance of *Gaspard de la nuit*. While Paris was a stimulating musical environment, it was not the only source of Ravel's inspiration. As a child, he was taken to a factory and was fascinated by the engineered precision of the machines; Ravel would remember “their clicking and roaring, which, along with the Spanish folk songs sung to me at night-time as a berceuse by my mother, formed my first instruction in music!” (Larner, 1996). Even in Ravel's childhood there is evidence of

two predominant qualities in his music: a love of melody and imagery, and attention to mechanisms and details. *Gaspard de la nuit* is the pinnacle of this two-sided style, and its unparalleled capacity to evoke images is actually enhanced by a precise structure.

Igor Stravinsky called Ravel the “Swiss clockmaker” (Bricard), an appropriate nickname for a man who sought perfection and flawlessness in his art. Ravel treated his compositions as if they were fine jewelry or handmade ornaments; one can imagine him carving each note into the page, using a magnifying glass to make sure every inch of music was ideal. He also had a flair for elegance and formality in his compositions as well as in his personal life; almost all known photographs show a man who has groomed himself for the picture. He was “meticulous about his personal appearance... as unlikely to present himself as he was a composition to the world in an ‘unfinished’ state” (Hopkins, 1986). With this meticulous nature, Ravel’s works are picture-perfect. Though in the case of *Gaspard de la nuit* it is not obvious how one can create a “perfect” representation of a swinging corpse, it is safe to say that the refined, glossy music makes such depictions more realistic.

To bring his works closer to perfection, Ravel borrowed from other artists, employing their styles and techniques more with pride than embarrassment. He once said, “To develop your craftsmanship, you must learn from others,” you need “a model or source of inspiration” that would improve the quality of his music (Dubbiosi, 1967). For example, Ravel wrote *Gaspard de la nuit* intending to compose three poems of “transcendental” virtuosity -- an allusion to Liszt’s Transcendental Etudes. According to Roland-Manuel, “Transcendental takes the word in its exact meaning, because the virtuosity transcends its domain and makes *Gaspard de la nuit* one of the principal successes of Ravel and one of the summits

of his art” (Bricard, 9).

Before analyzing each of the movements, we must examine two aspects essential to the entire piece: relationships between music and poetry, and technical accomplishments.

The Work As A Whole

Ravel and Bertrand seem to have been destined to meet at some point. Both shared a talent for precision and imagery in their art; Bertrand was a “goldsmith of words” (Perlemuter, 1988). *Gaspard de la nuit* was first published in 1842, a year after Bertrand died, but a 1908 reprint of the poems in the *Mercure de France* was Ravel’s probable source of inspiration (Larner, 1996). Bertrand’s gothic prose poems were perfect models for Ravel. In each of the three poems Ravel chose from the set-- respectively *Ondine*, *Le Gibet* and *Scarbo*-- the poetry is dark and hallucinatory. Even the title seems fantastic: *Gaspard* derives from a Persian name for one who guards treasure (Bruhn, 1997).

Although classical in structure, with three movements of proportionate dimensions and organized sections where distinct motifs are introduced and developed, *Gaspard de la nuit* is hardly a Mozart sonata. *Ondine*, *Le Gibet*, and *Scarbo* are polyrhythmic and polytonal, with complex rhythmic patterns and vague key signatures. There are also post-impressionist harmonies and even elements of jazz (Dubbiosi, 1967).

Ravel had an amazing talent for evoking physical and visible things-- what may be referred to as “musical onomatopoeia” (Dubbiosi, 1967). He created descriptive objects throughout some of his compositions, from Spanish jesters to sad birds, dead princesses to hundreds of chiming clocks (as in *Alborada del gracioso*, *Oiseaux tristes*, *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, and *La Vallée des cloches*). He had composed works based on poems before, too: *Jeux d’eau*, about water, and

Noctuelles, or “Night Moths” (Dubbiosi, 1967). *Gaspard de la nuit* is the pinnacle of this representative style-- a veritable treasure chest of images-- because Ravel captures every minute detail from the poems: a dark sky, a lake, a mermaid-princess, a hanged corpse, a sunset, an empty city, a dancing dwarf-monster, nightmarish shadows, and, in an even more impressive display of his control of keyboard effects, such nebulous entities as mystified horror, resigned sorrow, death, lust, and nervous laughter. How on earth, one might ask, does one use a piano to mimic the sentiments of a lustful mermaid shrouded in sprinkling water? Ravel accomplished this feat by using, with superb imagination, an enormous range of sonorities, articulations, and rhythms that actually replicate Bertrand’s words. For example, broken octaves and dotted rhythms may be said to represent a creature who moves “like the spindle fallen from the wand of a sorceress” (from Bertrand’s *Scarbo*). Or, for another of many possible examples, quiet and slowly dissipating chords, synesthetically, actually sound like a “setting sun” (from Bertrand’s *Le Gibet*). Ravel used essentially everything, prompting legendary French pianist Alfred Cortot to say that “these three poems enrich the piano repertoire of our era by one of the most astonishing examples of instrumental resourcefulness that I have ever witnessed in the work of composers” (Bricard).

However, its most impressive and valuable aspect is a comprehensive and revolutionary study of piano technique. Not only does it explore a range of sounds and articulations, but all three movements demand a remarkable virtuoso technique. Ravel wanted to advance piano technique; he was quoted as wanting to compose “something more difficult than *Islamey*” (Larner, 1996), which is widely regarded as one of the most challenging pieces in the repertoire. *Gaspard de la nuit*’s difficulty lies not only in the notes themselves, but, more importantly, in the

way the notes should be played. There are frenzied staccato chords and languid scale passages, sonorities ranging from *fff* to *ppp*, and inner melodies that must sing out over varying accompanimental voices. The pianist, in short, must concentrate during every second of the approximately 23 minutes it takes to perform this piece.

Ravel focused on particular pianistic challenges in his “transcendental” writing; “[t]he solution of technical problems (problème de métier) was [his] primary purpose in composing *Gaspard de la nuit*” (Dubbiosi, 1967). For example, parts of *Ondine* consist of lightning-fast arpeggios with each hand in contrary motion on different tonal keys (creating dissonance). Other technical demands include the interaction between the hands, glissandi, repeated notes, and functions of the thumb.

The division of melodies and chords between hands had been used before by Liszt’s rival Sigismund Thalberg, who created a three-voiced effect by having an inner melody surrounded by two accompaniments. Ravel created more range through “doubling the melody in octaves and the placement of the harmonic accompaniment within the limits of the melody voices” (Dubbiosi, 1967). When one hand plays the melody, the other joins in the melody or plays accompanying notes in such proximity that specific hands playing certain notes are no longer obvious.

Glissandi are used primarily for imagery in *Ondine*. The conventional glissando is a sweeping motion with one finger over the white keys of the piano (Liszt used glissandi in the “classic” form in many of his virtuoso showpieces). However, Ravel bids the pianist use the black keys, which is not only very difficult, but also creates tonalities less prominent in Western music.

The use of repeated notes “was to become a hallmark of Ravel’s style” (Hopkins, 1986). Repeated notes are divided between octaves, shared by both hands, played unimagably fast,

and, famously, form the integral structure of *Le Gibet*.

Of particular importance is the thumb which, as Roland-Manuel claims, “is very remarkable in the works for piano of Ravel. It is the thumb that commands, particularly in *Gaspard de la nuit*, one of the works most characteristic of his transcendental technique” (Bricard, 9), extending the functions of the hands, the capabilities of pianists, and the range of modern piano-playing.

Although we have examined the style in which *Gaspard de la nuit* was composed as a whole, it is necessary to analyze each movement in detail.

Ondine

Ondine is arguably the most beautiful movement of *Gaspard de la nuit*; it is certainly the most colorful and sensuous. In the poem, Ondine is a mermaid who sings to a man, describing her fantastic world and trying at length to seduce him. The man, however, is married to a mortal, and when he explains this to Ondine she cries, laughs, then disappears as quickly as she first appeared. While this basic story forms the skeletal structure of Ravel’s music, there is far more to the poetry than a simple narrative. Words and phrases create impressions of darkness, mystery, and a magical world of water. Ravel’s incorporates these themes as he follows the progression of the story, introducing and developing the setting and characters.

Just as the poem begins with “Listen! Listen!” and does not provide any introduction to explain what is going on, the music evolves out of nothingness, like something from a dream. Ravel begins the piece in *ppp* with a very fast and quiet repeating series of chords that becomes the central and driving rhythmic element of the work. These initial bars establish a quiet atmosphere of mystery, metrical elegance, and anticipation. The shimmering notes immediately draw one into “the beautiful starry night and the

beautiful sleeping lake.”

The actual poetry begins in the third measure, where Ondine is first heard in a dreamy, song-like melody. When Ravel introduces her playfully amorous character, the melodic line conjures images of the mermaid calling “Listen! It is I, it is Ondine who brushes drops of water on the resonant panes of your window” from outside. The music “follows the actions and thoughts of the sprite-princess and sustain[s] the least inflection of her voice” (Long, 1973), and later becomes more complicated as Ondine’s song builds in strength and sensuality. For example, when Ravel repeats the melody, it is in broken chords rather than single notes, with more agitated accompaniment. In the third stanza of the poem, Ondine again calls “Listen! Listen!”-- the repetition creates urgency. Incidentally, the first three stanzas of the poem are in ABA form, which is also applicable to the musical organization: a theme (A), which goes through a development section (B), and the initial motifs are then repeated (A) (Bruhn, 1997).

Ravel changes the key and melodic line as Ondine offers her love to a married man and tension mounts. The music is more sinister, and for the first time the melody is sung in the lower, darker regions of the keyboard. There is unmistakable momentum as the music becomes more dance-like, and soon the playfulness disappears. A stormy romantic passage builds as she offers her hand in marriage. When the man rejects Ondine, water seems to crash everywhere as the pianist pounds over the keyboard. In the wake of this terrible climax, the music is softer and more fragile, eventually disintegrating into nothing more than a timid reflection of the melody. This is the nadir of the piece, showing Ondine alone with a mixture of childish disappointment and adult sadness-- “she wept some tears.” However, as she “uttered a burst of laughter, and vanished in a shower,” the music blossoms into a coda of rapid arpeggios before trailing off like a

dream.

Ondine is difficult to play because it requires a good deal of strength to maintain a light touch. The pianist must create a supple and brilliant atmosphere, with subtly different touches for water that ripples, shines, shimmers, and cascades. At one point, the hands traverse practically the entire keyboard in a matter of seconds, yet even in this loud and fearsome passage the music must be flowing, like water. In addition, the rhythmic motif of chords is hard simply to play fast, but near impossible to play fast and quietly. While the pianist sweats over this technical challenge, the melody must sing out, which becomes difficult to maintain when the hands begin leaping around the keyboard. Still, despite the difficulty, the atmosphere must remain constant and vivid. The pianist must create a sparkling, nighttime atmosphere, like a prism suspended in rain and darkness.

Le Gibet

Le Gibet is a picture of desolation and misery. It is a musical landscape of the singular, breath-taking image of a lonely corpse “reddened by the setting sun.” Bertrand’s poem is a series of contemplations of this image, all made with gloomy, hopeless resignation. Unlike *Ondine*, there is no story being told. Instead, the poem consists of five gruesome questions and a horrific answer. *Le Gibet* opens with a picture of a man who is “the hanged one,” yet who is still alive and “utters a sigh.” By the end of the poem, after the relentless series of disturbing questions, the man is certainly dead-- his emotions have expired, his spirit is extinguished, he is now a “corpse.” It is as though we, as readers, have witnessed “the unfolding of that moment between almost-no-life and definite death” (Bruhn, 1997).

Ravel devotes almost the entire focus of the composition to atmosphere. He does not try to recreate specific descriptions like “scarab beetles” and “sterile ivy.” Those images are incor-

porated into a larger theme based on the evocation of emotions rather than objects. The character of the poetry is introspective and cyclical, more observational than explanatory. Like the poetry, the music is an odyssey without a mournful, extended image. The whole movement consists of three relentlessly repeating motifs: a constant B-flat, a melodic chord progression, and a second, more singing melody. Pianist Vlado Perlemuter remarked that “you must not be afraid of making it sound monotonous”; in fact, monotony is an integral part of the music.

The forlorn atmosphere is maintained by a B-flat that sounds throughout the entire piece, like a perpetual sigh or ringing bell. Bells play a key role in *Le Gibet*. The musical landscape is reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe, whose poetry Ravel admired; in fact, Poe’s poem *The Bells* may have influenced this music (Larner, 1996). Siglind Bruhn finds that the B-flat bell is important because the “tolling constitutes the link among the different aspects embedded in the poem.” Though this B-flat theme is the most famous aspect of *Le Gibet*, all three motifs overlap and build off one another to create an indelible image.

Technical difficulties of *Le Gibet* are in the management of sound quality and voicing. Marguerite Long points out that independence of the hands and discrete differences between *ppp* and *pp* make the piece extremely challenging. The pianist must not only play quietly, but also be aware of subtle changes in sound and texture. Henri Gil-Marchex believes 27 different touches are necessary in *Le Gibet* (Bricard). A particularly difficult task is the maintenance of each musical line. For example, the B-flat is sometimes divided in octaves between hands, but it still must sound exactly the same as when played by only one hand. At other moments, different melodic lines are played simultaneously and must sound as completely independent voices. Another technical difficulty

is the playing of extended chords. All the notes must be played in the same way and at the same time, and, because the music is slow and quiet, any notes depressed a half-second too late are obvious mistakes. Performing *Le Gibet* is like standing perfectly still so that even your breathing is imperceptible, only you must also always be looking at a single ghastly scene. When the music at last dies out, that ceaseless B-flat is the only sound that remains. It is like the corpse left hanging from the rope, and then the scene fades to black.

Scarbo

Scarbo: this is arguably the most famous movement from *Gaspard de la nuit*, the piece people talk about long after they have first heard the nightmarish music. *Scarbo* is truly the work that represents transcendental virtuosity. The music is unbelievably difficult and seems very advanced and dissonant for Ravel’s time. Literally every key of the piano is used. Furthermore, the virtuoso elements become a vehicle for conveying the poetry, which like the music is frenetic and bizarre, almost drugged-out. However, as Bertrand never abandons structure, Ravel manages to fit the shadows and dwarfs and hallucinatory images into a “tightly knit form [that] is comparable to the Chopin *scherzi* and *ballades*” (Dubbiosi 1967). The result is an intense and relentless journey that lies somewhere between a technical study and a psychotic episode.

In the poem, the narrator describes his fear of Scarbo, an evil dwarf who comes in the dead of night. Scarbo plays with the narrator’s mind: sometimes he dances, other times he hides and only makes noises, and then sometimes he appears and “grows between the moon and me like the belfry of a gothic cathedral.” At the end, as the insanity becomes unbearable, Scarbo disappears, “his face pales like the wax of a candle end--and suddenly he is extinguished.” Although the poem is short, there is grandeur in its horror, “a sense of awe, embodied in the image of

the majestically high spire of a Gothic cathedral” (Bruhn, 1997).

Although the music is surreal, it is relatively simple to follow its relationship to the poetry. *Scarbo* consists of several motifs, each representing a theme or image from the poem. The piece begins with three ascending notes, uttered softly and deeply from the lower registers of the piano. This is like a “sneak preview,” like the trailer to a horror film (Bruhn, 1997). The three-note motif varies from a whisper to a romantic sweep, and representing the emotions of the narrator. At the end of the piece, this is played one last time in assertive left hand octaves before the music abruptly trails off, representing a sort of relief as *Scarbo* disappears. Likewise, a staccato and rhythmic theme is frantic and grotesque, like the dwarf’s jagged, uneven dancing. Another motif consists of broken octaves and is more mysterious; this represents suspense, like *Scarbo* hanging from the ceiling, unseen. Finally, there is a very intense, rhythmic progression of chords that interrupts the broken octaves and twice builds up to a climax, like a scream of awe and terror. Ravel, a brilliant orchestrator, wanted the piano to sound like “kettle drums” at this point, which creates a frightening effect (Perlemuter, 1988). Ravel also integrates and interchanges these motifs. For example, there is a strangely calm section in the middle of the piece, but its melody is actually a slower version of *Scarbo*’s “dancing” theme. In this way, Ravel creates anticipation, hinting that the dwarf is hiding, but not gone-- “Do I think him vanished then?”

There are three areas of technical concern in *Scarbo*: playing the notes, developing specific articulations for each motif, and, possibly more difficult than anything, the juxtaposition of very different articulations. Simply learning the notes is an accomplishment, for *Scarbo* demands speed, precision and agility. The pianist must cross and interlock hands, play multiple notes with the thumb, and perform similar acro-

batics at a very high speed. However, the pianist cannot simply hit the right notes; the pianist must hit the right notes in the right way. For example, the initial sequence of repeated notes is very fast and therefore challenging to play. However, as Bruhn insightfully points out, “[t]he musical metaphor is that of trembling.”

Still, the most challenging aspect of *Scarbo* is adjusting to accommodate different articulations in virtually no time. As Marguerite Long said, “the performer must learn to cope with continued neuro-muscular equilibrium in the fingers.” At one moment, for instance in one of the “jumping chord” passages, the playing must be light and quick, with measured staccato. Then, a half-second later, the pianist must entirely adjust the volume and articulation to play pedaled broken octaves. Likewise, the atmosphere changes from frenzy to mystery. If the pianist can somehow master the transcendental virtuosity of *Scarbo*, the result is a captivating musical experience.

It is interesting to note that *Scarbo* ends much like *Ondine* begins, with fast and quiet notes played in the higher registers of the piano that seem to shimmer. This is further evidence of the cohesiveness of *Gaspard de la nuit*. *Ondine* and *Scarbo* have a mixture of darkness and color, a glittery effect. *Ondine* opens with a “beautiful starry night,” and *Scarbo* with “the moon glitters in the sky like a silver shield on an azure banner strewn with golden bees.” The only movement that does not sparkle in the darkness is *Le Gibet*, but this is appropriate since it is the slow movement.

Ravel even provided explicit instructions for the work’s emotional interpretation: “With ‘*Scarbo*’ and ‘*Ondine*’... it is fitting to bestow them with the sentimentality of Liszt and Chopin, whereas ‘*Le Gibet*’ should be played uniformly throughout, implacably, terrifying by its even simplicity” (Dubbiosi, 1967). *Gaspard de la nuit* fits together brilliantly, and each movement

is an impressive enough rendering of Bertrand’s prose that the poetry may as well have been based on the music, and not the other way around.

Coda

“*Gaspard de la nuit* is celebrated everywhere as one of the all-time masterpieces of piano writing” (Larner, 1996). Having examined the genius behind this piece, Larner’s sentiment seems truthful. It is certainly a widely held belief that this piece is a monumental accomplishment, a work that uses piano technique as a study in its own right and as a means of recreating poetry. No other piano work covers such a range of technical study or is as unforgettably vivid. *Gaspard de la nuit* is musical poetry; every page expresses Bertrand’s words in Ravel’s own style. To define his style, one must remember that Ravel was an innovator, a perfectionist, a witty romantic at heart, and a man who learned from centuries of music and composers, from Mozart to Liszt to Satie. This style, then, incorporates elements ranging from the classical era into the twentieth century—elements such as a sonata-like form, romantic images, and a vast range of both classic and modern technical problems. *Gaspard de la nuit* is a compendium of the piano literature, and a perfectly crafted imprint of horror and elegance.

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