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# The Style of Modern Western Music from Ravel's Musical Works

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**Abstract:** Maurice Ravel is one of the most important representatives of Western modern music in the 20th century, and he has made far-reaching contributions to the development of Western modern music with his unique musical style and compositional philosophy. Ravel's music not only made important achievements in the impressionist tradition, but also further expanded the boundaries of modern music through innovative forms, structures and the absorption of ethnic musical elements. In his works, Ravel broke the boundaries of traditional harmony and tonality with his superb technique and unique aesthetic sense, and brought a new way of expression to western modern music. By analyzing Ravel's masterpieces, such as Bolero and Daphne and Chloe, we can see how he opened up the diversified path of modern music style through the fusion of impressionism and modern techniques. Ravel's music not only had a profound impact at the time, but still provides a rich source of inspiration and resources for modern composers and music education.

**Keywords:** Ravel; Impressionism; Modern Western Music; Ethnic Music

## 1. Introduction

Ravel occupies a pivotal role in the annals of 20th-century Western music, renowned particularly for his contributions to the realm of Impressionistic music. However, Ravel's influence extends far beyond this singular domain. His works transcend the simplistic boundaries of Impressionism, revealing profound connections with subsequent modern musical trends. As a quintessential figure of France's golden age of music, Ravel adhered to tradition while boldly exploring new expressive forms and musical languages. This blend of heritage and innovation endows his compositions with both artistic sophistication and widespread impact. Ravel's music not only reflects his acute sensitivity to timbre and texture but also showcases his unique innovations in form and structure. By incorporating diverse cultural and ethnic musical elements into his compositions, he presents a broad perspective on the profound understanding of musical forms and styles. It is within this confluence of cultural and technical elements that Ravel has provided a rich reservoir of intellectual resources for modern music. His music transcends temporal limitations, exerting a lasting influence on contemporary musical creation and education.

## 2. Stylistic Analysis of Ravel's Musical Works

### 2.1. The use of impressionism

Ravel's application of Impressionistic techniques reveals his acute sensitivity to timbre and atmosphere, particularly in his handling of harmony and orchestration. Diverging from traditional melodic dominance, Ravel emphasizes the colors and textures of music. Through the overlay of unconventional harmonies and the blurring of tonalities, he crafts a mesmerizing, dream-like auditory experience. For instance, in

Published: 19 September 2024



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*\*Boléro\**, a singular melody is persistently repeated, yet through the orchestral layering and shifting timbres, it gradually constructs a tension-filled musical space—a hallmark of Impressionism. Ravel adeptly employs subtle harmonies to convey natural landscapes and emotional states, eschewing conventional musical phrases. His *\*Miroirs\** suite vividly illustrates the Impressionist pursuit of light and ambiance, with its notes seemingly providing a musical depiction of natural phenomena, evoking strong visual associations. In Ravel's oeuvre, Impressionism transcends mere technical means to become an extension of emotional expression. Through his portrayal of timbre and atmosphere, he dismantles traditional musical boundaries, infusing modern music with new dimensions and inspiration, resulting in a more liberated and expressive conveyance of emotion [1].

### 2.2. *Innovations in structure and form*

Ravel's musical compositions exhibit remarkable innovation in structure and form, showcasing his audacious deconstruction and reconfiguration of traditional frameworks. In stark contrast to the intricate forms characteristic of 19th-century Romanticism, Ravel employs simplified forms and asymmetrical structures to forge a unique musical language imbued with distinct rhythm and expressiveness. A quintessential example is his ballet score for *\*Daphnis et Chloé\**, which eschews conventional sectional structures in favor of a series of organic fragments, intricately weaving melody and timbre into a cohesive musical fabric that conveys a sense of fluid narrative. His treatment of the rondo form is particularly noteworthy. In *\*Boléro\**, Ravel builds upon a continuously repeating melodic line and a fixed rhythm, yet through variations in orchestration and dynamics, he imbues the work with an ever-escalating tension and drama. This cyclical reiteration of a singular theme allows listeners to experience varying emotional nuances within the “repetition” of the music, effectively shattering the monotony of traditional structures. Ravel does not rely on existing formal frameworks; instead, he strikes a balance between tradition and modernity, fostering greater freedom and flexibility in the structural development of his works by transcending linear musical logic, thereby unveiling his distinctive musical philosophy. It is this very innovation that bestows Ravel's compositions with an extraordinary sense of modernity and enduring artistic allure in terms of formal aesthetics.

### 2.3. *National styles and modern techniques*

Ravel's fusion of nationalistic style with modern techniques imparts a distinctive character to his musical compositions. He adeptly draws inspiration from diverse folk traditions, integrating multicultural elements into his works to infuse them with unique hues and emotions. For instance, in his “Rhapsodie Espagnole,” he boldly incorporates Spanish dance rhythms and traditional melodies, vividly showcasing the exotic charm of Spanish culture through vibrant timbres and intricate orchestration. Yet, rather than mere imitation, he employs modern musical techniques to bestow these ethnic elements with a novel expressive dimension. In his compositions, he frequently utilizes irregular rhythms and modal shifts to transcend conventional rhythmic constraints, creating a pronounced sense of nationalistic rhythm. Ravel also employs complex harmonic structures and rich orchestration to reflect the intricacies and diversity of folk music. His use of elements from Eastern scales and Gypsy melodies enriches his works with profound emotional depth and diversity. By perfectly blending modern techniques with nationalistic style, Ravel preserves the essence of folk music while pushing the boundaries of traditional music [2]. His works reveal a profound cultural depth within a modern context, expanding the horizons and possibilities of Western contemporary music, and demonstrating his respect for and innovation in musical diversity.

### 3. Influence of Ravel's music on Western modern music

#### 3.1. Contribution to the development of Impressionism

Ravel played an extraordinarily pivotal role in the evolution of Impressionist music. Not only did he inherit Debussy's pioneering concepts, but he also expanded upon them in a uniquely distinctive manner. Ravel's compositions are marked by their intricate timbral nuances and complex harmonic structures. Through his acute sensitivity to color, he elevated Impressionism to new heights. His meticulous handling of sound imparts a dreamlike, nebulous quality to his music, exemplifying the Impressionist pursuit of ambiguity and ephemeral perception. In contrast to Debussy, Ravel showed a greater inclination towards rigorous formal control; however, within these formal constraints, he explored further possibilities of Impressionist music through the richness of timbre and the flexibility of harmony. For instance, in "Boléro," he achieves a unique effect of simultaneous stillness and dynamism through the continual repetition of a single melody and progressively layered orchestration, deepening the Impressionist focus on timbre. Ravel's contributions to Impressionism are not only evident in his specific works but also in the new avenues of expression he opened for subsequent composers. Through precise conceptualization and a distinctive sound world, Ravel provided a new direction for Impressionist music, transforming it from mere sensual expression into an art form with greater structural elegance. This innovation laid a profound foundation for Western modern music, advancing the exploration of timbre and form in 20th-century music.

#### 3.2. Influence on subsequent styles of modern music

Ravel's influence on subsequent modern musical styles is profound and extensive. Through his innovation and fusion of traditional musical elements, he paved new pathways for the development of 20th-century music. His works not only showcase exceptional technique and strict control over form but also reflect his pursuit of musical freedom. By breaking the constraints of conventional tonality and rhythm, Ravel provided future composers with a more open creative space, fostering further exploration in structure and timbre. In his compositions, Ravel emphasized the ultimate expression of timbre and orchestration, creating intricate sonic layers through his sophisticated orchestration techniques. This approach impacted many later modern composers, particularly in minimalism and serialism, where the focus on timbre was further developed. Ravel's treatment of rhythm was similarly forward-looking, as he laid the groundwork for later minimalist music through asymmetric beats and repetitive structures, with his influence still evident in the works of Philip Glass and Steve Reich. His bold use of folk music elements, especially in the context of multicultural integration, also inspired modern composers. Whether in the rise of jazz or the diverse expressions in film music, Ravel's innovative ideas have had a significant and undeniable impact on the overall direction of contemporary music [3].

#### 3.3. Revelation of Ravel's works on contemporary music creation

Ravel's compositions, marked by their distinctive spirit of innovation and diverse expressive techniques, offer profound inspiration to contemporary music creators. His openness of thought and intercultural fusion in his work make his compositions exemplary models of the perfect synthesis between tradition and modernity, reason and emotion. Ravel's precise control over form and meticulous refinement of timbre provide contemporary composers with a muse for seeking artistic equilibrium. Whether through the use of complex harmonies or the subtle shaping of timbre, he reminds later musicians that the integration of technique and emotion lies at the heart of musical expression. Ravel's audacious handling of melody and rhythm, particularly his exploration of asymmetrical rhythms and complex counterpoint, has introduced a new creative language to modern music. Under Ravel's influence, today's musical creation

no longer confines itself to traditional modal frameworks but increasingly values emotional expression and sonic experimentation. Whether in the revival of neoclassicism or the avant-garde exploration of electronic music, Ravel's spirit continues to guide musicians in transcending boundaries to discover their unique voices. Contemporary music creation must navigate between change and innovation to find its identity, and Ravel's works stand as the quintessential example of this creative ethos. His music illuminates that artistry is not merely a display of technique but a profound exploration and expression of human emotion and culture [4].

#### 4. The Application of Ravel's Musical Works in Modern Music Education

Ravel's musical compositions, with their distinctive harmonic language and rich palette of colors, hold significant value in contemporary music education. As a pivotal figure bridging Romanticism and modern music, Ravel's works exhibit innovations in harmony, rhythm, and timbre. This provides an abundance of material for music education, allowing students not only to grasp the innovative thinking of modern music but also to cultivate a more acute musical sensibility. Works by Ravel, such as "Boléro" and "Daphnis et Chloé," offer vibrant examples for music theory instruction through their complex rhythmic layers and interwoven harmonic structures. Such pieces encourage students to explore breakthroughs and innovations within traditional frameworks, thereby deepening their understanding of pivotal transformations and developments in Western music. Additionally, the meticulous and layered orchestration in Ravel's compositions serves as a practical reference for ensemble training and instrumental instruction, enabling students to master the nuances of different timbres and their interactive roles within an ensemble. In contemporary music education, Ravel's works are not merely tools for theoretical learning but also a wellspring for artistic expression and creative development [5].

#### 5. Conclusion

Ravel's musical creations are both a tribute to tradition and a vision of the future. Through his masterful application of Impressionist techniques and his audacious exploration of form, harmony, and ethnic musical elements, he has provided a rich tapestry of innovative possibilities for modern music. Not only is Ravel's musical language extraordinarily expressive, but the depth and breadth of his works have also opened vast creative spaces for subsequent composers. His musical ideas have inspired contemporaries such as Debussy and laid crucial theoretical and creative foundations for later modern music movements, including twelve-tone technique and minimalism. In contemporary music education and research, Ravel's works remain an indispensable model for study. Through detailed analysis and performance practice of his compositions, music students and professionals can gain insights into the evolution and innovative spirit of modern music. Ravel's music is not merely a product of its time but a timeless artistic treasure, continuing to shine with undeniable brilliance in the development of modern music.

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