

Ravel, Maurice (1875-1937): Summary presentation of writings

The assemblage of public writings by Maurice Ravel includes 28 articles, 18 of which date from before 1914; 16 open letters, rights of reply, manifestos, advertising, and petitions; 80 interviews or accounts of interviews, many of which were published outside of France, responses to inquiries, and homages.

A very small number of manuscripts of these writings survives; one article in the private archives of Jules Écorcheville, one article in the Glinka Museum in Moscow, one open letter in the private collection of Éric Van Lauwe.

These writings begin in 1896 with an homage to Saint-Saëns, and they finish in 1933 with an article on the aspirations of young composers. The silence of Ravel's final years is explained by his incurable neurological malady.

Ravel expressed himself publicly relatively little, speaking more willingly about the music of others than his own. Apart from his discretion and his unfeigned modesty, he did not deem it necessary to talk about his art: "I have never felt the need to formulate, whether for others or for myself, the principles of my esthetic" (*Esquisse autobiographique*, 1928). Focusing on composition, he declined several offers to collaborate on periodicals. He even swore never to publish again in *Le Courrier musical*, upset about an article he had written on Chopin in 1910 that was distorted by editing. Ravel always maintained a certain mistrust toward the press, deeming that his words were often misquoted. In fact, three dubious interviews, two of which are surely apocryphal, have no place in the body of writings.

Ravel did serve briefly as a music critic: from February to April 1912, 3 articles for *La Revue musicale* and *Bulletin de la Société internationale de Musique*; from January 1913 to June 1914, 11 articles for *Comœdia illustré*. A special case deserves emphasis: Claude Debussy, prevented from attending a concert of the Société nationale de musique (SNM) on 21 February 1903, asked Ravel to send him a review; and so the article by Monsieur Croche in *Gil Blas* on 23 February 1903 is thanks to Ravel. As an ephemeral music critic, Ravel did not prove unworthy, due to his elegant and concise style, his intellectual curiosity, and his sometimes caustic wit. Sometimes certain of his original judgments were surprising, for example those regarding Brahms, Richard Strauss, or Wagner. His unconditional admiration for Mozart is striking: "Mozart is perfection: he is Greek, while Beethoven is Roman. What is Greek is great, what is Roman is colossal. For my part, I prefer the great" (ABC, Madrid, 1 May 1924).

Many of the writings were drafted as signs of protest. For example, in an article published in the *Cahiers d'aujourd'hui* in February 1913, he denounced sharply the severe criticisms by Pierre Lalo against the late works of Debussy. In June 1914,

Ravel wrote two open letters to the director of *Comœdia* to protest the decision by Sergei Diaghilev, director of the Ballets russes, to present *Daphnis et Chloé* in London without the chorus. Sometimes, the protest writings are collective, as in one letter from 1923, co-written by André Caplet, Roland-Manuel, and Albert Roussel, denouncing Louis Vuillemin's polemics against the "outsider concerts" of Jean Wiéner. Let us also mention the collective theoretical text which forms the Founding Manifesto of the SMI published in 1910. The new society wanted to be more open than the SNM, whose committee, in 1909, had refused works by two students of Ravel, Maurice Delage and Ralph Vaughan Williams, and one of his friends, Charles Koechlin: "to create a free community, where every artistic attempt, without distinction as to genre, nationality, style, or school, will be welcomed."

Beginning in 1922, Ravel dictated several important writings to a trusted collaborator, Roland-Manuel, a close friend since 1911 and one of his rare students: thus, an article on the songs of Gabriel Fauré published in *La Revue musicale* in 1922. The same for an article in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* in 1927, regarding the harsh criticisms by Pierre Lalo in *Comœdia* against Marcel Delannoy, Maurice Jaubert, and Darius Milhaud. In fact, Ravel was upset that Lalo would use him as an example for the younger generation. Roland-Manuel also transcribed the dictation, in 1928, of an essential portion of the text of the *Esquisse autobiographique*, ordered by the Aeolian firm but only published posthumously, in which Ravel speaks concisely of his musical formation and his works. A few months earlier, another important and relatively long text by Ravel, probably transcribed by Roland-Manuel in the original French which has not been located, was published in English in The Rice Institute Pamphlet (USA) as "Contemporary Music": the only known lecture by Ravel, in April 1928 in Houston. Another important text is known only in incomplete fashion: the preparatory text for the three "master classes" on his piano music, his chamber music, and his songs at the École normale de musique in June 1925.

In addition, two editorial projects didn't work out: on the one hand, a clarification on the rapport between Ravel and Debussy; on the other hand, a treatise on orchestration based on mistakes detected by Ravel in his own works. Georges Auric always regretted not having seized the opportunity to be Ravel's "pen" for these two works (oral testimony in the film *Maurice Ravel, ou l'homme et les sortilèges* by Paul Danblon and Alain Denis, RTBF, 1975).

Despite everything, the total amount of public writings by Ravel is not insignificant and is rich in information. Ravel affirms that his esthetic owes much to Mallarmé and to Edgar [Allan] Poe: "My master in composition is Edgar Poe via his analysis of his marvelous poem *The Raven*. Poe taught me that true art is found at the exact midpoint between intellect and feeling" (ABC, Madrid, 1 May 1924). Ravel also acknowledged everything he owed to Chabrier and Satie. If he calls himself "very influenced" by Debussy, he affirms to have "nevertheless engaged in the reaction against him, in favor of the classicists" (The Musical Digest, 1928). His musical tastes are eclectic: Bartók, Beers, Borodin (from whom Ravel chose the theme of the 2nd *Symphony* as a rallying motto for the "Apaches"), de Falla, Fauré, Gershwin, Gounod, Grieg, Hindemith, Honegger, Kodály, Mendelssohn, Milhaud, Mussorgsky, Pizzetti, Rimsky-Korsakff, Saint-Saëns, Schubert, Richard Strauss (with

reservations), Stravinsky (except for his “failures” *Mavra* and *Apollon musagète*), Svendsen, Tailleferre, Vaughan Williams, etc., not to mention Spanish and Basque folksongs—which his mother sang to him when he was a child—and jazz. But obviously the most important composers in his eyes were Mozart, Debussy (with a predilection for *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un Faune*, which he wished played at his funeral), and Schoenberg.

A reading of the 124 writings by Ravel will be usefully supplemented by the 1883 letters. All 2007 of these public and private writings were published in November 2018 (Le Passeur Éditeur), knowing that the last scientifically viable anthology, by Arbie Orenstein in 1989, had collected only 42 writings and 305 letters by Ravel, for a total of 347.

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English translation by Frank Daykin

For further information :

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