

# Ravel's Late Music and the Problem of "Polytonality"

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Ravel's music of the 1920's comprises some of his finest and most progressive works, including the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, the *Chansons madécasses*, and the opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. Many Ravel scholars have consistently designated significant segments of these and other late works as *polytonal*. While these works feature dissonant superimposition, this paper proposes that the passages in question may generally be construed as representing one of two types: monotonal, wherein the bass assimilates the upper-voice dissonances; or a dual organization, which features a primary and secondary pitch priority (in place of the term "polytonality"). The conceptualization draws on contemporary and historical accounts of polytonality (including those of Milhaud and Ravel); the analyses focus on compositional and structural factors and contexts that prevent or potentially enable dual organization to take place.

**R**AVEL'S MUSIC of the 1920's includes some of his finest and most progressive works, including the *Chansons madécasses*, the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, and the opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. In contrast to his earlier compositions, these pieces and other late works have consistently been designated by many prominent Ravel scholars as *polytonal*.<sup>1</sup> Herein lies the crux of the problem alluded to in my

title: theorists remain fiercely divided regarding the nature, analytical salience and the very plausibility of polytonality.<sup>2</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, while not directly addressing the issue of polytonality, articulates something of its elusiveness in writing about more global theoretical matters: "When we seek . . . to come to grips with the problems of musical practice, the terms we use are of little significance *provided that their shortcomings do not unduly inhibit an understanding of the object in hand—especially when it is by no means clear what that object actually is*" [my emphasis].<sup>3</sup>

Implicated here is the central problem of terminology and its influence on conceptualization. Indeed, the term "polytonality" is consistently employed to designate a broad range of compositional phenomena, including polychords, the superimposition of different scales or scale fragments, the superimposition of different transpositions of the same

1 See for instance Orenstein 1975, Nichols 1977, Marnat 1995, Larner 1996 and Jankélévitch 1959. In the scholarly literature, some writers refer to "bitonality," others prefer the broader "polytonality." On the one hand, in his seminal 1923 article "Polytonalité et Atonalité," Milhaud creates models for two and three simultaneous pitch centers and includes musical examples of up to five centers. On the other hand, subsequent scholars including theorists, musicologists and cognition researchers have mostly addressed two-key contexts using either term. With respect to Ravel's commentary on Milhaud's music and his own compositional practice, clearly his interest in the technique is limited to two centers as well. Accordingly, consistent with its usage by Ravel, Milhaud, Casella and other contemporary composers and theorists, for this paper I shall refer to "polytonality" rather than "bitonality." Nevertheless, all pieces analyzed here entail no more than two pitch centers.

2 The recent "Colloquy" in this journal between van den Toorn and Tymoczko 2003 over octatonicism and the analysis of Stravinsky's music only reaffirms the intensity of the debate.

3 Dahlhaus 1987, 62.

scale type, and the mere presence of simultaneous different key signatures. Certainly, Ravel's late music features all of these phenomena. But, to instantiate Dahlhaus's statement, the inconsistent use of the term polytonality has inhibited an understanding of the music purporting to exemplify it, especially when it is by no means clear what constitutes a proper definition of the term, and what conditions give rise to its existence.

Besides the term itself, perhaps the most oft-cited problems with the notion of polytonality concern its perception and its analytical relevance. Thus James Baker writes:

... The validity of the theory of polytonality as an explanation for musical structure as it is perceived by the listener has long been disputed ... although it does seem to reflect the way certain composers put their music together. Composers from entirely different musical backgrounds—Paul Hindemith and Milton Babbitt, to name two—have held that it is impossible to perceive more than one harmonic root at a time, that is, to hear in two or more keys at once, regardless of the composer's method or intent. The theory of polytonality is impoverished, since it dispenses with the hierarchy of tonal relations so essential to tonality and to much music employing techniques of extended tonality as well.<sup>4</sup>

Several published studies argue that a listener is capable of attending to two simultaneous pitch centers; this research will help refine the notion of what polytonality is, and how it might be construed. The issue of analytical salience is more intractable. I propose that the term polytonality has been used for Ravel's music to designate a set of relatively consistent structural contexts that are not readily modeled by tonal or extended tonal techniques, and which thereby demand a different sort of analytical strategy.

Part one of this essay examines issues relating to polytonality, focusing on those most relevant to Ravel's late music. Several historical treatments provide a point of departure for the discussion, particularly Milhaud's article "Polytonalité et Atonalité," and Ravel's analysis of an excerpt from his own *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. Here, I propose some basic defi-

nitions and distinctions, based on the use of superimposed harmonies and drawing on existing cognitive studies. Part two engages more complex and larger-scale examples, focusing on conditions involved in either supporting or discouraging a listener's apprehension of unitary versus dual tonal organization. I conclude with an analysis of the "Blues" movement from Ravel's *Sonata for Violin and Piano*.

#### I. TOWARDS AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH

As a prominent member of the post-war group of French composers known as "Les Six," Darius Milhaud was recognized early on as the avatar of polytonality, in his music as well as his writings. His article in *La Revue Musicale*, "Polytonalité et Atonalité," provides a basic taxonomy for identifying textures based on superimposition of chords (polytonality) and melodies (polymodality).<sup>5</sup> The former is more germane to the topic at hand.

Example 1 reproduces his chart of two-chord superimpositions, which provides the basis for his discussion of numerous examples from his own and other composers' works (including the second movement of Ravel's recently composed *Sonata for Violin and Cello*).<sup>6</sup> Because these superimpositions for Milhaud may represent chords or keys, only major and minor triads are included. Each superimposition has a bass and a treble component. In Example 1(a), Milhaud's Roman numerals indicate the number of semitones between the roots of the lower and upper chords; 1(b) shows the four available modal possibilities:

Treble	M	m	m	M
Bass	M	m	M	m

- 5 Milhaud 1923. In this paper, I shall not engage the extensive literature on polymodality and polymodal chromaticism, much of which is associated with the music of Bartók.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 32–3. My Examples 1(a) and (b) correspond to Milhaud's Examples 2 and 3. His Example 4 presents possibilities for inverting the bass and/or treble chords from the previously displayed superimpositions.

4 Baker 1993, 35.

(a)

(b)

EXAMPLE I. *Milhaud's chart of two-chord superimpositions.*

Several commentators have dismissed Milhaud's approach to polytonality as having little or no analytical value.<sup>7</sup> Three basic reasons are offered: first, it is merely a taxonomy and does not adequately consider musical context; second, by assuming equal key-defining weight for the treble and bass components of the superimposition, it does not consider the strong (some would argue the unavoidable) tendency of the bass to assimilate the dissonating treble "key" as chord extensions of an essentially consonant sonority; third, regardless of the extent of bass assimilation, the two keys might in some

cases be incorporated into a single scale (e.g., the octatonic or hexatonic), thereby obviating the need to conceptualize two keys in the first place.

Certainly regarding the first point, Milhaud does not generally consider context (especially by current theoretical standards). It does not necessarily follow, however, that what such a taxonomy tries to get at—intervallic distance between purported pitch centers as a significant compositional feature (and one which may influence the nature and extent of bass assimilation)—is thereby invalidated. With respect to the third point, recent work by Tymoczko suggests that, for a passage involving superimposition, theorists may opt for either a unitary collection approach or a "dual-strand" approach; he sensibly advocates both flexibility and assessment of relevant parameters in making the choice, especially in light

7 Mawer 1997, 18–19, writes "... the prefix 'poly' is of dubious perceptual and theoretical value: the concept of the simultaneous existence of several different tonal or modal lines seems invalid since one tends to perceive a resultant accumulation of all pitch material heard at any particular moment, strongly influenced by the bass progression."

of the diversity of scales and variegated possibilities for superimposition.<sup>8</sup>

The second point cuts to the heart of the problem of polytonality. The literature on music perception sheds some light on the topic but is not definitive. While the work of Terhardt and Huron supports the perceptual importance of the bass and the perceptual salience of the upper-most and lower-most voices, respectively, neither scholar addresses conditions approaching polytonality.<sup>9</sup>

However, a recent study by Thompson and Mor does investigate this area.<sup>10</sup> Using excerpts from several works, including Milhaud's *Sonata No. 1 for Piano* (1920), listeners consistently were able to identify some kind of hierarchy for two tonal centers, even when presented simultaneously. The researchers conclude:

The results [of the preceding four experiments] suggest that listeners can perceive more than one tonal organization or key at the same time, and that each key may be weighted according to its perceived importance in the music. This situation is in contrast to the possibility that only one internal representation of key structure may be instantiated at once, so that keys must compete for attention. A process of weighting keys also contrasts with the possibility that internal representations are instantiated in an all-or-nothing fashion, so that the strength of their influence is fixed.<sup>11</sup>

While their study is admittedly incomplete, and while it is dubious to call the phenomenon "polytonality," their work nevertheless suggests that there might be a middle ground between total rejection and complete acceptance.<sup>12</sup>

The above assertions of bass priority on the one hand and

the possibility of dual priority on the other are not mutually exclusive and are to some degree reconcilable. Accordingly, I henceforth assume the structural priority of the bass as a normative tendency. At the same time, in some contexts, the upper voice(s) may resist that priority and establish a degree of autonomy as a *secondary priority*; or, more rarely for Ravel, as a more or less equal or even primary priority. The support for such a weighting process by a listener will hinge on contextual factors, including the manner of presentation of the conflicting parts, and the extent of separability of their respective pitch organization, rhythm, register and contour.<sup>13</sup>

Such a spectrum of possibilities entails two related issues: the distinction between the notions of polychord and poly-

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apprehending the chord as referable to a single entity—i.e., a unitary tonal context or the octatonic collection as superset—versus a bitonal hearing. They conclude that the passage is perceived not as bitonal but rather as a complex fusion, ascribable neither to C major nor F# major tonal contexts and neatly captured by van den Toorn's octatonic model. Interestingly, however, when the C and F# lines were first presented separately (their Experiment 1), listeners were consistently able to perceive the influence of both keys. ". . . these results indicate that one viable account of this passage is as bitonal, with both component keys perceptually functional" (Ibid., 163). At the end of the article, despite the viability of this interpretation, Krumhansl and Schmuckler opt for the octatonic reading. Nevertheless, they leave open the possibility for dual organization under appropriate compositional conditions: "Thus, the experiments [with the Petroushka chord] do not demonstrate a capacity to hear two independent tonalities simultaneously, although this result might be obtained with a bitonal passage that differentiates the two components more in terms of pitch [and register], contour, and rhythm" (Ibid., 180).

13 Although he does not deal with polytonality per se, in "Women's Voices and the Fundamental Bass" (1992), David Lewin addresses the related issue of the capability of women's relatively high voices to resist the gravitational tonal influence of the bass. Using feminist theory as a backdrop, he suggests that, among other things, Rameau's conceptualization of the *basse fondamentale* marks a turn away from the bass's status in Zarlino as a foundation among *equal* voices to one of a dominator, described by Rameau in explicitly male-gendered terms. Lewin's article is suggestive in two ways with respect to polytonality: it invokes

8 Tymoczko 2003, 195–8.

9 See Terhardt 1982a and 1982b, and Huron 1989. My thanks to David Huron (private correspondence) for his citation of these sources and his confirmation of the dearth of research in this area.

10 Thompson and Mor, 1992.

11 Ibid., 70.

12 Thompson and Mor's study follows that of Krumhansl and Schmuckler, 1986, on the *Petroushka* chord. (This is reprinted with additional commentary in Krumhansl 1990.) In it they assess the possibilities for

tonality, and structural levels. Regarding the former, Ulehla writes:

A harmonic vertical structure that simultaneously sounds the roots of two chords is called bichordal or polychordal. It is an extension of the Classical pedal tone which represents a strong bass root above which other chords move. A bichordal structure may have the complete bass chord against which a treble chord of a different root clashes . . . .<sup>14</sup>

Just as polychords demand the simultaneous hearing of two roots in a vertical structure, polytonality is the simultaneous use of two or more keys or tonalities. It can be deduced that in a polytonal passage, polychords will, of necessity, be present. The reverse is not true . . . . Polytonality, at its best, is heard intermittently.<sup>15</sup>

According to Ulehla, the use of polychords represents a *de facto* surface- and foreground-level phenomenon; deeper levels of structure may incorporate such usage in either monotonal or polytonal contexts. But how can one speak of structural levels for a musical situation whose very existence is denied by half the interpretive community, and admitted as intermittent at best by the other half?

As a result, I reinterpret Ulehla in light of the conceptualization offered thus far. That is, what Ulehla terms polychords and polytonality share a fundamental component: in general, both come into being according to whether and to what extent the treble can resist assimilation by the bass and retain its own distinct identity and priority. This priority may take a variety of forms, depending on context. Instead of structural levels per se, the emphasis here is on whether and how weighted pitch priorities take place, and to what extent

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the metaphor of *resistance*, literally embodied in women's higher voices in relation to a bass assumed to be *fundamental* in the broadest sense; and it implies that this notion of resistance in the evolution of harmony is not only (or perhaps even primarily) a cognitive issue, but rather is deeply inscribed into the very development of tonal music, the history of theory, and the attendant metaphors and language used to describe their historical unfolding.

<sup>14</sup> Ulehla 1966, 272.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

such *dual priority* (replacing the term "polytonality" altogether) reflects a broader syntactical strategy for a given movement (and possibly an entire work). As we shall see, this conceptual shift is not merely semantic but has significant analytical implications.

Milhaud's early set of piano works, *Saudades do Brazil*, provides something of a *vade mecum* for the possibilities of superimposition. Example 2 provides the opening and an analytical reduction for the first piece in the set. The beginning of "Sorocaba" exemplifies a thoroughgoing bass assimilation of the treble. The four-bar introduction states the left-hand tonic-dominant ostinato pattern accompanying the treble ascent to the structural downbeat at m. 5. Beginning here, were the treble to be taken out of context and played without the accompaniment, it would sound a simple tonic-dominant progression in D major; see Example 2(a). Given, however, the introduction's prior establishment of B $\flat$  as tonic (with perhaps a subtle foreshadowing of D major by the E $\natural$  in m. 4), the treble part beginning m. 5 is readily assimilated into B $\flat$  (see Examples 2(b) and (c)). Hence A $_4$  is better understood as the major seventh of tonic B $\flat$  than as the fifth of a competing tonic D major; similarly, the voice-leading function of F $\sharp_4$  as an appoggiatura to G $_4$  overrides its potential as the third of D. (Note that the reduction slurs F $\sharp$  to G in order to clarify its voice-leading tendency, as opposed to Milhaud's slur connecting A and F $\sharp$ , which thereby groups the treble pitches into a notated, if not readily perceived, D-major triad.) In the next measure, C $\sharp_4$  (coupled with its upper third E $_4$ ) functions similarly as an appoggiatura to D, again overriding its potential as third of A dominant seventh. For "Sorocaba," the superimposition of B $\flat$ - and D-major triads in the particular voice-leading context in which it occurs, together with the largely diatonic introduction, strongly articulates B $\flat$  major; accordingly, the elements potentially relating to D major-as-key instead provide piquant coloration of the controlling tonic B $\flat$ .

The following piece, "Botafogo," poses a quite different set of conditions. (See Example 3.) As in "Sorocaba," the bass

Modéré, 88 =  $\text{♩}$

*p*

*mp*

D: I                      vii°                      [V<sub>7</sub>]                      I

(a) out of context

Bb: I<sub>M7</sub>                      V<sub>9</sub>                      I<sub>M7</sub>

(b) in context

(c)

EXAMPLE 2. Opening of Milhaud's "Sorocaba."

presents an ostinato vamp (i-ii°-V), this time in F minor. Here, however, the treble sounds a scalar ascent in F# minor rooted a semitone higher than the bass. A slightly simplified account of the opening is shown in the reduction. The treble is interpreted in two ways: the Roman numerals above the staff indicate implied harmonies in F# minor, assuming autonomy from the bass; and the annotations between staves indicate possible (albeit weak) points of assimilation of the treble notes by the bass.<sup>16</sup> However, unlike "Sorocaba," in which the pitches nominally belonging to the treble key had a clear voice-leading function in the context of the bass, in "Botafogo" the voice leading of the treble is largely autonomous (i.e., not drawn into the orbit of F minor), and hence the elements relating to F# minor retain a measure of association with that key. The two movements differ markedly in the result of their superimposition with respect to two crucial contextual factors: manner of presentation and voice leading. Thus "Sorocaba" privileges a monotonal hearing, while "Botafogo" encourages a dual prioritization.

We cannot ignore, however, the larger context of the phrase or of the piece as a whole. In m. 12, the sustained C#<sub>4</sub> marks the end of the triadic texture of the melody beginning in m. 7. More importantly, it is the first treble element definitively assimilated into the bass, functioning as the flatted fifth of the implied G-diminished triad and suspended as the (enharmonic) flatted ninth of a C dominant seventh sonority. This in turn resolves conventionally down by step to the fifth of the tonic F minor, coinciding with the phrase ending.<sup>17</sup>

16 In the example, the term "double inflection" is drawn from Ulehla 1966, 286 *ff.*, designating the simultaneous sounding of different qualities of the same intervallic distance from the root: here A $\flat$  and A as thirds of F, B and B $\flat$  as sevenths of C.

17 The coincidence of bass assimilation of the treble with a formal point of articulation takes place on a larger scale with the transition to the reprise. Here the middle section's superimposition of F major over A $\flat$  major gives way to a structural dominant, the treble parallel fifths trichords all representing chord extensions to the fundamental C dominant seventh harmony.

Doucement 84 =  $\text{♩}$

*mp* *en dehors*

*f* *mp*

F#m: i V<sub>7</sub> i i iv or V<sub>7</sub> i V<sub>7</sub> i V<sub>7</sub> i ||

#11 b13 d.i.\* d.i. b13 b9 d.i. 7 d.i. 3 (=m.8) (=m.9) b5 b9

Fm: i (ii) V<sub>7</sub> i ii V<sub>7</sub> i // // //

\* d.i. = double inflection

EXAMPLE 3. *Opening of Milhaud's "Botafogo."*

Taken together, these two movements from Milhaud's *Saudades* begin to frame an analytical approach to superimposition. On the one hand, each articulates a single key—that sounded by the bass—on a large scale; on the other hand, the treble in the second piece suggests a secondary pitch focus at the phrase level, given its less than thorough assimilation to the bass domain, unlike the first piece.

As will become apparent in the following analyses of Ravel's late works, the notion of a primary versus secondary pitch focus in a superimposition is crucial, especially as it relates to relevant formal, registral, presentational and voice-leading contexts. Before proceeding further, let us consider Milhaud's influence on Ravel, and Ravel's own writings relating to the issue of polytonality.

At first blush, Ravel's attitude toward polytonality appears ambivalent. On the one hand, his letters, reviews and lectures consistently reveal a strong attraction to Milhaud's music and respect for his talent (as well as envy for his prolificness):

“. . . in the works of Darius Milhaud . . . one is frequently impressed by the vastness of the composer's conceptions. This quality of Milhaud's music is far more individual than his use, so frequently commented upon, and often criticised, of polytonality. . . . In one of his latest works, *Les Malheurs d'Orphée* . . ., Milhaud's occasional use of polytonality is so intricately interwoven with lyric and poetic elements as to be scarcely distinguishable. . . .”<sup>18</sup>

While hardly a ringing endorsement of polytonality, Ravel's statement suggests his interest not in the compositional technique per se, but rather in its possibilities for expanded means of expression.

On the other hand, Ravel's analysis of an excerpt from his own 1909 *Valses nobles et sentimentales* seems to contradict any sympathy for polytonality (Example 4).<sup>19</sup> In a letter to René Lenormand, who was collecting examples for a book on con-

temporary French harmonic practice, Ravel cites the opening of the trio section of the seventh waltz. His purpose is to demonstrate how harmony may be enriched through the use of *unresolved appoggiaturas*. It appears that the bass fifth F–C establishing F as tonic (occasionally spiked with appoggiaturas C# and G#) supports a treble tonic-dominant progression in E major. Ravel, however, states unequivocally that the passage is based on an F major added-sixth chord, and consequently proceeds to write in parentheses the resolutions of the tones nominally belonging to E major: thus G# leads to A, B to C, and E to F (inner voice) or to D (treble).<sup>20</sup> It should be mentioned that the treble anacrusis and first bar support F major and thereby boost its “tonicity power,” encouraging one's apprehension of the treble chromatic notes as unresolved appoggiaturas.

If all of the so-called polychordal and polytonal passages in Ravel's music can be analyzed in a similar manner as enhancements of diatony and monotonicity, then the Ravel commentators cited at the beginning of this essay are misreading these works on the basis of their surface characteristics. I believe that this is not the case, and that the analytical picture is by no means this simple. However, it is undoubtedly true that Ravel continued to compose passages like the *Valses nobles* trio throughout his career, including the late works.

The first movement of the G Major Piano Concerto from 1930 provides a typical example. (See Example 5.) In a sequential passage shortly before the recapitulation, the piano and orchestra sound a G# dominant-seventh chord in 4/2 inversion. At Rehearsal 14, the orchestra and piano fall a step to E, while the right-hand piano part sustains the tones of a G#-major triad. This continues to be sustained through the bass motion by fifth descent to A and D. At Rehearsal 15, the bass resolution to G coincides with the treble motion from the G# triad to a momentary enharmonic C# major

18 The quotation is drawn from a lecture given by Ravel, entitled “Contemporary Music,” and delivered in Houston, Texas on April 7, 1928; it is reproduced in Orenstein 1990, 42–3.

19 The example is reproduced from Lenormand 1915, 62–3.

20 In the last measure of Ravel's analysis, G#<sub>4</sub> should undoubtedly resolve to A<sub>4</sub> and not to F<sub>4</sub>.



M. RAVEL *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. (Durand, Pubr.)

(3) this fragment is composed on a single chord

Let us now see the passage with the resolutions of the appoggiaturas, all of which resolutions take place only in bar *A*, where the chord changes its position:

EXAMPLE 4. Ravel's "self-analysis" of *Valses nobles et sentimentales* #7, Trio.

EXAMPLE 5. *Unresolved appoggiaturas in Ravel, Piano Concerto in G major, first movement.*

triad, which leads directly to a D minor triad, keeping the common tone F. This last move makes explicit what the passage has heretofore implied: that the bass provides the roots of a chromatically enhanced descending fifths progression, the apparent right-hand “triads” all representing unresolved appoggiaturas until R15, with an actual resolution to G<sup>9</sup>. Immediately thereafter, G<sup>9</sup> resolves to bass C, supporting a chordal appoggiatura at the *Valse* trio interval of a major seventh (i.e., B-major triad over root C), which continues in sequence (not shown in the example). Following Ravel’s analysis, I have indicated the implied appoggiatura resolutions in parentheses. Two factors facilitate such an interpretation: the natural strength of the bass, coupled with its ability to assimilate dissonating treble notes, intervals or chords into its domain, thereby preventing the establishment of their own pitch center.

Nevertheless, other musical factors may strengthen the treble and/or weaken the bass. Perhaps the first passage in Ravel’s *oeuvre* to do this occurs in the third of the Mallarmé songs from 1913, “Surgi de la croupe et du bond.” Example 6 shows the opening (rhythmically simplified) of the middle section. Measures 9–10 set up the basic opposition: the linear bass motion by fifth E<sub>b</sub>–B<sub>b</sub>–E<sub>b</sub> coupled at the upper fifth in the piano, and the complete major triads a major seventh above, D–A–D, in string harmonics. (This is the same intervallic distance we saw in the *Valse* trio and the Piano Concerto of Examples 4 and 5.) All other factors being equal, we would analyze the passage in a similar fashion, with the treble tones constituting D major as an unresolved chordal ap-

poggiatura. “Surgi,” however, adds a new feature: a vocal line. The example replicates all the pitches of the vocal line on the second and third staves, and, using modified Schenkerian notation, stems and slurs them according to two different interpretations: one congruent with the treble D Major, the other with the bass E<sub>b</sub>. Determining the relative priority of the two keys is problematic. Certainly F<sub>#</sub> can be heard simultaneously as the third of D major and the enharmonic third of E<sub>b</sub> minor. The remaining tones A, C and E relate to the treble as chord tones, but to the bass as conjectural unresolved appoggiaturas. Here, then, we have a precarious tonal balancing act: the ability of the bass to assimilate treble dissonances is attenuated by the strengthening of potential tonicity of the treble, in this instance by the vocal line’s arpeggiation of harmonies congruent with the treble chords.

“Surgi” is unique in Ravel’s pre-war music in its use of superimposition to establish, albeit on a small scale, a sense of tonal equilibrium or possibly even treble priority. Given the composer’s abiding interest in compositional technique in the service of expression, it comes as no surprise that there should be an extramusical poetic motivation for this passage. Mallarmé’s poem speaks of two mouths, one chimera (defined in Webster’s *New Collegiate Dictionary* as “an imaginary monster compounded of incongruous parts”), and the indeterminability of meaning underlying the sense of the passage. To convey these highly esoteric images, Ravel creates a timbral and tonal chimera whose musical lines retain their incongruity. This passage is also the first of several examples from Ravel’s vocal music employing superimpositions of var-

The musical score for Example 6 consists of four staves. The top staff is labeled 'String Harmonics' and shows chords for measures 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13. The second staff is 'Voice, D-priority', the third is 'Voice, E-priority', and the bottom two staves are 'Piano'. The piano part shows a sequence of chords: D7(9) in measure 11, A(7) in measure 12, and D7 in measure 13. The voice parts show melodic lines with annotations like 'Ebm', 'Bbm(M7)', and 'Ebm (M7 add6)'. The piano part also has annotations like '(unresolved appoggiaturas?)', '(u.a.)', and '(u.a.)'.

EXAMPLE 6. Dual pitch priority in "Surgi de la croupe et du bond."

ious sorts that situate in his own work those motivations he cited in Milhaud for the use of polytonality "intricately interwoven with lyric and poetic elements."

Historically, Ravel's apparent style change in his late music may be related to his wartime experience and its aftermath. Following World War I and coinciding with the rise of "Les Six," Ravel's music came to be perceived as out-of-date. Biographer Gerald Larner notes: "[By 1920, Ravel] cannot have failed to register the message that suddenly, in the light of the post-war Parisian aesthetic, he was considered seriously old-fashioned."<sup>21</sup> This loss of stature was furthered by Ravel's health problems following his stint as an ambulance driver in the war and his subsequent inability to compose any significant new music for several years.<sup>22</sup> Hence it seems likely that Ravel felt impelled to revitalize

his style, in order to regain his status as France's leading composer following the death of Debussy.

In this light, it is worth noting the one completely new work that Ravel wrote between 1917 and 1919, the little-known *Frontispice* for two pianos, *five hands*.<sup>23</sup> Significantly,

23 "Written as a frontispiece for Ricciotto Canudo's *S.P. 503 Le Poème du Vardar* . . . [the poem belonged to] a series of philosophical reflections based upon his combat experiences in World War I . . . (Ibid., 188). Ivry 2000, 100–1, offers quite a different description, reflecting his interpretation of Ravel's music in light of his purported homosexuality: "In 1918 all that the still-fatigued Ravel achieved was an orchestral transcription of *Alborada del gracioso*. He also wrote his strangest, most discordant work, a brief *Frontispice*, for a book by the Italian poet Ricciotto Canudo (1877–1923), who outspokenly defended bisexuality in his notorious *Futurist Manifesto of Lust*. . . A portrait of Canudo by Picasso decorated the book, whose title page shows a muscled nude youth, wearing a World War I doughboy's hat, blowing a hunting trumpet, straddling a galloping horse, which drools. The jarring sense of a world gone awry is

21 Larner 1996, 171.

22 Orenstein 1975, 75 *ff.*

this strange piece, comprising only fifteen bars, consists entirely of five superimposed parts separated by register and rhythm. Example 7 reproduces the opening six bars, at which point all parts are introduced. Two of the parts are strict ostinati; the other three are somewhat varied. Each part features a different pitch collection and priority, and there is no subsequent cadence of any kind toward which the separate parts are directed.

This work is so unlike anything Ravel composed previously that it could simply be regarded as a curiosity. However, given his psychological and compositional crisis at the time, and also his increasing turn to dissonant superimposition as a technique throughout the 1920's, *Frontispice* may also represent the first inkling of a stylistic shift that subsequently reached fruition in the two chamber sonatas, the *Chansons madécasses*, and the ingenious opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, to which we now turn.

## II. ANALYSIS

*L'Enfant*, composed 1920–25 to a libretto by Colette, provides a veritable laboratory for Ravel's harmonic experimentation. His sparing and selective use of superimposition provides a window onto his own interweaving of dual pitch priority with lyric and poetic elements. For example, in the opening scene Ravel exploits the dissonant superimposition of black-key pentatonic and white-key diatonic sets to represent in graphic terms the Child's epic temper tantrum and its destructive results (beginning 5/3/1 of the vocal score preceding his "Ça m'est égal!"—"I don't care"). (Score references are from the Durand piano-vocal score.)

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audible in *Frontispice*, which sounds like two pianists playing entirely unconnected pieces until, oddly, a fifth hand enters the aural scene, playing by itself. This five-handed piece is spookily unreal, as if flouting nature and the number of hands that normally occur on human arms." (Cf. the comments above on "Surgi" and the chimera.)

A subtler example occurs in the antepenultimate scene of the opera between the Squirrel and Frog; Example 8(a) reproduces the opening. The harmonic accompaniment and Squirrel part sound a simple cadential progression in D major, while the E $\flat$  clarinet plays above it a dissonant, mostly black-note pentatonic obbligato. Each note of the clarinet part could be readily assimilated by the lower chords: thus within the A dominant ninth, C $\sharp$  represents the chordal third, A $\sharp$  the minor ninth, D $\sharp$  the sharp eleventh, and G $\sharp$  the double inflection of the seventh; with the resolution to the tonic D major with added major seventh, E $\sharp$  represents the minor third (another double inflection), and A $\sharp$  an acciaccatura sounding with its resolution to A. Given the registral, textural and metrical prominence of the D-major parts, as well as the apparent ease of assimilation by the bass, the passage would seem to be an exemplar of chromatically enhanced monotonicity.

This interpretation, however, becomes less certain as we realize that the dissonating clarinet part, marked x, is drawn note-for-note from the Squirrel's immediately preceding recitative, shown in Example 8(b). Here x is set within the context of G $\sharp$  minor and therefore sounds provisionally consonant. Discovering the motivation for this radical change in tonal context requires a closer look at the previous scene, the instrumental *Dance of the Frogs*. In Example 8(c), the upper system provides a harmonic reduction of the reprise followed by the Squirrel's recitative, which serves as a transition to its exchange with the Frog. In the dance, a soaring pentatonic flute melody sounds over a diatonic progression in G $\sharp$  minor, enlivened by numerous appoggiaturas and extensions. Beginning at 81/1/5 and sustained through the recitative, the harmony—C $\sharp$  minor with added sixth, ninth, and acciaccatura G $\times$ —is heard as subdominant in G $\sharp$  minor. (Note that the recitative horizontalizes the tones of the chord.) At the same time, the acciaccatura provides the seed for its recontextualization. With the start of the trio proper, G $\times$ , E and C $\sharp$  are retained as common tones—the G $\times$  respelled as A $\flat$  and brought down to the bass—and G $\sharp$  gives

## FRONTISPICE

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Frontispice" by Maurice Ravel. It is divided into two systems. The first system features two piano parts, Piano I and Piano II. Piano I is in the treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. It begins with a *pp* dynamic marking and plays a melodic line with a slur. Piano II is in the bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a time signature of 3/4. It starts with a rest and then enters with a melodic line marked *pp* and the instruction *un peu en dehors*. The second system continues the piece, starting with a measure number of 3. It features a complex polytonal texture where the upper voice (Piano I) has a key signature of one sharp (F#) and the lower voice (Piano II) has a key signature of one flat (Bb). The upper voice has a *pp* dynamic and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The lower voice continues its melodic line with a slur. The score illustrates the superimposition of two different tonal centers.

EXAMPLE 7. *Superimposition in Frontispice.*

EXAMPLE 7. [continued]

way to  $G\sharp$ , thereby generating the dominant harmony in D major. With the retention of  $G\sharp-A\sharp-C\sharp-D\sharp$  from the recitative, what was interpreted as consonant in the tonal context of  $G\sharp$  minor is rendered maximally dissonant in D major. (The dissonant counterpoint continues in the middle section, even with the change to F pentatonic.)

We can certainly assimilate the pentatonic obligato within a D-major environment, especially since there is no tonal center in the upper part to compete with D as tonic. Nevertheless, it makes more musical sense to apprehend the passage as a duality superimposing the primary D-major diatony against the secondary but still recognizable black pentatony. This process takes place as a prospective listener is first presented with the opportunity to “learn” the pentatonic melody in a consonant context, and then struggles to retain it through the dissonant tonal setting. This configuration in

turn gives rise to a dramatic interpretation: namely, that the consonant context for the pentatonic melody in the Dance of the Frogs represents the natural habitat for them and, by extension, for all the animals in the garden that provides the locale for the second half of the opera. In their subsequent duet, Squirrel and Frog describe their imprisonment in the cage by the Child. Ravel captures perfectly the dynamics of the dramatic situation by making the animals’ pentatonic melody struggle in vain against the Child’s prevailing key of D major, just as they struggle in vain to escape from the cage.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The subsequent entrance of the Child provides still more evidence of Ravel’s linkage of tonal context and dramatic motivation. Following the Frog’s account of his unwittingly being trapped by the Child and the Squirrel’s irritated response (“Sans cervelle! Tu auras mon sort!” (Brainless one! You will share my fate!)), the Child sings “La cage, c’était pour mieux voir ta prestesse, tes quatre petites mains, tes beaux

*In the fork of two low branches and coughing the way squirrels do.*  
 A la fourche de deux basses branches, et toussant à la manière des écureuils.

Lento.  $\text{♩} = 50$

La pri-son. Heu, heu. La pri-son. Le fer qui pique, en-tre deux bar-reaux.  
 The pri-son. The pri-son. The steel which pricks 'tween two i-ron bars.

82/1/1 *pp* X *m.d.*  
*m.g.* *m.g.*

D: V<sub>9</sub>(13)

IM7

\* played by E $\flat$  clarinet; sounds as written

(a)

EXAMPLE 8. *Squirrel and Frog duet. L'Enfant et les sortilèges.*

An earlier scene of *L'Enfant* provides a more explicit example of separate presentation leading to superimposition. In the duet between the Wedgwood Teapot and Chinese Teacup, Ravel exploits to hilarious effect both musical and racial stereotypes in depicting their mock duel, as shown in

yeux" (The cage, 'twas but to see better your quickness, also your four little hands, your fine eyes). At the same time, the tonal setting changes, from the duality associated with the torture of the animals, to the parallel triadic setting of the Child's part, nominally in D major. The wandering triads recall the opening of the *Prélude*, and thereby recall as well the state of "pre-morality" innocence depicted prior to the Child's initial tantrum. This innocent state is short-lived, however, setting the stage for the animals' cacophonous riot against the Child, and his compassionate action of binding the squirrel's paw.

Example 9. Hence the black Teapot is set as a ragtime in the blackest key of A $\flat$  minor, while the white Teacup sings pseudo-Chinese in F pentatonic, set within a mostly white F-major context. Formally the number follows a conventional three-part format for opera duets of solo 1 (Wedgwood), solo 2 (Chinese), duet. The modified Schenkerian reduction displays the Teapot on top, the Teacup below. (The example replicates the temporal progression of the number and should be read accordingly: upper staff, lower staff, together. The Teacup's passage in square brackets, labeled "RC," becomes recomposed and slightly expanded as an ascending chromatic sequence when the parts are played together; this alters neither the overall progression nor the cadence. The boxed piano-vocal references between staves designate the actual duet.) In order to clarify the measure-by-measure

Moderato  
LA RAINETTE THE FROG

THE SQUIRRELL *drily*  
L'ECUREUIL, *sechement*

*mf* X Ké ké ké ké cék - ça?

Sauve-toi, sotté! Et la cage? La cage?  
Spare your-self! And the cage? The cage?

(b)

## EXAMPLE 8. [continued]

alignment of the combined parts, the analysis, while simplifying the melody, retains as many of the actual durational values as possible.

The Teapot opens with a cadential progression leading up to a putative, and dissonant, *Kopfton*  $G_5$ .<sup>25</sup> This gives way to a third descent, arriving on  $Eb_5$  in m. 11 coinciding with the tonicization of III. Measures 13–16 then provide the transition to the Teacup. Unlike the largely dissonant outer-voice

counterpoint of the Teapot, the Teacup follows a more conventional path (notwithstanding its pentatonic allegiance), unfolding a three-line leading to tonal closure over the course of twenty bars.

What happens when the two parts are combined? First, due to their separate presentation as well as the structural weight of tonal closure accruing to the Teacup's key of F major, her melody retains its harmonic character and context; indeed, it does so far more thoroughly than the Squirrel in the previous example, even though the Teacup's melody is played by itself without its supporting harmonies. (The timbral prominence of the trombone and its registral placement above the Wedgwood's melody, lowered an octave from its initial presentation, contribute to its relative autonomy as well.) Here the partial erosion of the normative priority of the bass and consequent rendering of both parts as more or less equal partners, are emphasized at the two interior cadence points, marked by square brackets in the example. The first represents an authentic cadence in the two keys, the

25 Chong (2002) chooses to graph descending *Züge* like this in Ravel's music with an implied  $\hat{8}$ . A representative example is the opening of Ravel's "Une barque sur l'océan" from *Miroirs*, for which he shows  $F\#_5$  in parenthesis as  $\hat{8}$  (Ex. 2.23, 47, Vol. 2). This strategy becomes necessary because he seeks to retain intact all of Schenker's basic tenets in analyzing Ravel's piano music. If, however, one allows for the possibility of dissonant tonics in post-tonal music, then such a move becomes unnecessary. For the *L'Enfant* duet, the off-tonic opening and especially the coincidence of tonic arrival and melodic ascent to the highpoint  $G_5$  argue for its status as initiating tone (and, more fundamentally, chord tone), as opposed to an implied  $A_b$ .



Dance of the Frogs (reprise)      Transition      Frog/Squirrel

Black-note pentatonic      Squirrel: Sauve-toi, sotté! Et la cage?  
Frog: Ké-ké-ké-ké-cek-ça?

(flute)      non-pent

80/2/3      80/3/3      80/3/4/ - 81/1/4      81/1/5      81/4/1      82/1/1

G#m: i<sub>9/7</sub>      V<sub>7</sub>      i<sub>9/7</sub>      iv<sub>9/6</sub>

CONSONANT PENTATONIC / Natural Habitat

vs.

DISSONANT PENTATONIC / Hostile Habitat

a1 Pent.      b White pent.      a2 Pent.

Sq: The prison - the steel that pricks...      but your [frog's] little wet [useless] hands...      Frog: [Unwittingly describes child's cruelty in baiting him]

82/1/1      82/2/3      82/3/4      83/3/1

D: V<sub>9</sub> I<sub>M7</sub>      [E: V<sub>ext</sub> V<sub>7</sub> ext I]      V<sub>9</sub> I<sub>M7</sub> -<sub>7</sub> IV      "ii<sub>7</sub>"

II

(c)

EXAMPLE 8. [continued]

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system is in 19/2/4 time, with a tempo marking of 20/1/1. It features a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes. Above the staff, there are markings for '8<sup>va</sup> basso (when played together)' and various chord symbols: A♭m: ii, V<sub>7</sub>, iM<sub>7</sub>, V<sub>7</sub>, i(add6), III, [C♯: I IV<sub>add6</sub> II], F: V<sub>4</sub><sup>6</sup> 7/V, and V. The second system is in 22/2/3 time, with a tempo marking of 23/1/1. It continues the rhythmic complexity and includes markings for '20/4/2', '21/1/1', '22/1/1', and '24/1/2'. Chord symbols include F: V, I<sub>(add6)</sub>, (IV<sub>add6</sub>), iii, I, RC, V<sub>7</sub> → V<sub>7</sub>, V<sub>7</sub>, and I. There are also markings for 'LN' and 'G (completes pentatonic)'. The notation includes various accidentals, ties, and dynamic markings like *pp*.

EXAMPLE 9. *Teapot and Teacup duet, L'Enfant.*

second the tonicization of their diatonic mediant. In short, compositional context is all important. Given the separate presentation of keys prior to their combination, listeners potentially are able to keep track of both of them, which after all is the witty premise of the duet in the first place.

In light of the preceding examples, which emphasized the ability of the bass to assimilate upper-voice dissonance, it may appear paradoxical that in the duet the treble pitch center of F is allowed to prevail over the bass A♭ in the end, notwithstanding the more conventional nature of its counterpoint. (Following the structural cadence in F at 24/1/2 of the piano-vocal score, the juxtaposition of the Wedgwood's A♭ minor chord ("I boxe you") giving way to the Chinese F major ("Ping pong ping") further reinforces the latter's victory.) Once again, a dramatic and expressive purpose under-

lies the compositional setting. Immediately following the duet's conclusion and the exit of pot and cup, the naughty child, characterized as "atterré" (horror-stricken), sings "Oh! ma belle tasse chinoise!" ("Oh, my lovely Chinese cup!"). This marks the first instance in the opera of the child's recognition of his wrongdoing—breaking the cup in his violent temper tantrum of the previous scene—and the inevitable consequence of losing something that he loves.<sup>26</sup> Hence the

26 In this light, the pentatonicism of the Teacup not only provides the stereotypical Chinese element, but, in its tonal contextualization, contrasts with the "purer" non-tonal pentatonicism of the prelude opening the opera. This process of tonal recontextualization of the pentatonic unfolds in parallel with the child's eventual acceptance of his Mother's authority and his own emergence from total self-centeredness taking

structural priority of the Teacup's key embodies in musical terms its deeper significance to the Child.

A final example from Ravel's vocal works is drawn from "Aoua! Méfiez-vous des blancs" ("Aoua! Beware of the white people"), the second of the *Chansons madécasses* composed in 1924. Its use of superimposed dissonant ostinati is presaged by the *Frontispice* some six years earlier (see Example 7); there, however, the similarity ends. The opening seven measures (not shown in the example) prior to the vocal entrance divide into two parts: mm. 1–5 sound a furious outburst in the instruments and voice, the latter representing an island native in the throes of white colonization; and mm. 6–7 introduce ostinati in the flute, right-hand piano part, cello and left-hand part (listed in registral order from high to low). Example 10 sketches the voice leading through the middle of the song. The bass is dominated by the major seventh G/F#, answered by the descending twelfth A–D; this suggests G as pitch center, which is supported by the cello double-stops. The right-hand part oscillates black-note open fifths, which in combination sound either an F# major chord with an added sixth, or a D# minor seventh harmony; the flute is relatively neutral in its orientation. In order to determine the degree to which the bass-centered G assimilates the black-note fifths, we need to consider the entire section.

The reduction delineates the progress of each of the principal parts plus the vocal line, up to the final section. The opening section (mm. 8–17) divides into 3+3+4 bars according to the vocal subphrases. The vocal line, centered on D#, is drawn into the domain of the black-note fifths, thereby establishing D# as a secondary center to the governing bass G, and conveying a relative sense of autonomy for the treble line. (This is similar to the procedure we observed in the middle section of "Surgi.") The one note that sounds markedly out-of-place in the context of D# is the durationally emphasized A $\flat$  of m. 11 ("on leur *dit*"), reiterated in m. 12; but it

quickly reverts back to D# and remains absent through the remainder of the section.

Thereafter the bass moves through a two-part sequence. The first part (mm. 18–27) features a stepwise third ascent G/F# (C)–A (F#)–B (the elaborating notes are shown in parentheses), in part representing a chromaticized root-position variant of an ascending 5–6 series; the second part dovetails with the first and ascends by thirds (B–D–F). Not surprisingly, the right-hand fifths part maintains a consistent interval with the principal bass motion, also moving up by major second and minor third at a now familiar major seventh up from the bass (considering the first fifth as the point of reference); this vertical relationship is maintained with the octave doubling at m. 30 and the turn to full chords at m. 35. All else being equal, the consistency of the vertical relationship between the left-hand and right-hand parts would imply the retention of primary and secondary pitch priority, respectively. However, as the vocal line becomes increasingly drawn into the domain of the bass, dual priority evaporates in favor of total domination by the bass. Beginning in m. 18, the second verse opens by maintaining the sense of dual priority, even with the change of bass to C. But in the next phrase (mm. 21–24), the arrival of the vocal A $\flat$ , formerly at odds with the black-note fifths, now coincides with the bass motion to A. (Compare the points marked by the downward arrows.) In this way the vocal line is radically recontextualized, changing its status from dissonance within the secondary pitch focus (D#) to consonance with respect to the primary part (A). This incipient shift of allegiance of the vocal line from right- to left-hand part continues throughout: thus in mm. 25–27, the line F#–G#–A# is supported by the bass F# $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> (and B); even with the change of key signature, A $\flat$ –B $\flat$ –C receives similar (albeit enharmonic) support from G# $\flat$ <sup>7</sup>; and the climactic ascents to D $\flat$ <sub>5</sub> and F $\flat$ <sub>5</sub> (mm. 30 and 35) essentially double the bass in octaves.

In sum, throughout the course of the song, a subtle but dramatic change takes place regarding the nature of the tonal language. Herein the voice begins by supporting D#/F# as a

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place at the end of the opera. Hanninen 2003 provides a rigorous formal model for the process of recontextualization.

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Voice (simplified and full), Right Hand Piano (RH pno.), and Left Hand Piano (LH pno.). The second system includes parts for Voice (simplified and full), RH pno., and LH pno. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. A 'tacet' period is indicated for the Flute and Piano parts between measures 11-13 and 14-16. The voice parts are divided into phrases with measure numbers: 8-10, 11-13, 14-16 (17), 18-20, 21-24, 25-27, 28-29, 30-33, and 34. The lyrics are: 'Du tems de nos pères... on leur dit... Soyez justes... Les blancs promirent... (same as 8-10) Un fort menaçant (same as 11-13) leurs prêtres voulurent... ils parlèrent enfin d'obéissance et d'esclavage. ...ils furent tous exterminés. Aoua!'. The piano accompaniment features a cello line in the LH pno. part. The score ends with a double bar line and the marking '8<sup>va</sup> basso'.

Fl. *tacet*

Voice simplified

8-10 11-13 14-16 (17)

Voice

Du tems de nos pères... on leur dit... Soyez justes...

RH pno.

LH pno. *cello*

Voice

18-20 21-24 25-27 28-29 30-33 34

Voice simplified

Les blancs promirent... (same as 8-10) Un fort menaçant (same as 11-13) leurs prêtres voulurent... ils parlèrent enfin d'obéissance et d'esclavage. ...ils furent tous exterminés. Aoua!

RH pno.

LH pno.

8<sup>va</sup> basso

EXAMPLE 10. *Aborting dual priority in "Aoua! Mefez-vous des blancs."*

secondary pitch priority but quickly shifts to a state of consonance with the bass, thereby enabling the bass largely to assimilate the right-hand dissonances into its domain. This sense of barely glimpsed duality that goes ultimately unrealized in the wake of domination by the bass is crucial to Ravel's setting of the prose narrative for "Aoua!" The text reads as follows:

Méfiez-vous des Blancs, habitants du rivage. Du temps de nos pères, des Blancs descendirent dans cette île. On leur dit: Voilà des terres, que vos femmes les cultivent; soyez justes, soyez bons, et devenez nos frères.

Les Blancs promirent, et cependant ils faisaient des retranchements. Un fort menaçant s'éleva; le tonnerre fut renfermé dans des bouches d'airain; leurs prêtres voulurent nous donner un Dieu que nous ne connaissons pas, ils parlèrent enfin d'obéissance et d'esclavage.

Plutôt la mort. Le carnage fut long et terrible; mais malgré la foudre qu'ils vomissaient, et qui écrasait des armées entières, ils furent tous exterminés. Aoua! Méfiez-vous des Blancs.

Beware of white men, dwellers of the shore. In the time of our fathers white men landed on this island. They were told: Here are lands, may your women till them; be just, be worthy, and become our brothers.

The white men promised, and yet they built entrenchments. A threatening stronghold arose; thunder was shut up in mouths of brass; their priests wanted to give us a God we did not know; they spoke in the end of obedience and slavery.

Death rather than that. The bloodshed was long and terrible; but despite the thunder they spewed out which destroyed whole armies, they were all exterminated. Aoua! Beware of white men.<sup>27</sup>

Both the musical events themselves, and the language I have chosen to describe them—domination by and assimilation into the domain of the bass, relative autonomy and its loss by the treble—respectively enact and reflect the story of the island's colonization by the Whites. The Whites promised relative autonomy ("become our brothers") but quickly reverted to imposition of their own God and enslavement of the natives. With astonishing fidelity the music realizes this

tragic progression through its shift from brief duality (a "brotherhood of keys" as musical benevolent dictatorship) to sustained bass assimilation congruent with total domination by the Whites. It should be noted that the text speaks of a happy ending for the islanders: "they [the White armies] were all exterminated . . . they are no more, and we are alive, and we live in freedom." Ravel's music, however, does little to bear this out, and it would appear more likely that the composer chooses to read the text ironically, albeit sympathetically, as a pathetic self-deception on the part of the narrator remembering the events.<sup>28</sup>

To review, we have seen that what has been called polytonality can be more accurately described as the employment of simultaneous primary and secondary pitch priorities, and that its recognition depends on contextual factors. In "Surgi," the duets from *L'Enfant*, and "Aoua!," Ravel invariably employs dual pitch priority (or, in "Aoua," deploys and immediately rescinds it) for specific expressive ends, consistent with his comments on Milhaud's use of polytonality; hence the poem or libretto provides an explicit external context for analysis.

In turning to one of Ravel's late large-scale instrumental chamber works, the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, the interpretation of such passages and their structural context poses a different sort of challenge.<sup>29</sup> The ensuing analysis focuses on one movement, the middle-movement "Blues," and unfolds in three stages: an identification of incipient dual-priority passages and an assessment of their degree of fulfillment of dual priority; a consideration of their formal and pitch-structural context; and an examination of the broader compositional premise of the multi-movement work as a whole.

28 See Kaminsky 2000, 50–6 for further discussion of this point.

29 Ravel's other late chamber work, the four-movement *Sonata for Violin and Cello*, also raises analytical questions pertinent to this study. Given, however, its length, complexity, and incorporation of features more properly belonging to nineteenth-century notions of tonal pairing, its inclusion would have unduly expanded the length and scope of this article.

27 The uncredited English translation is quoted from the CD booklet accompanying *Mémoires Ravel*, EMI 1984, CDS 7 47638 8.

The modest goal here is to interrogate the process underlying the tonal organization for this work, and to determine what role dual priority or, more precisely, its articulation as a *potential* course of action, plays in the movement. This in turn helps elucidate how the creation of a unique structural context may replace the external factor of text expression.

Example 11(a) presents a reduction of the opening of "Blues," formally representing the first refrain of a modified rondo. In the example, bar lines designate harmony changes initiated by the left-hand piano part; the middle staff shows treble chords introduced by violin, then taken over by piano. The upper staff shows the violin melody: the upward stems together with the annotations above the staff show the harmonic relationship of the note to the tonic  $A\flat$ ; the downward stems and annotations below the staff show the same to  $G$ . As in previous examples, modified Schenkerian notation is employed; here, scale-degrees indicate the leading linear progression.

In the opening six measures, the violin slowly strums what at first sounds like a basic simple blues progression in  $G$  major, I–IV–I–V–I (the inversions take advantage of the violin's low string). This assumption abruptly changes on the downbeat of measure 7 with the bass entrance on the open fifth  $A\flat_2/E\flat_3$ . Consequently the repetition of the violin's progression in  $G$  (mm. 7–12) is significantly recontextualized. Compositionally, the timbral and registral separation of the two parts is reminiscent of the middle portion of "Surgi" (shown in Example 6): once more the bass is expressed by open fifth as opposed to a complete triad in the treble; and their roots lie a major seventh apart. The main difference lies in the prior solo presentation of the treble progression in "Blues," providing the potential for resisting complete assimilation by the bass and thereby enabling a dual tonal organization. In this context, the entrance of the violin melody in m. 12 becomes crucial to whether such duality will be realized, depending on the key— $A\flat$  or  $G$ —to which its tones hold allegiance. Because mm. 12–17 sustain the single harmony  $G$ -over- $A\flat$ , the phrase almost takes on the status of a

cognitive test case. Accordingly, the first three principal notes,  $G_5$ – $F_5$ – $B_4$ , relate equally well to both keys. However, the following  $E\flat_5$  most plausibly relates to  $A\flat$ , especially given its departure by leap (preventing its possible status as passing or embellishing tone to a consonance to  $G$ ); the "X" indicates its functional non-allegiance to  $G$ . This leads in turn to the enharmonic switch from  $B\sharp_4$  to  $C\flat_4$ , suggesting the transformation of the pitch class from incipient dual citizenship to merely single. In mm. 18–19, with the change of treble chord from  $G$  to  $C$ , the maintenance of  $G$  as a secondary pitch priority becomes still more tenuous. The analysis of the violin part attempts to sustain an interpretation in  $G$ , which once again falls apart with the departure from  $A\flat_4$  by leap, its only reasonable assimilation to the bass as root. Measures 20–22 further confirm the hegemony of  $A\flat$ : in m. 20, the treble chord itself loses its identity as the fifth  $G$  gives way to  $A\flat$ , thereby providing the third of the bass  $F$  minor seventh; in mm. 21–22, the  $D$ -major chord re-emerges, by now unavoidably assimilated as flat ninth ( $F\sharp$ ) and thirteenth ( $D$ ) to the bass  $F$  dominant seventh. Reviewing the melodic progress of the phrase, the arrival of  $B/C\flat_4$  initiates a third descent coinciding with the cadential progression in  $A\flat$ ; the corresponding figured bass relates the treble tones as added dissonances. (By omission of the bass  $A\flat$  at the cadence, the progression continues to a half cadence in m. 26.)

Hence, according to the definitions proposed earlier, "Blues" does not maintain the primary/secondary duality heard in the *L'Enfant* excerpts. Obviously this does not resolve the issue of tonal organization for the movement. I propose that, for "Blues" and the *Sonata* as a whole, Ravel employs the  $T_{11}$  superimposition as a catalyst for a potential dual organization which, however, remains unrealized. By using semitonal superimpositions as referential sonorities at formally strategic points, the composer plays with polytonal possibility without actually realizing it. Accordingly, the remainder of the analysis sketches the structural role of dual priority as a *potential* course of action. Examples 11(b) and (c) provide a harmonic reduction of the last full refrain



statement to the end. In graph b, the white notes designate the structural harmonies, constituting a complete cadential progression in tonic (I–IV–II–V–I). Significantly, I, IV and II each are  $T_{11}$  chords: the tonic subposes  $D_2$  beneath the  $A\flat/E\flat$  fifth;  $IV$  serves as a deceptive resolution of the preceding dominant and provides consonant support for the violin's scale-degree 1; and II, representing the climax of the movement, is generated by suspension, as the relatively consonant juxtaposition of A-over- $F\sharp$  at m. 130 gives way to A-over- $B\flat$  at m. 137. As a result, structural resolution for the movement takes its cue from the opening blues sonority and concludes in effect as a middleground progression of superimposed  $T_{11}$  triads leading to the final cadence.

The importance of the  $T_{11}$  superimposition is suggested from the outset. Example 12(a) shows the beginning of the first movement. Formally, it opens with a conventional double statement of the main theme, both times by piano (mm. 1 and 17, respectively); the second statement harmonizes the theme with a V–I progression confirming G as tonic. Prior to this, the tonal center is unstable. In mm. 1–6, the theme and pitch collection imply D major as tonic. With the violin's varied imitation at the fifth (m. 6), G Dorian is suggested (including the piano's  $B\flat$  but not the dissonant  $D\flat$ – $E\flat$  in m. 8). In m. 10, the left-hand part enters with a rhythmic counter-theme based on the fourth  $C\sharp_4$ – $F\sharp_4$ , suggesting  $F\sharp$ -centricity in opposition to the treble G Dorian. Thereafter the violin ascends sequentially by step (follow the upward stems), supported by the pedal  $C\sharp$  which confirms its  $F\sharp$  major allegiance at m. 16, and culminates in m. 17 on the high point ( $C\sharp_6$ )– $A\sharp_5$ . Only with the cadence and second thematic statement does the structural context for the opening come fully into view: beginning in m. 10,  $F\sharp$  is implied as *bass priority*, G as *treble*; however, from measure 17 onwards they reverse roles, as G is confirmed as tonic, assimilating the tones comprising the  $F\sharp$  major triad in mm. 18–19. As G assumes the bass and  $F\sharp$  the treble, the latter loses its sense of secondary priority. Hence the compositional strategy behind the openings of the first and second movements is similar:

both movements open up the possibility of dual pitch priority through superimposition, only to deny it by cadencing in the bass key. Nonetheless, Ravel retains the  $T_{11}$  superimposition, and thus elevates it to the status of a compositional determinant. This brings into relief the beginnings and endings of each movement: the close of the first movement on an archaic double leading-tone cadence, as shown in the  $F\sharp/C\sharp \rightarrow G/D$  progression in Example 12(b); the consequent strength of G major as apparent tonic opening "Blues," giving way to the real tonic  $A\flat$ ; the analogous move of  $A\flat$  giving way to G opening the third movement; and its triumphant conclusion with  $F\sharp$  major arpeggios leading to block G major chords, shown in Example 12(c).<sup>30</sup>

In conclusion, the notion of polytonality, as evidenced by much of the theoretical literature, entails an inherent irony: that the term has a *unitary* meaning, as opposed to multiple possibilities for compositional realization. This assumption constitutes one of the main reasons for its lack of rigorous investigation and the attendant polemicizing of the subject. Milhaud offers a more fruitful point of departure when he writes at the end of "Polytonalité et Atonalité": "Autant de compositeurs, autant de polytonalités" (which means, roughly, that there will be as many different sorts of polytonality as there are composers pursuing them). Given that the source

30 The opening of the third movement establishes the  $T_{11}$  superimposition as a structural pillar for the entire work. For example, measures 1–13 sustain the  $A\flat^7$  chord concluding "Blues" (minus the third C); the appoggiatura G resolving to  $A\flat$  presents a microcosm of the previous movement's structure. At m. 14, parsimonious voice leading has G $\flat$  renoted as  $F\sharp$ , together with  $E\flat$  sliding down to D and  $A\flat$  as appoggiatura sliding up to A. In m. 15, the previous D triad resolves to the tonic G for the movement (and the sonata as a whole). Not atypically, the tonic sonority is a major seventh chord, with  $F\sharp$  retained from D major and the appoggiatura figure sliding up  $A\sharp$  to B. Ravel goes on to treat this sonority (that is, G = root,  $F\sharp$  = 7<sup>th</sup>,  $A\sharp$  = appoggiatura to B) as referential, adds  $C\sharp$  to complete a  $T_{11}$  chord, and concludes the movement with a variant of the first movement's double leading-tone cadence, followed by the complete  $F\sharp$ -major triad as appoggiatura resolving to G.



Allegretto (♩ = 76)

Violon

Piano

10

16

G: V

I

M<sub>7</sub>

rit

p

(a)

EXAMPLE 12. Structural role of T11 in the Sonata for Violin and Piano, first and third movements.

Andante

(b) End movt. 1

EXAMPLE 12. [continued]

of the controversy is in large part terminological, I have chosen to abandon “polytonality” in favor of superimposition with the possibility of a primary and secondary tonal focus. Based on evidence drawn from a number of different works, as well as a theoretical lineage dating back (at least) to Rameau, the primacy of the bass voice and its resultant tendency to assimilate upper-voice dissonances have here been

retained as fundamental precepts. At the same time, the foregoing analyses have demonstrated various possibilities for manipulating the tendency toward bass assimilation by means of its attenuation (the Frog/Squirrel number from *L'Enfant* and “Surgi”), delay (Milhaud’s “Botafogo,” “Blues” and “Aoua!”), or denial (the Teapot/Teacup duet from *L'Enfant*). For Ravel’s late music, these compositional strate-

(c) *End mvt. 3*

1923 - 1927

EXAMPLE 12. [continued]

gies represent some of the possibilities inherent in Milhaud's "autant de polytonalités." For each work, the specific treatment of superimposition plays a critical role in the creation of unique modes of expression and the forging of appropriate structural means for their enactment. Herein lies my motivation to reexamine the issue of polytonality, and to explore alternatives to the dead-end of attempting to prove or disprove its existence. It is hoped that this paper provides some fruitful paths for further discussion and analysis of a rich and challenging repertoire.

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