

Review

Twentieth-Century Music 20/2, 261–266 © The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press
doi: 10.1017/S147857222300004X

Jessie Fillerup, *Magician of Sound: Ravel and the Aesthetics of Illusion* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), ISBN: 978-0-520379-886.

Jessie Fillerup, who currently teaches at the University of Richmond in Virginia, has published a welcome new book on Maurice Ravel, encouraging us to reconsider his music with regard to the principles of theatrical magic and illusion practised during the decades before and after his life proper (1875–1937). Building upon her previous work on illusion and Ravel,¹ Fillerup offers an even wider, cross-disciplinary, indeed cross-cognitive, study arguing that extra-musical illusionary practices influenced Ravel in as yet unacknowledged ways, that they betray the outlines of an ‘aesthetics of musical illusion’ in which we all participate (to differing degrees) and, hence, that they point towards new ways of re-evaluating our perceptions of the music, the composer, and his legacy. It is a very fine and imaginative study, both analytical and theoretical, complicated in original ways that allude to what has been referred to at least once before, in something of a similar context, as a composer’s ‘pre-compositional’ method.² Like most original thought, I think, it is a bit idiosyncratic in concept and organization but (more importantly) derives fairly and creatively from what many others have thought about the author’s chosen topics, over very long times.

Thinking anew about Ravel’s music here embraces new complexity, since Fillerup introduces a broad array of research beyond music theory, history, perception, and the Humanities in general to include more recent results from psychologists, philosophers, and newer disciplines, such as disability studies, consortiums studying magic and illusion, and ‘clusters’ of shared research. More specifically, she proposes a threefold re-imagining of Ravel’s methods – ‘musical masonry’ (8), as nicely put – comprising initially 1) the composer’s public image, 2) his fascination with machines, and 3) the compositional craft itself. To link and develop these categories more fully, four others are introduced as ‘Ravelian effects’: 1) illusions of perpetual ascent, 2) transformational ascent, 3) mechanization, and 4) apparent motion and stasis. Much of this draws (newly) upon a large body of ‘theater and media history’ (6) interwoven with the chosen musical examples, figures, illustrations, and interpretations of past and present Ravel research in order to frame the background and

1 Jessie Fillerup, ‘Ravel and Robert-Houdin, Magicians’, *19th-Century Music* 37/2 (2013), 130–58.

2 One is reminded of Roy Howat’s earlier Debussy study: ‘Dr. Howat’s book is an investigation . . . of what has become known as [Debussy’s] pre-compositional method.’ Chris Dench, ‘Books: *Debussy in Proportion*, by Roy Howat, Cambridge University Press’, *Tempo* 149 (1984), 29.

contents of five chapters and a ‘summative’ conclusion. Various aspects of Ravel research are ‘re-problematized’ in interesting ways, some reinterpreted (or even set aside), in favor of newer readings that reflect more fully the book’s central desiderata expressed in its introduction: ‘an amplified knowledge of [Ravel’s] methods, joined with a panoramic, historicized view of illusory spectacle, may yet deepen our enchantment – if we so will it’ (17). ‘Historicize’ and ‘will’ may give some pause, but the invitation – like Ravel’s music – is engaging on multiple levels, and leads onto larger playing fields of informed speculation wherein (and from which) Fillerup ‘refracts’, in the sense of magical practice itself, previous attentions to and assumptions about the music in order to ‘deepen our enchantment’ (17) with it. In this, I think most will find her to have been often successful, sometimes brightly so.

Forty-odd bar and staff excerpts from sixteen works addressing the vocal and instrumental categories in which Ravel worked are intertwined with others antecedent (i.e., Bach to Chopin), contemporary (Poulenc, Stravinsky), and beyond (Ligeti, John Adams, etc.) all with brief comparative and theoretical comment, along with a number of helpful illustrations from the nineteenth-century worlds of magical illusion in Paris, and reproductions from painting and sculpture of which Ravel was likely aware. Established areas of Ravel research (i.e., Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Proust) are revisited and previous research on enduring cultural implications of his life and works are acknowledged,³ as Fillerup compares and correlates her many reconsidered past(s) with what has been referred to more recently (in neat humour)⁴ as a near ‘glut’ of interest in the works of a composer whose output is dwarfed by, say, Milhaud, never mind other obvious suspects (most of whom Ravel knew well enough).

Fillerup’s ongoing inspiration remains the exemplar of illusionist Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805–71), who died several years before Ravel was born, having performed publicly for nine years in the mid-nineteenth century before turning to other business ventures, and whom she believes to have cast a ‘shadow’ upon nineteenth-century practices of illusion comparable to that of Beethoven’s upon music (2). Most fortunately, nearly all of Ravel’s public life and reception was chronicled by what seems in retrospect to be a veritable legion of authors and critics, some of whom were quite, indeed exceedingly, knowledgeable of their times. Critical and general interviews with Ravel spanning more than two decades survive, along with a handful of the composer’s own contributions to the Paris press that address (at least, in part) established concert series and their active repertoires. Fillerup deploys a splendid aggregation of these materials, re-illuminating Ravel’s reception and studies to advance her challenges about how more *specifically* we might think (or have thought, should think) in experiencing such a patently obvious virtuosity of *musical* illusion.

3 Regarding automata, ‘mechanical’ aspects of Ravel’s style, reception, and much more historically, see Carolyn Abbate, ‘Outside Ravel’s Tomb’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52/3 (1999), 465–530. For a more economic/cultural interpretation from ‘POMO’ times, see Lawrence Kramer, ‘Consuming the Exotic; Ravel’s *Daphnis and Chloé*’, in *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 201–25.

4 Caroline Potter, ‘Review of Mawer, 2013’, *Music & Letters* 94/3 (2013), 536–38, acknowledging Mawer’s influence, which can be extended back another decade, that is, Deborah Mawer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Magician of Sound's entry point is noteworthy (1) – no less than Claude Debussy complaining in 1908,⁵ to the highly influential critic Louis Laloy,⁶ about Ravel's annoying powers of 'trickster' and/or 'fakir', words not in general use at the time.⁷ Such music would not withstand the test of time, could not 'resist' (as the French have always put it): time would 'grind it to dust' since, in essence, it would all be a trick, 'with a looming expiration date. To hear it once [would be] to exhaust its secrets.' Laloy's later likening of Ravel to a 'magician of sounds' in 1912, underscores the title of Fillerup's study, and she is spot on in characterizing Debussy's indignation over using 'tricks' in new music (rather than imparting some semblance of 'arrière pensée'),⁸ to be – in more recent cant – 'throwing shade' upon a younger colleague, an emerging rival.

It has been agreed upon for some time that Ravel consistently presented himself to the public as a *dandy*, hardly shunning the role 'Magician of Sound' (as so anointed by Laloy), and it is gratifying to have a wider investigation of what may underpin so much of this. Fillerup connects many dots between previous interpretations of *dandysme*, proposes some others, reveals the technical and mechanical extent to which Robert-Houdin and his followers ventured in the design and execution of nineteenth-century theatrical illusions, and argues in detail for their subsequent sway on her chosen musician. There is only one musical example in the first forty pages, an excellent one, underlining the proposed correlation between 'priming' in theatrical illusion and Ravel's careful preparation of (musical) expectations in the voice leading of the *String Quartet*'s opening (8–9), which may well be tied to Robert-Houdin's enduring influence. How closely as a designated Ravel 'tactic' this may be connected to *Gestalt* principles ('grouping by common fate', in this case) is another interesting question, since we certainly know that Freud was 'on the loose' in Paris during the times under review.⁹

5 The year, I think, should be 1907. The premiere of the *Histoires naturelles* was not in 1908, rather the year before. The letter has been reproduced elsewhere, including François Lesure and Roger Nichols, *Debussy Letters, Selected and Edited by François Lesure and Roger Nichols*, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 177–8.

6 Laloy, early and distinguished French musicologist and critic, was (uniquely, it appears) allied with both Debussy and Ravel from at least 1904. See Christian Goubault, *La Critique musicale dans la presse française de 1870–1914* (Geneva and Paris: Slatkine, 1984), as confirmed later by others, that is, François Lesure and Roger Nichols.

7 Fair enough, but put a bit differently, *fakir* and *faiseur de tours* were certainly in use by those seeking to shape *fin de siècle* musical life in Paris (especially after the 1889 and 1899 World Exhibitions), to include (thankfully) Judith Gautier and probably others yet to be discovered; they can be found (especially *fakir*) in other sources (even Baudelaire), before 1900.

8 Essentially the opposite of 'tricksterism', a term used (allegedly) by Ravel himself in 1910 when discussing Chopin in the press, by Florent Schmitt nearly thirty years later (just after Ravel's death) concerning the *Duo sonate* (and others in between). Maurice Ravel, 'Les Polonaises, les Nocturnes, les Impromptus, la Barcarolle – Impressions', *Courrier musical* 13/1 (1 January 1910), 31; and Florent Schmitt, 'Une belle Exécution de la sonate pour violon et violoncelle de Maurice Ravel', *Le Temps*, 8 January 1938, 3.

9 As is well known, Freud spent a year in Paris in medical residency. Among his devoted followers was the great-grandniece of the emperor, a devotee also of Poe. Eventually instrumental in Freud's escape from the Nazis, she published one of the first monographs on Poe. Like Fillerup, Peter Kaminsky concludes his volume of Ravel studies with a detailed (though Freudian oriented) essay on *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. Peter Kaminsky, 'The Child on the Couch', in *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music*, ed. Peter Kaminsky (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 306–30.

In any case, and in view of the fact that Fillerup's further examples, analyses, and theories unfold rapidly in the remaining 150 pages, it might be helpful to remember that Ravel was quite clear in advocating his own versions of priming and misdirection: 'So, that is how one *orchestrates*: it is what I call "fooling the listener."' ¹⁰

Space precludes more than touching upon a handful of the many inter-related proposals that might underpin 'Ravelian effects' capable of leading us to new (or renewed) enchantments. The *Quartet* example obviously announces Chapter 1's topic, 'Misdirection', which is probed further as 'Image, Illusion, or Musical Motion' with respective sub-categories and examples that address the technical (and cultural) aspects of theatrical conjuring and illusion, and their potential musical analogues, prominent among them the 'problem' of musical motion. Fillerup concedes the rather large distance to be negotiated in moving 'forward' (no pun) from Zeno's Pre-Socratic *arrow* to Hanslick, Herder, Bergson, and beyond, pointing to as much research as possible, and citing Lydia Goehr's pungent observation two millennia after Zeno: 'all music moves; how could it not move?' ¹¹ Problems of the 'how', then, remain, but are advanced in several hypotheses, for instance, concerning *perpetuum mobile* and perceptual apprehensions thereof. It would seem that music has been used to illusionary ends for some time.

The categories of 'Illusional perpetual' and/or 'Transformational' ascent (a bit more intuitive by nature) are introduced in the following chapter as 'emblematic' evidence of what we might think of as Ravel's 'intent to enchant'. Musical masonry of major works across all the productive decades of his life is deconstructed with special attention to the harp or (as Fillerup puts it) Ravel's 'harpiness' (55). These two 'Emblems of Enchantment' re-appear in later chapters, including the next, which is entitled 'The Machine Bewitched'. Here the 'emblems' complement an elaboration of Ravel's family background and fascination with mechanics, ¹² and draw further attention to the dreadful influences of (newly) mechanized warfare. Analysis of the two piano concertos (1929–31, very nearly Ravel's last works) is especially original. The 'musical-gear' outlined for the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D major traces a blueprint of the composer's musical thought that Ravel's father and sole brother – both mechanical engineers – could never, of course, live to see. Analysis of the Piano Concerto in G major's 'Adagio' movement is inspired as well: its turgid interior of mounting dynamic intensity via cross-current chromaticism is re-conceived as a transformational ascent between the movement's bookends, uniting the whole in a slow-motion celebration of the dance of its time. If I might pick up, however, on Fillerup's mention at the chapter's opening of 'the narrative of Ravel as eternal child (which could use some scrutiny)' (49), I do think it possible to

10 As recounted with later detail by his longest surviving composition student. See pp. 77–8 in Manuel Rosenthal and Marcel Marnat, *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal* (Paris: Hazan, 1995).

11 Lydia Goehr, *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 35.

12 The fundamentals have been gathered over several decades by Arbie Orenstein, Roger Nichols, Marcel Marnat, and more recently revised by Nichols in 2011. Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 60–4. Fillerup, of course, adds newly found materials for her discussion about the aesthetic consequences of mechanized warfare.

hear the concluding section as a lullaby as much as a ‘close coupling’ (with filagree). Ravel once said his earliest musical experiences derived from his mother’s song in infancy,¹³ and to be effective, of course, lullabies must be both (reasonably) mechanical and slow, with or without filagree.

Perhaps more labyrinthine, ‘Illusions of Form and Void’, in Chapter 4, return to (musical) motion, but here with an interesting emphasis on stasis. ‘Gibet’, from *Gaspard de la nuit*, receives a novel and extended re-reading, both musical and perceptual. I am not entirely persuaded that the obvious circularity of its form is quite intentionally perfect enough to allow for the free interchange of some of its sections. Fillerup allows for the work’s place among non-teleological precursors of the late twentieth-century ‘Moment Form’,¹⁴ although this chafes a bit at her much earlier judgement (49) of *Gaspard* as being among the works in which Ravel was ‘not experimenting stylistically’. But the implications of formal circularity in ‘Gibet’ are greatly relevant in re-weighing the Mallarmé songs and their mysteries (three each from both Ravel and Debussy, one treating the same text). Fillerup enters Mallarmé’s ‘Magic Circle’ (177) respectfully, with careful attention to the texts of ‘Soupir’ and ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond’, and their themes of negative presence or void. Mallarmé’s aesthetics are unavoidably circular but (perhaps like ‘Gibet’) transcendental as well. Despite what the poet famously said, words are not quite the same means of material communication as musical notes on a piano, nor can combined verses become orchestras. Unless, of course, we so ‘will’ it (as Mallarmé certainly encouraged). The reassessments of *La Valse* and *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* in the closing chapter and conclusion represent impressive concatenations of the author’s previous, inter-related materials,¹⁵ inflected by research on *phantasmagoria*, *vertige*, ‘magic lanterns’, and more, underpinning the keen sensitivity of her conjoining of Ravel, Colette, and Proust.

The book is well edited; I noted (in hard copy) only one minor blip (bottom, p. 18), ‘blithely’ three times. Fillerup writes well, clearly, and with purpose and a certain lyricism. Occasionally one’s brow jumps, but usually with a smile. To recast a bit: ‘She has a way with words.’ The illumination of overlap and tension between long-aligned, alleged ‘twin pillars’ of Ravel research, such as Irony and Artifice (Roland-Manuel, Jankélévitch, and others, pp. 3–4),¹⁶ is fair and welcome, yet need not (I hope) imply that either be eliminated in order to accommodate others, including the influences of theatrical conjuring and illusion, so deftly demonstrated in this study.

Ravel lived out his later life in a modest house near Paris, where he received a handful of private composition students on a fairly regular basis.¹⁷ Having survived the great pandemic

13 Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel, Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975; reissued 1991), 8.

14 Theo Hirsbrunner judged ‘Gibet’ (and *Gaspard*) to have been in anticipation of Messiaen. Theo Hirsbrunner, *Maurice Ravel, sein Leben, sein Werk* (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1989), 181–3.

15 Or ‘agglomerations’ of (in the French sense) greater, even cultural ‘unions’.

16 It would have been helpful to find ‘Jankélévitch’ included among other of his index entries here, and especially p. 2, where a question of his about Ravel’s style is cited as seminal in Fillerup’s book.

17 These included Roland-Manuel, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Manuel Rosenthal, perhaps Lennox Berkeley, and a few others.

and land war of his time, he gradually succumbed to a terrible *flèche* or aphasia of some kind, dying on 28 December 1937 as France faced more conflict. Jean Zay, Minister of Education during these years,¹⁸ delivered an address at the civil ceremony (*obsèques*) for Ravel in early 1938 that included the following: ‘I believe I would be correct in stating that it was a supremely intelligent way of looking at things, whether the most passionate or the most *pathétique*, and subjecting them to the discipline of style.’¹⁹

Magician of Sound’s final sentence is artful: ‘Come closer, you can almost hear the gears.’ Yet in order for the gears to ‘perform’ effectively and reliably, they must have been designed precisely, which is to say with discipline. The successful practice of illusions, theatrical or otherwise, demands nothing if not discipline, as do abiding musical styles. After the final waves of disciplined, mechanized warfare against France had once again been turned back, French (secondary) public schools were eventually named for both Jean Zay and Maurice Ravel. Jessie Fillerup has composed an excellent work of detailed analyses and research, one that introduces a plethora of new ways to reconsider the many ‘illusions’ of Ravel’s chaotic, receding musical world, and about how and *why* we might still bother to do so. Very nicely done.

Stephen Zank

zankoperamail@fastmail.com

18 Zay was soon forced (as a Jew) to resign his post, fled Paris, and was eventually arrested and murdered by Nazis in Bordeaux. Jacques Benoist-Méchin, *Sixty Days That Shook the West: The Fall of France, 1940*, trans. Peter Wiles (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), 420.

19 *Le Temps*, 31 December 1937, quoted in Orenstein, *Ravel, Man and Musician*, 109. The concluding pages of Nichols, *Ravel*, are disquieting but elegant (342–7, and the following ‘Postlude’).