

Transforming Grief into Art: Ravel's Commemorative Journey in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Introduction

Le Tombeau de Couperin, M. 68 (1914-1917) is a work by French composer Maurice Ravel. The piece is commonly known for its adaptation of Baroque styles and its dedicatees, whom were Ravel's friends who died in the First World War. However, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* dives into themes of the past farther than just these references. Following the devastation of World War One and personal tragedy, Ravel's composition style adapted to explore the sentiments of commemoration and memory in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. This is achieved through its stylistic, technical, and musical methods, such as employing a lighthearted approach reflective of nostalgia and memory of the past, and technical "dialogue" between its reference to baroque practices and modern forms of the French Impressionist era.

Ravel and the Great War

Le Tombeau de Couperin's musical and stylistic impact cannot be assessed through just the lens of its score. Although many details within the music provide evidence for Ravel's reminiscent initiative, understanding Ravel's historic and personal circumstances during the time he wrote *Le Tombeau de Couperin* provides clarifying contextualization. As previously mentioned, the general history that surrounding *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is the First World War (1914-1918) and its lasting effects. Ravel's firsthand experience with trauma and death in World

War One altered his expression of grief, as it did with many artists of this time, and this emotional expressivity is represented through *Le Tombeau de Couperin*'s technical and stylistic approach.

When the French mobilized for War on August 2nd, 1914, Ravel, as well as many of his friends and fellow musicians immediately enlisted. This was a product of feverous patriotism and the value of national duty permeating through French society, including artists like Ravel (Rogers 100). This homogenous patriotism implies that the personal lives and emotions of the French people were interconnected with the war. Thus, for Ravel, who was very much involved in the war effort, the overall tragedy dealt with due to the War became personal, and the personal losses he experienced due to war were amplified due to heightened emotional attitude towards the war. Additionally, many of Ravel's own friends were killed in the war, some of which *Le Tombeau de Couperin* dedicates itself to.

Rogers even goes on to explain that musicians like Ravel would contribute to the French nationalist machine, including those of mourning (Rogers 102). Although, music that represented remembrance and commemoration was produced, it was not to contribute to the French wartime attitude in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, as Rogers argues, but rather because of the interconnectedness of tragedy and personal emotion that arose from the war. If the work was representative of French nationalism, like many works of the earlier Romantic era, it would not be as lighthearted as it is. This is what differentiates *Le Tombeau de Couperin* from a more passionate and intense work. In *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel has a reason to reflect on the war from a perspective that is truly his own and, in a way, different from the common understanding of mourning. He was even criticized for seemingly mismatching the character of

the work, to which he responded, “The dead are sad enough in their eternal silence.” (La 33). However, it must be noted that this distinction still emphasizes the war’s impact on *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, just not in a politically oriented manner. Ravel’s creation was a consequence of not the nationalist passion brought out by the war, but the exacerbated tragedy that had a more personal impact due to the existing wartime attitude. This brings together the two major points of my thesis; *Le Tombeau de Couperin* has a commemorative approach due to the emotional tragedies Ravel had to deal with during the war, and that this approach was musically expressed through a lighthearted and nostalgic approach since it was not constrained to the usual nationalistic style.

In addition to Ravel’s personal trauma with the war, his mother also died during the war (La 33). Ravel, who was very close to his mother, found himself to be pinned between the emotional weight of losing his mother and his friends during the war. This gives even more reason to why Ravel approached this work in a commemorative manner. Overall, Ravel’s personal losses during the First World War allow for *Le Tombeau de Couperin* to be analyzed in context of a composer dealing with the complexities of assuming grief and turning it into commemorative work of art. In the following sections, technical analysis will be conducted to support this historic and personal context.

Couperin’s Tombeau

Before assessing the extent to which Ravel adopted Baroque styles, it is necessary to examine the Baroque styles themselves and their properties. Dissecting the title *Le Tombeau de*

Couperin is the first step in establishing this basis. The word *Tombeau* in French means tomb, but a tombeau also refers to a style of music that commemorates someone who died. As for *Couperin*, this refers to Louis Couperin, a prominent 17th century French baroque composer.

However, Tombeau originally was a literary style developed in the 16th century. It was in the 17th century when Baroque composers began to adapt the tombeau into musical form. One of these composers was Couperin, which Ravel's piece titularly commemorates. Couperin's Tombeau was characterized by his unmeasured preludes which were intended to have rhythmic freedom. La notes that Couperin's unmeasured preludes began with a motif that was then developed into more complex musical material but remained a derivation of this motif (La 9). An example of this would be Couperin's initial use of an anacrusis scale that is risen to the fourth of the key signature in his *Tombeau de Mr. de Blancrocher*. This motif is then altered throughout by descensions, augmentations, and ornamentations, which were common techniques of the baroque era (Couperin). It can even be interpreted that these motifs in Couperin's tombeaus are a representation of the dead and that they are commemorated through the music created through their musical alterations. This is because these elements add a sound of emotional complexities, so the motif can reflect many different emotions, almost humanizing the theme as if it were a person being remembered. Musicologist Michael Tilmouth even goes to say that this style evokes the "sensitive *style brisé* of the lute", where *style brisé* is the irregular breaking of the chordal progressions and rhythms (La 10). This interpretation is certainly in context with Ravel's version, which seems to model many aspects of Couperin's work besides its labels.

Le Tombeau de Couperin

As mentioned before, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* certainly takes Couperin's models as inspiration. However, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is still a modern product with a neoclassical and impressionist basis. In this following section, analysis of the written differences of Ravel's work will be compared to the original Couperin tombeau. This interplay between Ravel and Couperin shows a direct method in which Ravel adapted his compositional styles to incorporate an element of memory. Additionally, many technical examples within the work point towards a unique style that also embodies memory. Therefore, the defining "physical" features of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (its musical style and structural basis) has 2 significant interpretive factors: as a representative of the intertwines of past and present through its interplay with baroque influence, and as a show of commemorative emotion through its style and musicality. It must also be noted that the wide range of memorial references also allow Ravel to direct the music to convey an ambient, but sorrowful sound, one that turns commemoration into nostalgia.

The first notable example of Ravel's homage to Couperin can be found in the *Forlane* movement, which is also dedicated to Ravel's friend Gabriel Deluc. A *Forlane*, in baroque music, is traditionally an Italian folk dance of passion between two partners. Ravel's *Forlane* is in 6/8 time and is construed very methodically and elegantly. He achieves this through a punctuated sound which comes from extensive use of dotted rhythms (Ravel). Olah notes that this punctuality is quite like Couperin's *Forlane*'s, indicating its homage to the past. She also explains that in both *Forlanes*, a rondo-couplet alternation is used, which was the preferred musical form of the baroque era (Olah 300). In comparison to the techniques used by Ravel and composers of

the early 20th century, the Forlane is almost archaic. The forms of late-romantic pieces hardly used rondo form and often favored rhythmic freedom to emphasize expression. This is well embodied in Ravel's own previous works, such as *Daphnis et Chloe*, a piece which has almost no rondo-esque repetitions in its melodic progressions. All these structural similarities with Couperin and slight divergences from modern styles well represent a sense of memory as it develops a relatedness between the past and present that is embedded within the work. Aside from the structural similarities with the Baroque era, this rhythmical structure gives off a musical sound that is very pleasant to listen to and is simple, further reflecting how Ravel achieves a more lighthearted and nostalgic emotion rather than a feverous one.

However, Ravel still achieves a degree of affectionate and commemorative emotion like those of traditional romantic works, regardless of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*'s baroque style. This is achieved through Ravel's harmonic complexities throughout the Forlane that remind the listener that it is still Ravel. For example, the repeated ascension without resolution of the leading tone (the note one half step below the tonic), is a common technique found in Ravel's more impressionist works. This harmonic effect is important, particularly in the context of its dedicatee, because can capture a wide range of emotions. In Olah's assesement of the Forlane, she references pianist Vlado Perlemutter's input, where he explains the sounds of this harmonic effect is that of a magical music box (Olah 300). Although, this effect can be expressed different depending on the listener/performer, there is a component that evokes a fulfilled sentiment that isn't overly passionate due its underlying baroque structure, which keeps it down to a lighthearted feeling, as mentioned before. This honed in emotional expression in context of Ravel's dedication to his dead friend solidifies that this mellowness heard in the Forlane

manifests themes of memory. Based on Forlane's harmonic aspects, it can be concluded that Ravel can nostalgically grasp themes of commemoration with more than its structural homage to Couperin.

The Prelude, harmonically, is much simpler, but achieves the same emotional effect in a different manner. Ravel writes in the original manuscript that the movement is in memory of his friend First Lieutenant Jacques Charlot, the transcriber of his *Ma mère l'Oye* (1910). In contrast to the Forlane, the Prelude is defined by its rhythmic freedom. It also is quite continuous with many 16th note runs and long phrases. Additionally, Ravel employs the pentatonic scale in its harmony, one of his most common harmonic devices (Ravel). Just as in the Forlane, this harmony creates an emotion-filled sound, particularly a nostalgic one. Additionally, the rhythmic freedom and continuous phrases develop a carefree and playful sound. The Prelude is trying to reference a very reflective feeling and with its written dedication, it is very clear that Ravel is artistically commemorating a dead friend. It still recalls aspects of the traditional Prelude styles, however, particularly through its ornamentation (La 19). Ornamentation, particularly excessively, is a trait of baroque music and is rarely heard in Ravel's pre-war works. Besides the fact that the movement is a labelled prelude, Ravel's adherence to its defining aspects shows a genuine dedication to the styles of the Baroque era. Just as with the Forlane, fusing together components from past and present create an emphasis on an emotional attitude towards the past.

Another major theme in *Le Tombeau de Couperin* that is essential to its commemorative intentions is its generally human like expressions. Certain musical elements from within evoke lighthearted sounds, although they may come from more consolidative

intentions. In the second movement Fugue, Ravel uses a repeating two-note slur, which also is the subject of the movement. La argues in her analysis of this movement that this signifies a sigh and is analogous to human expression (La 35). This is certainly heard throughout the movement and adds a human element, evoking more emotion to the listener. Again, in context of its Ravel's personal life at the time of the work, this human element can be seen as the musical representation of the movement's dedicatee Jean Cruppi. However, she also interprets this as a voice of lamentation and mourning, which is then turned into an array of crying voices due to the fugue's nature (La 36). Although, as with the Forlane, Ravel uses musical techniques to express sentiment, it is not necessarily of a heavy weight. This human element rather reinforces the established nostalgic theme and doesn't point it towards a change. The subject of the Fugue itself even begins almost the same notes as the beginning of the Prelude and the second part of the subject is an inversion of the second part of the Prelude's (Ravel). Additionally, a Fugue isn't traditionally included in a French Baroque suite, but is often paired with a prelude in other types of works (La 20). Essentially, Ravel's Fugue is an extension of the Prelude, and continues its nostalgic and light sound. These carefully crafted techniques allow for Ravel to convey commemoration of his dead friends through reminiscence, which amplifies its sentimentality to the listener.

The remaining movements, Menuet, Rigadoun, and Toccata, are also all styles that were common in the baroque era and were usually not formally used in Ravel's time. Ravel's general implementation of a baroque structure establishes that the work is about commemoration. However, he maintains his personal style one way or another in each of the movements, allowing for a modern expressivity of the emotions attached to paying respects to the dead. With both

structure and technique aligned in their intention to refer to memory, Ravel squeezes out a product that well represents both his sorrow and acceptance of personal tragedy from the First World War.

***La Valse* and Conclusion**

The elegance of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* comes from Ravel's intentions for it to be commemoration of his dead friends. This is uniquely and effectively achieved through its structural homages, such as rhythmic and form similarities with the Baroque era and developing an emotion-filled harmony that emphasizes a light, wistful, and sentimental reflection of the fallen. However, this is quite unique to just *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and Ravel's works later in his career interpret the trauma from World War One in a much different manner. A notable example I will analyze is *La Valse* (1920). I believe it is providing clarity in the changes of Ravel's composition style, showing his work in *Le Tombeau de Couperin* was distinct from his general musical output. *La Valse* is an ironic work in the sense that its content deviates from that of a traditional Viennese waltz. It is characterized by its heavy use of dissonance, strange modulations, and the use of the Danse Macabre allegory (Ravel). This creates an uncomfortably violent and dissatisfying sound. Unlike *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *La Valse* is a passionate and overwhelming piece (like many of Ravel's other works). Through its unconventional techniques, its references to death (the Danse Macabre), and Ravel's experience in World War One, it can be assumed the emotional magnitude of *La Valse* conveys trauma and loss. This differs from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* since it transforms trauma into commemoration while *La Valse* expresses it in a much blunter manner. However, just as *Le Tombeau de Couperin* uses Baroque inspiration,

La Valse utilizes the style of a 19th century Viennese waltz to extent, and as previously analyzed, is a tool that effectively conveys themes of past. This serves as a reminder that this emotional output is in remembrance of the tragedy of the First World War.

Regardless of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*'s differences from other post-war works, it still stands as a poignant fusion of personal grief and artistic homage. Ravel's personal experience and trauma with the First World War. Through intertwining Baroque elements in style, technique, and structure, a delicate balance between past and present is crafted, reinforcing the titular commemorations. Additionally, through harmonic complexities Ravel strengthens his sentimental and commemorative expression, honoring his fallen friends through a nostalgic and lighter sound, rather than through overwhelming passion. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* remains a poignant example of how music can serve as a timeless tribute to those who have been lost, transforming grief into a lasting memorial through the power of composition.

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