

BOOK REVIEW

Michael J. Puri, *Ravel the Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, and Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). viii + 272 pp. \$24.95.

In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, Deborah Mawer called for a reassessment of Ravel's compositions, noting that the 'mysteries are real and detailed musical enquiries must continue'.¹ This call has been answered by Mawer herself, in *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, and in a second edited volume, *Ravel Studies*, as well as by other Ravel scholars represented in that volume, including Steven Huebner, Barbara Kelly, Emily Kilpatrick and Michael J. Puri.² Puri's most recent offering, *Ravel the Decadent*, is a fascinating, original and engaging step further forward in the field of Ravel scholarship.

In the opening section of his book, 'Introduction: Memory, Decadence, and Music', Puri develops a fresh perspective on Ravel by aligning his work and aesthetic with the nineteenth-century literary figures Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), and, perhaps most significantly, with his contemporary, Marcel Proust (1871–1922). Most important, Puri singles out Decadence as central to Ravel's creativity. A late nineteenth-century phenomenon, Decadence was associated with the Symbolist movement. Puri identifies this aspect of Symbolism, and of late-nineteenth-century aesthetics, as a formative influence on Ravel.

Decadence brings together in a single work binaries like past and the present, and what is remembered and what is not. Puri brings together these conflicting dimensions to reveal the importance of time, memory and nostalgia in Ravel's music. He offers a 'broad account of Ravel's music ... relating it to contemporary trends in early European modernism' (p. 3). Rather than adopting critical terms that have been explored previously, Puri sets out to establish his own terms in a way that is 'compatible' to the discourse and to the 'dynamism of Ravel's music' (p. 3). Decadence thus becomes a new interpretative stance and a new method for interrogating memory in music.

Looking to Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*,³ Puri compares Proust's textual and Ravel's musical processes. The Proust work forms a model for the 'exploration of memory from a Decadent perspective' (p. 14). It is, indeed, the

¹ Deborah Mawer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 4.

² Deborah Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel: Creation and Interpretation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Deborah Mawer, ed., *Ravel Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Other recent Ravel scholarship includes Peter Kaminsky, ed., *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2011), and Stephen Zank, *Irony and Sound: The Music of Maurice Ravel* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009).

³ Written between 1909 and 1922, and published in seven volumes between 1913 and 1927, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* once was known in English translation as 'Remembrance of Things Past', though more recently the title has been rendered more literally as 'In Search of Lost Time'.

Decadence⁴ established in Puri's 'Introduction' that guides this fascinating enquiry, as the book seeks to show how this is manifested in Ravel's music. The 'decadent tendencies' (p. 8) of the era establish the book's central themes: memory, sublimation and desire. Puri acknowledges the terms most often used in discussing Ravel's music, such as Impressionism, Symbolism and Neoclassicism, but he sets out their limitations, and unfolds a new reading that is grounded in evidence drawn from primary sources. In defining Ravel as part of the Decadence, Puri establishes some shared features, or tropes, of the artistic works in this movement, including 'refinement, dandyism ... esotericism ... unconscious, introspection ... androgyny, sexuality ...' (p. 6). Debussy's setting of Mallarmé's *faune*, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), is seen as an example of 'a decadent subject caught up in the dialectics of memory, sublimation, and desire' (p. 9). Puri then asks what this Decadence means for Ravel's music (p. 11). It is seen as a catalyst, not only for an artistic creation, but also for Ravel's engagement with memory, for his embodiment as dandy, and for his music as a mirror of that dandy.

Memory is a central theme of the book, established in the 'Introduction' and further explored in Chapter One, 'Thematic Cyclicity and the Ravelian Finale'. Memory is one attribute of the Decadence: it refers to a sense of nostalgia and belatedness, sharing features of Neoclassicism; but it is also a quest to find something new in the past, and a challenge to recall and then make use of that past. Puri takes care to iterate the differences between a conscious and an unconscious memory. As Jacqueline Rose notes in her study of Proust, 'involuntary memory is an epiphany, and the struggle of memory ... is to retrieve its object rather than push it away.'⁵ Ultimately, an experience worthy of a reaction, and therefore of renewal, is at the heart of the Decadence; or, as Andrew Hussey notes in his historical survey of Paris, the Decadents 'argued for novelty over boredom, horror over banalities of beauty'.⁶

Memory is one attribute of the Decadence, and here it is analysed in relation to musical structure and thematic cyclicity in particular. Puri is very careful to define his terms: when memory is explored, he refers to 'either the past [which] become[s] present or the ability to make the past present' (p. 15). Reference is made to both the conscious and unconscious use of memory, noting its temporal and variable nature. Appropriation of forms, techniques and traditions are seen as Ravel's conscious use of the past. The recurrence of themes, motives or ideas across works and forms might be said to be his unconscious memory at work. Notably conveyed via Puri's expert analysis is that Ravel's use of memory changes during his career, later becoming sinister and more mysterious. Puri asks how Ravel reuses material and where it is reused: to what effect is the re-use put and does the original meaning carry forward? The 'intermittence' (a term also used by Proust) in the recurrence of themes is where 'Ravel brings out the shimmering dialectics of Decadence' (p. 32). In his analysis, Puri sets out 'preconditions' for the existence of memory, including 'stillness and slow time' (p. 41). In Chapter One he analyses the *Sonatine* (1905) (pp. 33–6) and *Rhapsody espagnole* (1908) (pp. 42–8); his thorough approach, with contemporaneous

⁴ The aesthetic of Decadence often is referred to as 'the Decadence', a stylistic conceit of Puri's writing style in this book, and so shall be retained in this review.

⁵ Jacqueline Rose, *Proust Among the Nations: From Dreyfus to the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 147.

⁶ Andrew Hussey, *Paris: A Secret History* (London: Penguin Books, 2007): 299.

reference both to Proust and to d'Indy's *Cours de Composition musicale*, produces an original critical perspective that is convincing and engaging.

Chapter Two, 'Reanimation and the Primal Scene', continues to present memory in Ravel's music, while turning to a positive perspective. The *Sonatine* (1905) was seen as a 'turning point in Ravel's poetics of memory' (p. 52) in that the 'Menuet' movement is 'unpredictable' in avoiding the conventional structural processes in favour of 'involuntary' processes. The *Introduction et allegro pour harpe, flûte, clarinette et quatuor* (1905) is analysed in Chapter Two, where Puri refers to the 'reanimation' of material, iterating the significance of memory as an active search for material once more:

We can define animation as an action that brings life to something that never lived, while reanimation returns life to a being that was once alive ... the index of pastness in the latter object – its history of living – is the crucial factor that places reanimation beneath the rubric of memory (p. 56).

The reformulation of material is explored, with reference to Ravel's 'skill in adapting old works to new performing contexts' (p. 59). This initial analytical chapter establishes a methodology for what follows.

Chapter Two also 'introduces the central work of the book, Ravel's ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912). Decadence is expressed within this work in many forms, not least in the association of Daphnis as a self-styled dandy, with an inference that this, in turn, is a reflection of Ravel. The music toys also with nostalgia: this chapter takes the introduction to the work to assess its content, before exploring its reuse and development through the rest of the work. The creative context of the work is established before Puri provides an overview of the main themes. From here on, Puri's attention to a detailed thematic analysis iterates where memory resides. The contextual assessment, in Chapter One, underpins this analysis well. The comparison between Ravel and Proust, borne out throughout the volume, is not an easy one, as they treat memory differently: as Puri noted in his contribution to *Ravel Studies*, it would seem that memory:

mean[s] different things in the context of their works. In Proust's novel, it is primarily a phenomenon that takes place in the mind of the narrator, while in Ravel's music it manifests itself mainly as an abiding dependence on the distant historical past, most notable in the avid use of antique forms.⁷

Puri interrogates the precision of Ravel's music, in particular its ability to express meaning as clearly as poetry. Interpreting representative themes of the era, the music is able to recall specific memories both voluntary and involuntary: the act of memory is viewed as the unifying feature of *Daphnis*.

In Chapter Three, 'Dandy Interrupted', Puri reads Ravel's music, especially in *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912), as embodying the dandy. Nichol's recent Ravel biography called for further research to assess 'what dandyism entailed', noting that it marks out 'an individual position'.⁸ Puri establishes the way Ravel produces his unique position in his original compositions. Using thematic and structural analysis, he is able to show how 'Daphnis seems to place *himself* on display as a

⁷ Michael J. Puri, 'Memory, pastiche, and aestheticism in Ravel and Proust', in *Ravel Studies*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 67.

⁸ Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011): 17.

beautiful presence to be desired' (p. 95). Attention is given to the cultural context of Ravel's work and to its interdisciplinary dimension, with reference to Daphnis's character and to Nijinsky's performance of him. Mawer's previous reassessment of Ravel's ballets noted that 'Ravel's aesthetic perspective upon the arts was a holistic one'.⁹ In line with this, Puri asserts the interdisciplinarity of Ravel's music and significantly develops the issue of the dandy, raised previously, as an analytical focus: unpicking memory, the Decadence and representations of the dandy, Puri's central examples are likewise drawn from ballet, such as *Daphnis et Chloé*, or are otherwise evocative of dance, such as *La Valse* and *Valse nobles et sentimentales*.

The dandy is a performance – in dandyism a person becomes a work of art; Ravel turns a mirror on this relationship by making his dramatic character a dandy – and perhaps a reflection of himself – thus making art resemble the human. The dandy presents, in Baudelaire's words cited by Puri, 'sublime without interruption'.¹⁰ In constructing a perfect persona, Ravel's music and character show affinity with this notion.

Chapter Four, 'Idylls and Bacchanals', explores Ravel's use of historical styles and forms; in particular he analyses the bacchanal in order to illustrate the interdependence of memory, desire and sublimation. Memory is an active construction in Ravel's *œuvre*. He does not simply reproduce forms and genres; the works are not mere pastiche. Rather, Ravel is able to 'recreate' the past (p. 19) – as Proust put it: 'Seek? More than that: create.'¹¹ This creativity is illustrated in Chapter Four: a comparison of two versions, from 1910 and 1912, of the bacchanale for Part III of the ballet (p. 129–39) is particularly revealing.

Chapter Five, 'Epilogism in the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*', and Chapter Six, 'Dynamism in *La Valse*', continue to explore Ravel's re-use of older forms by comparing two waltzes. Puri's concentration on dance works is further relevant to the Ravel–Proust comparison because:

the topic of the body continues to be neglected in humanistic field of memory studies, [even though] it was central to Proust's notion of involuntary memory, which was typically triggered by the physical reexperiencing of distinct sensations from the past (p. 145).

Such re-experiencing is reliant on an embodied experience in time. Referring to Bergson, Puri asks how time relates to memory (p. 163).¹² Puri's prose moves freely between philosophy, aesthetics and cultural studies, as well as musicology and analysis. The authoritative tone and dedication to providing a well-supported new reading of Ravel's music is grounded in this breadth of disciplinary awareness. These two chapters apply the model of the Decadence with reference to detailed score analysis. It is an expert example of how to produce meaningful musical analysis. The final chapter, 'Conclusion: In the

⁹ Deborah Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel: Creation and Interpretation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010): 1.

¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Journaux intimes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Yves-Gérard Le Dantec and Claude Pinchois (Paris: Gallimard, 1961): 1273.

¹¹ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1999): I, 49.

¹² Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 2001): 1–157.

footsteps of the Faun', develops 'the notion of "faun music"' (p. 31) by iterating how the Decadence can be interpreted in light of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, and moreover, by outlining Ravel's response to it.

Puri's dedication to analytical detail is refreshing; he is not shy of citing specific bars and phrases in his many musical examples, though he more often supports his assertions by references to bar numbers and rehearsal figures. The book is not easy to follow, however, unless one has the scores and recordings to read and listen to alongside the prose. It is a welcome opportunity for the academic reader to delve into the details of the scholar's analytical interpretations, though it would be difficult for the general interested reader or a student new to the subject area.

This beautiful volume features thick description, meticulous analytical observations, copious evidence and a strong thematic focus. Puri's original aim, to reassess the role of Decadence in Ravel's *œuvre*, distinguishes him as a leading scholar in this field. His careful attention to primary sources is matched by an exceptional attention to establishing the contextual situation. Moreover, the ease with which Puri moves between disciplines is commendable. The complex issues are iterated with a graceful writing style and impeccable explanation.

Clearly written and expertly researched and presented, the book shines with Puri's enthusiasm for Ravel. His goal to be both 'novel and productive' (p. 3) certainly is achieved. His authoritative prose crosses musicology, analysis, cultural studies, cultural theory, history, aesthetics and philosophy with ease. This volume would be of interest to any scholar or dedicated student of French music, art, history and culture of the period. The clarity of prose and copious analysis provides a model of excellent scholarship that will make this book a standard reference on this topic. *Ravel the Decadent* is a thoroughly enjoyable and engaging read that is difficult to put down. It fosters a re-experiencing of Ravel's music, in new terms, namely Decadence and Memory, and will be a central reference text for future researchers.

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