

# The Language of Enchantment:

Childhood and Fairytale in the Music of Maurice Ravel

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# Introduction

## Prologue

When Claude Moreau unlocks the doors of the Musée Maurice Ravel, she often calls out ‘Salut, petit Maurice!’. If you spend your working day in someone else’s house – sweep their floors, browse through their library, play their piano and scrub paint stains off their bathroom basin – you do begin to feel that you know them quite well. And sometimes you talk to them. Even if they’ve been dead since 1937.

Le Belvédère, in which Ravel lived from 1921 until his death, does recall its owner with an immediacy that can be startling. The imprint of his personality is quickly discernible in the precisely arranged furnishings and objects that fill its small, oddly-shaped rooms. It is easy to imagine how Ravel used the space and how he moved about the house, because its construction and organisation compel the visitor into similar patterns of movement and interaction. There is a balcony perfectly shaped for sitting outside and talking, a balcony rail just the right height for leaning on and contemplating the view of the village and surrounding countryside. There is a flight of stairs so tiny that only a very small person could negotiate them in comfort. There is a separate, shadowy music room, placed at the end of the house, where one can move easily between desk and piano, and where the dark blue and black walls and small window contrast with the open, light-filled living spaces. There is a *cagibi*, a storeroom filled with books and papers, concealed behind a cupboard in the *salon*. Ravel’s dressing gown hangs in a closet, his shaving brush sits in the bathroom, and his spectacles are still in their holder on his desk.

Meticulously conceived, constructed with painstaking attention to proportion and detail, and furnished with exquisite taste and many touches of humour and magical inspiration, the house can evoke Ravel’s music with revealing clarity. The fairytales of Perrault and d’Aulnoy on the library shelves recall *Ma mère l’Oye*, while the doll Adélaïde, posing languidly in her glass case, was made to commemorate the première of the ballet *Adélaïde, ou le langage des fleurs*. A painting of Daphnis and Chloé hangs

in the music room, and a tiny ship sailing on a papier-mâché sea is, of course, ‘Une Barque sur l’océan’.

There is, too, a strong sense of a broader compositional aesthetic. Le Belvédère is turned away from the street, and its rooms all face onto the gentle hills of the Île de France. The concentrated interiors of the house are set in relief by the grand sunlit sweep of the landscape, a quality that recalls Ravel’s innate sense of form and construction: small, vital details are arranged so as to illuminate a ‘big picture’. The juxtaposition of diverse and unusual objects – the bizarre and the beautiful, the intriguing and the kitsch – typifies Ravel’s delight in the unexpected. The *cagibi* itself is typically Ravelian: beyond the sheer surprise of its presence, its open door also changes the shape of the salon; it shifts perspectives and angles, drawing the viewer in and promising hidden treasures. The diversity of inspiration – Chinese and Japanese ornaments and prints, Louis-Philippe engravings, *faux* Greek vases, a Moroccan tea service – is typical of a composer who wrote variously of Spain, Madagascar, the Orient, the France of Louis XIV and the Greece of antiquity. If the shepherds and shepherdesses, the nightingale and the Chinese tea-cups of *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* are all to be found in Le Belvédère, the rooms, like the episodes of the opera, are utterly individual in character and realisation, complete in themselves, but working within a harmonious and well-built whole.

The genesis of this thesis was a period of residence in Ravel’s home village of Montfort l’Amaury, some fifty kilometres south-west of Paris in the *département* of Yvelines. In the summer of 2004, the Musée Ravel was in the final stages of a year-long renovation and restoration, in which I was a privileged participant. In the month before the museum reopened there was much to be done – cleaning and tidying the dusty, paint-splattered rooms and unpacking and carefully replacing the thousands of objects taken away for safekeeping and refurbishment. But there was also time to spend hours playing Ravel’s Érard piano, to lie on the floor reading his books or sit in his wicker chairs on the balcony in conversation with friends and colleagues. Although it is now a museum, Le Belvédère was once a home, and it stills feels like one. It is situated in a village left largely unchanged by the passage of three-quarters of a turbulent century, where you can still drink a coffee or a *kir* at the same café Ravel used to visit, by the church in the central Place de la Libération (in Ravel’s time Place de l’Église), where

you can take the walks Ravel took into the forest of Rambouillet or around the neighbouring villages, and where the names on the register of the local school are, for the most part, the same as those of a century ago.

Ravel's presence is easily sensed in Le Belvédère, in part because there are so many records of his life there. There are letters, such as that written to his friend Cipa Godebski a year after his 'installation':

I can put all of you up, you know. I even think you will inaugurate the bathroom. An attempt was made yesterday, and I saw blackish water flowing delightfully in the bathtub. You can see that I'm not hiding the attractions.<sup>1</sup>

There are photographs of Ravel leaning on the balcony rail, talking to his cats, walking in the forest, weeding the garden, and enjoying meals and conversation with his friends. There are stories of him inventing cocktails for his guests, displaying newly acquired trinkets and enjoying furious arguments with his housekeeper Mme Revelot.

Le Belvédère and the memories it holds bear witness to a side of Ravel's personality frequently overlooked in appraisals of his life and work. His fragile health, his lifelong bachelorhood and his periods of creative frustration may sketch a picture of a lonely man, inept and unfulfilled in his personal relationships. Yet there are few composers of whom friends and acquaintances wrote with such love, such warmth and, perhaps most tellingly, such humour. Depressed Ravel may have been at times, awkward, demanding and restless he undoubtedly was – but this was also a man who carved star-shaped holes in his bedroom door, so that he would wake each morning to find golden sun-stars on his floor.

## **Childhood and fairytales**

Carefully placed inside a yellow box in the library of Le Belvédère is a 'Lilliput [Post-]Card' (about the size of a business card) inscribed in the hand of a very young child: 'Monsieur Ravel' on one side, and 'Merci mon grand ami – Giselle' on the other. The card is a simple and touching testimony to Ravel's natural affinity with children, and his love of the accoutrements, occupations and fantasies of childhood. There are many toys and games in Le Belvédère, together with objects whose appeal is frankly

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<sup>1</sup> In Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader: Letters, articles, interviews* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), p. 221.

childish: a strange, Chinese jack-in-the-box whose ‘Jack’ sticks his tongue out, and a pair of beautifully painted cups and saucers with holes in the bottom (in which Ravel liked to offer tea to his startled friends).

Ravel shared an ease of communication with children that many of his friends remarked upon. There are still a few Montfortois who proudly say that when they were three or four or five years old Monsieur Ravel stopped to speak to them in the street. One day a group of children came and knocked on the door of Le Belvédère – ‘Maître, give us a song!’ – and he good-naturedly obliged.<sup>2</sup> Several of his friends recalled that on more than one occasion he disappeared during a long and formal dinner and was later found in the nursery, playing with the children of the house.<sup>3</sup> All of these anecdotes stress Ravel’s lack of condescension: he was direct, straightforward and honest, and he addressed children with a gentle seriousness, entering easily into their activities and conversation.

Many of Ravel’s interactions with children were based around his talent as a teller of stories. As Mimi Godebska recalled:

There are few of my childhood memories in which Ravel does not find a place. Of all my parents’ friends I had a predilection for Ravel because he used to tell me stories that I loved. I used to climb on his knee and indefatigably he would begin, ‘Once upon a time...’ And it would be *Laideronnette* or *La Belle et la Bête* or, especially, the adventures of a poor mouse that he made up for me. I used to laugh uproariously at these and then feel guilty because they were really very sad.<sup>4</sup>

Ravel’s duet suite *Ma mère l’Oye* was born of his role as favourite babysitter and indefatigable storyteller to Mimi and her brother Jean, to whom he would dedicate the work.<sup>5</sup> Looking after the children for several days in September 1908, he wrote to their mother:

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<sup>2</sup> Recounted by Claude Moreau and Marie-Huguette Hadrot (in conversation with the author, July 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Roger Nichols (ed.), *Ravel remembered*, (London: Faber, 1987), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> In Roger Nichols (ed.) *Ravel remembered*, p.19.

<sup>5</sup> The parents of Mimi and Jean, Cipa and Ida Godebski, were amongst Ravel’s dearest friends. The closeness of their relationship is demonstrated by the substantial volume of correspondence now held in the Pierpont Morgan Library: the collection contains 122 letters written by Ravel to the family between 1905 and 1930. According to Arbie Orenstein, Ravel was introduced to the Godebskis in June 1904 by his childhood friend Ricardo Viñes. Viñes himself, however, was acquainted with the Godebskis from 1893, a circumstance that suggests that Ravel may have met them (and almost certainly would have known of them) earlier than Orenstein allows. (Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 617 and *Ravel, man and musician* (New York: Dover, 1975/1991), p. 41; Nina Gubisch, *Journal et correspondance de Ricardo Viñes*, (Thesis (musicology), Paris: Conservatoire de musique, 1971), pp. 148-55.)

Family life now resumes: laborious conversations with Miss [Hatchell, the children's English governess], aided by gestures and dictionaries; stories to tell the kids, not too gloomy in the evening to avoid nightmares, but lugubrious in the morning to stimulate their appetite.<sup>6</sup>

It was during this week that Ravel composed the 'Pavane de la belle au bois dormant', which, in 1910, would be joined by 'Petit Poucet', 'Laideronnette, Impératrice des Pagodes', 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête' and 'Le Jardin féérique'.<sup>7</sup>

Ravel perhaps inherited his storytelling talents from his Basque mother, Marie Delouart. Jean Françaix recalled that Ravel once told his father (the composer-pianist Alfred Françaix), 'When I was a child, my mother told me fairytales like nobody else could. Without her, I would never have written *Ma mère l'Oye*'.<sup>8</sup> Since fairytales were obviously an important part of his own childhood, it is unsurprising that as an adult Ravel told stories himself. Ravel's talent for creating and communicating an engaging narrative informed many of his compositions, both those, like *Gaspard de la nuit*, with obvious programmatic content and those, like *Rapsodie espagnole* or *Boléro*, where a narrative or programme can be intuited (the conception and realisation of *Boléro* as a ballet reinforces this). Even the few works without programmatic titles can suggest a story. Claude Moreau says that she hears the *Sonate pour violon et violoncelle* (generally regarded one of Ravel's most abstruse and intellectually abstract works) as a fairytale; she plays the sonata to her grandchildren and tells them the story that she senses within it.

Recounting stories that have been heard a thousand times before, in a manner that can make them come alive all over again, takes dramatic talent and creativity. It also demands the ability to make listeners see well-known characters, places and events as if through new eyes – a change of perspective, original detail, new dialogue, different colours, inflections and emphases. Making up stories is a related but separate art. To be memorable, a story must be inventive and interesting, but it also requires precise and attractive detail: as J.R.R. Tolkien acknowledged, it is 'the colouring, the atmosphere,

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<sup>6</sup> In Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> The première of *Ma mère l'Oye* took place at the début concert of the newly formed Société musicale indépendante on 20 April 1910. Ravel had hoped that Mimi and Jean would give the first performance of their suite, but Mimi, then ten years old, was too nervous to perform in public. The première was instead given by two other children, Jeanne Leleu (who went on to win the Prix de Rome and teach at the Paris Conservatoire) and Geneviève Durony.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Françaix, *De la musique et des musiciens* (Paris: Fondation Polignac, 1999), p. 164.

the unclassifiable individual details of a story [...] that really count'.<sup>9</sup> It is easy to lose one's way when making up a story, to be sidetracked by the minutiae and forget the broad narrative. A balance, therefore, is necessary between the small detail and the bigger picture – like the hills of the Île de France viewed from Maurice Ravel's fastidiously arranged dining room, or like the 'big, small world' that is the focus of the present Chapter Six.

In his 1928 'Autobiographical Sketch', writing of his *Miroirs*, Ravel quoted Shakespeare: 'The eye sees not itself, but by reflection, by some other things'.<sup>10</sup> Processes of reflection and transformation were central to his compositional philosophy<sup>11</sup>, as his description of *Ma mère l'Oye* in the same document makes clear:

Le dessein d'évoquer la poésie de l'enfance m'a naturellement conduit à simplifier ma manière et à dépouiller mon écriture.<sup>12</sup>

The intention to evoke the poetry of childhood naturally led me to simplify my style and pare down my writing.

In these five movements, the salon fairytales of the eighteenth century became for Ravel the 'prism' to view what he indicated was his real subject: children and the condition of childhood. The connection between childhood and fairytales for Ravel is here made explicit and obvious. To 'evoke the poetry of childhood' he used the medium of the fairytale. The two concepts are fundamentally and inextricably connected.

For the purpose of this thesis, however, there is a crucial distinction between childhood and fairytale. As Chapter One explores, 'childhood' is an idea or a set of ideas and constructions shaped around memories, observations and images of children; it carries connotations quite different from the word 'child'. A fairytale, by contrast, can be a real thing, with a physical existence; it is comprised of words, sentences and

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<sup>9</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', in *Poems and stories* (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Julius Caesar*, Act I Scene II; in Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), p. 488 n17. The line was translated as 'La vue ne se connaît pas elle-même avant d'avoir voyagé et rencontré un miroir où elle peut se connaître'.

<sup>11</sup> *Boléro*, for example, is as much about factories and cogwheels as it is about Spain, while *Le tombeau de Couperin* is an homage both to the France of the eighteenth century and to six friends killed in the First World War. Ravel specified in the ballet argument for *Ma mère l'Oye* that the *chinoiserie* of 'Laideronnette' should be in the style of the painter François Boucher, while his intention in *Daphnis et Chloé* 'was to compose a vast musical fresco, less concerned with archaism than with faithfulness to the Greece of my dreams, which is similar to that imagined and depicted by French artists at the end of the eighteenth century' (in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 30).

<sup>12</sup> In Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, p. 45.

paragraphs, written in ink, on paper, and contained in books. But a fairytale is also a means of expression, a framework for the communication of a particular message or image. A story of dubious authenticity may be dismissed as a ‘fairytale’, but as a descriptive term (‘a fairytale princess’, ‘a fairytale scene’), the word suggests something that may carry us to the borderland of reality; something with a sense of magic – or enchantment.

The title of the thesis was therefore chosen to reflect not only the themes with which it deals, but their expressive and musical import. The word ‘enchantment’ is one translation of the French *sortilège*, a term that dates at least from the thirteenth century and is directly related to the English *sorcery*, the casting of spells and the art of divination. *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* is perhaps best translated as *The Child and the Enchantments*, the middle syllable of *enchantment* echoing the Latin *cantare*, to sing. *Sortilèges* and *enchantments* are terms frequently applied to Ravel’s music, and Ravel himself has been described as a sorcerer, an enchanter or a magician. If we are enchanted, we might be bewitched or ensnared, but we may also be charmed, delighted or enraptured, and Ravel’s music can inspire all those responses. More importantly, though, an enchantment is a bridge between the realms of the real and the fantastic: enchantments are cast upon ‘real’ people, like the Child of *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, and they cause them to experience magical or fairytale events. This thesis deals much with the interaction of reality with fantasy, and indeed with the strange relationship between musical compositions as notes on paper and sounds in the ear, and the images and emotions those notes and sounds can convey.

The term ‘language’ refers directly to the importance of words, written, spoken and sung, in all of the works discussed here, together with the broader literary traditions and the culture to which those words belong. However, as the Oxford English Dictionary has it, ‘language’ is more than ‘the whole body of words and of methods of combination of words used by a nation, people, or race’: it can equally be ‘applied to methods of expressing the thoughts, feelings, wants [...] *otherwise* than by words’.<sup>13</sup> The study is also founded upon Ravel’s *musical* language, both as it was recorded in notes, melodies, harmonies, rhythms and forms, and as a method of expression of particular thoughts, feelings and images.

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<sup>13</sup> ‘language’, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1989, *OED Online*, Oxford UP, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50129613> (accessed 15 September 2007).



## Research questions

Beyond his natural affinity with children, the ‘childlike’ aspects of Ravel’s own personality were discussed by many of his friends in their various homages and reminiscences. As an adult, they wrote, Ravel retained ‘the candid soul’, ‘the purity’, ‘the spontaneity’, ‘the ingenuity’, and ‘the joyous astonishment’ of childhood.<sup>14</sup> ‘I think that he never forgot anything that was young and joyful’, wrote Guy de Pourtalès. ‘To him, the little world of childhood was always a fairyland, woven with enchantments and with music’.<sup>15</sup>

These reflections, read and pondered at Le Belvédère, became the starting point for this thesis. Despite the significance often accorded it in the context of his life and work, Maurice Ravel’s conception of childhood, together with the musical language through which it found expression, has not hitherto been the subject of a dedicated, extended study. The topic offered a chance to explore and write about a complex and fascinating man from an unusual perspective. It is also a subject with direct links to his creative output: *Ma mère l'Oye*, the *Trois chansons pour chœur mixte sans accompagnement* and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* all take their inspiration from children and childhood. These works, which form the musical core of the thesis, span a fifteen-year period of profound historical and musical transformation. They also encompass three different genres (piano music, song and opera), each with their own traditions, perspectives and means of expression.

Given the importance of storytelling in Ravel’s relationships with the children of his acquaintance, and the strong narrative thread that runs through much of his music, it is not surprising that each of these ‘childhood’ works presents not single images but evolving and engaging narratives. Specifically, they adopt the idioms, structures and language of the literary fairytale. *Ma mère l'Oye* is based upon the tales of Charles Perrault, the Comtesse d’Aulnoy and Mme Leprince de Beaumont. The *Trois chansons* twist fairytale characters and narratives into strange and satirical patterns.

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<sup>14</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, ‘L’Œuvre de Maurice Ravel’, in *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers* (Paris: Tambourinaire, 1939), p. 2; René Chalupt, ‘La féerie et Maurice Ravel’, *La Revue musicale* 19:187 (Special issue dedicated to Ravel, December 1938), p. 130; Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, ‘Ravel à Montfort l’Amaury’, in *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers*, p. 164, Tristan Klingsor, ‘L’Époque Ravel’, in *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers*, p. 133; Jourdan-Morhange, quoted in David Sanson, *Maurice Ravel* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2005), p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Guy de Pourtalès, ‘Petit hommage à Ravel’, *La Revue musicale* 19:187 (Special issue dedicated to Ravel, December 1938), p. 35.

*L'Enfant et les sortilèges* [*The Child and the Enchantments*] also traces a traditional fairytale narrative of transgression, reparation and transcendence.<sup>16</sup>

The intertwining of childhood and fairytales, explicit in *Ma mère l'Oye*, implicit in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* and the *Trois chansons*, leads us to the core argument of this thesis: that the concept of childhood, for Ravel, was inextricably linked with the language, traditions and idioms of the literary fairytale. The central question, therefore, is: how did these intertwined concepts of childhood and fairytale find expression in Ravel's music?

Within this primary research focus, we may identify seven supplementary questions, between which there is necessarily some degree of overlap. Firstly, as Georges Starobinski points out, while there have been many explorations of childhood in art, childhood in literature and children and childhood in society, 'a comparable study remains to be undertaken on a musicological plain'.<sup>17</sup> Certainly little has been written on French musical *enfantines*, of which there are many. How, then, does Ravel's music sit within a broader tradition of music about children and childhood, a tradition that may be said to have begun with Schumann and Musorgsky and continued in the music of Bizet, Fauré and Debussy? What imagery of childhood is depicted in *Ma mère l'Oye*, in the *Trois chansons* and, most graphically, in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*?

Fairytales offered Ravel not only the themes of magic and fantasy that had always inspired him, but also a formal structure at once clearly defined and infinitely variable. How did Ravel transform the themes, characters, idioms, images, events, the words, phrases and narrative constructs of the literary fairytale? How did he make musical use of the processes and traditions of storytelling? And how did his musical fairytales blend or juxtapose fantasy with the 'real world'?

The last strand of this study deals with the more contentious issues of historical, musical, personal and dramatic interpretation. What meaning did the concepts of childhood and fairytale have for Ravel, and why did he return to them so often as a source of inspiration? The complexity of this issue is hinted at in the reflections of

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendices for the texts and translations of the *Trois chansons* and a synopsis of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*.

<sup>17</sup> Georges Starobinski, 'Brahms et la nostalgie de l'enfance', *Acta musicologica* 74:2 (2002), p. 141.

Émile Vuillermoz on *Ma mère l'Oye* and Manuel Rosenthal on *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*:

The entire score of *Ma mère l'Oye* constitutes [...] a philosophical lesson, whose clear-sightedness cannot be contested. And it is in the conclusion of this suite that we discover perhaps the fullest confession of the secret sentiments of the most reserved and modest of the French musicians of our time.<sup>18</sup>

One cannot stress enough the importance of *L'Enfant*; not only amongst the masterpieces of Ravel but also as a veritable confession of his most secret feelings, opinions and sensibilities, of his views concerning not only childhood but all existence.<sup>19</sup>

The final research question is: how have musicians, directors and scholars sought to represent the intertwined concepts of childhood and fairytale in performance and analysis of Ravel's music? This issue has direct implications for performances of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, the most substantial and complex work in this study.

## Methodology

In keeping with the nature of these questions, this research entailed a multifaceted approach. The available musicological and documentary sources were supplemented by an exploration of relevant novels, poetry, philosophy and cultural and social history, as detailed in the Literature Review. Of particular importance was a recital of songs and piano duets, given by the author in May 2007 with Kerry Wake-Dyster (soprano) and Roy Howat (piano), which provided a practical perspective on much of the music.<sup>20</sup>

In order to understand the sociological background against which Ravel's *enfantines* were created, this research began with an exploration of the condition of children and the practices of child-rearing preceding and surrounding Ravel's lifetime. An exploration of children and childhood in art, literature and critical thought, as well as in music, served to establish a broader cultural context. Chapter One therefore investigates concepts of childhood up to and including the Romantic era, using works by Schumann and Musorgsky to support the fundamental argument that representations of children and childhood are never free from adult projections – as David Metzger puts it,

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<sup>18</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, 'L'Œuvre de Maurice Ravel', p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Marcel Marnat (ed.), *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> The programme included *Ma mère l'Oye*, *Noël des jouets*, *Histoires naturelles*, the *Trois chansons* and 'Toi, le cœur de la rose' from *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, together with Fauré's *Dolly* and Musorgsky's *The Nursery*.

‘receptacles for whatever adults want to place in them’.<sup>21</sup> Chapter Two extends this argument to a more detailed survey of children and childhood in French music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, juxtaposing musical commentaries with cultural and social history. This reveals some of the sources for the imagery and inspirations of the era’s many childhood-inspired compositions.

In order to deal effectively with the interaction of musical and literary idioms in the works under discussion, it was necessary to identify the essential characteristics of the fairytale, a genre with many applications and constructions. Chapter Three therefore traces the history of the literary fairytale, with a particular focus on its gradual identification with childhood. On a broader plane, the chapter discusses the appeal of the fairytale in the society of Third Republic France, where ‘magical’ concepts rapidly became technological reality and the Expositions Universelles fuelled a collective taste for fantasy. Involving a broad range of idioms, styles and images, the chapter provides a framework for later discussion, and suggests some of the reasons for Ravel’s repeated attraction to the genre.

Chapters Four, Five and Six take up the analytical elements of the research questions. Chapter Four examines Ravel’s own poetry in detail, focussing on its formal construction and its aural effect: the translation of *poetic* into *musical* language. Through an exploration of the processes and traditions of storytelling, the chapter argues that in each of the three key works the story’s musical communication is guided by the sounds of the language, through naturalistic and expressive text-setting, extensive use of onomatopoeia, and melodic lines (even in instrumental works) that recall the inflections and cadences of the spoken voice. Through analysis of both the literary fairytale and the key works, Chapter Five explores correspondences of idiom, musical construction and narrative progression, with a special focus on *Ma mère l’Oye*.

*L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, the longest and most complex work under discussion, necessitates a multi-layered analysis. Chapters Four, Six and Eight approach the opera from primarily literary, musical and dramatic perspectives respectively. Some existing studies of *L’Enfant* are wont to project the characters, events and symbols of Colette’s libretto on Ravel himself. In order to avert such possible non-sequiturs, the starting

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<sup>21</sup> David Metzger, “‘We Boys’: Childhood in the Music of Charles Ives”, *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 21:1 (1997), p. 83.

point here is an examination of the collaboration between Ravel and Colette. A clear understanding of the opera's creation helps untangle the closely woven strands of music, text and staging, clearing the ground for Chapter Six to explore elements of Ravel's own conceptions and musical depictions of childhood. The chapter examines the tightly focused musical material of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* and traces the evolution of motivic gestures, formal structure and orchestration in order to demonstrate how the opera achieves an essential coherence through the musical and dramatic characterisation of the Child.

The diverse interactions between childhood and fairytale are central to this thesis. Their juxtaposition often encompasses the broader dialogues and oppositions of reality and fantasy – concepts which, in these works, can be discussed with a surprising degree of musical and dramatic exactitude. Chapter Four in part relates these interactions to *Ma mère l'Oye*, and Chapter Six to *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, while Chapter Seven expands the resultant findings in a detailed discussion of the *Trois chansons*. A careful appraisal of the circumstances surrounding the wartime composition of these songs (again making use of artistic, literary and musical sources together with historical documentation) is used in this chapter as a foundation for analysing their underlying imagery. Through an exploration of fundamental fairytale images and narrative imperatives, the chapter offers new and very tangible evidence of the impact of the First World War and its traumas on Ravel's musical expression and his concept of childhood.

Chapter Eight evaluates existing musicological and interpretative responses to *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, exploring representations of childhood and fairytale in numerous productions of the opera. The chapter tests the conclusions of Chapters Six and Seven against practical questions of theatrical design, musical realisation and directorial conceptions. The discussion is broadened through appraisals of the work of other musical and literary scholars and the writings of Ravel and Colette themselves. In the course of addressing the last of the research questions, this chapter also draws together some of the main threads of argument presented across the rest of the thesis.

The programmatic titles, literary connections and personal and emotive subject matter of all three works under discussion can easily suggest layers of extra-musical meaning and implication, posing serious issues of subjectivity and all-too-imaginative 'interpretation' for the researcher. In the words of Henry Prunières, Ravel was *toujours*

*conscient*<sup>22</sup>: always aware of what he was doing and how he was doing it, and careful to keep his private life clear of his creative work. Frustrated by performers who took liberties with his music, he often pleaded to be spared from ‘interpretation’. This wish could equally be applied to some existing biographical or musicological studies that seek hidden messages and motives where none may exist. The complex and perilous issue of what and how we ‘interpret’ is thus particularly pertinent when discussing Ravel. In this regard the thesis seeks a balance between interpretation and explication, taking as its source the music, as understood within the historical and philosophical context of its composition. Consistent engagement with both the fine detail and the broader musical and dramatic construction is used to avoid ever losing touch with Ravel’s music as both ‘dots on paper’ and aural experience.

## **Literature review**

A review of the literature pertaining to this thesis may be divided into four key areas, between which there is some degree of overlap: the historical and musical cultures of childhood; the historical and musical cultures of fairytales; the broad field of French social, cultural and musical history across the period of Ravel’s lifetime; and the life and work of Ravel himself. Such an interdisciplinary span necessitates a substantial literature review. For inevitable reasons of space this must concern itself principally with the identification rather than the appraisal of the available sources. Critical discussion is incorporated for the most part into the thesis proper; a few important exceptions are dealt with here.<sup>23</sup>

Any survey of the ‘canon’ of literary fairytales begins with the tales themselves, in this case those of Charles Perrault, the Comtesse d’Aulnoy and Mme Leprince de Beaumont in particular. Perhaps the most eloquent and thought-provoking reflections on these and other ‘classic’ fairytales are essays by some of the great fantasy writers of the twentieth century, C.S. Lewis (‘On Three Ways of Writing for Children’) J.R.R. Tolkien (‘On Fairy Stories’) and G.K. Chesterton (‘The Ethics of Elfland’). The many writings of Jack Zipes explore the social history and changing functions of the fairytale, as do Elizabeth Harries’ *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the*

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Prunières, ‘Portraits et médaillons de musiciens: Ravel’, in *Cinquante ans de musique française, de 1874 à 1925*, ed. L. Rohozinski (Paris: Éditions musicales de la librairie de France, 1925), p. 379.

<sup>23</sup> Publication details of sources listed in the Literature Review are given upon their first appearance in the main text, and in the Bibliography.

*Fairy Tale* and Stephen Swann Jones' *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination*. Maria Tatar's *Off with Their Heads! : Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood*, Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* and, in particular, F. André Favat's brief but illuminating *Child and Tale: The origins of interest* all explore the interaction between conceptions of childhood and fairytale. The historical studies by Dorothy Thelander ('Mother Goose and Her Goslings: The France of Louis XIV as Seen through the Fairy Tale') and Michael Kotzin ('The Fairy Tale in England, 1800-1870') have particular relevance for Chapters Three and Eight. Structural and idiomatic studies of fairytales by Max Lüthi (*Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*) and Vladimir Propp (*Morphology of the Folktale*), together with the classification system developed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson (*The types of the folktale: a classification and bibliography*), inform the musical discussion of Chapter Five.

The fascinating question of interaction between musical and literary paradigms in operatic or instrumental fairytale-based compositions has received extraordinarily little attention. An exception is David Buch's 'Fairy Tale Literature and *Die Zauberflöte*', which offers a detailed survey of the literary basis of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* as well as engaging with the writings of Bettelheim and other fairytale theorists. However, Buch deals more with the libretto than the music of *Die Zauberflöte*. Chapters Four and Five use these literary parameters to construct a more comprehensive analytical method.

The historiography of childhood is a vast and complicated subject, spanning as it does sociology, philosophy, art and literature, as well as music. The starting point for most researchers is Philippe Ariès' *L'Enfance et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (published in English as *Centuries of Childhood*), widely recognised as the first social history of childhood. The historical context for Chapter One was shaped by Ariès' study, together with works such as *The History of Childhood*, edited by Lloyd deMause (in particular Priscilla Robertson's chapter on nineteenth-century family life), Hugh Cunningham's *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*, and Anita Schorsch's *Images of childhood: an illustrated social history*. Colin Heywood (*Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, Health and Education among the 'Classes Populaires'*) and Maurice Crubellier (*L'Enfance et la jeunesse dans la société française, 1800-1950*), together with Linda Clark ('France', in *Children in Historical*

*and Comparative Perspective*, edited by Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner) offered a more detailed perspective on the France of Maurice Ravel's own childhood. John Horne and Alan Kramer's *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* and Larry Zuckerman's *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* explore in passing the impact of the First World War on European conceptions of childhood; Glenn Watkins' chapter 'War and the Children' (*Proof through the Night: Music and the Great War*) details some musical responses to these events. However, Watkins concentrates his chapter around the music of Claude Debussy; the present Chapter Seven forges new conceptual links in extending the discussion to Ravel's *Trois chansons pour cœur*.

A more philosophical approach to childhood is presented in *Picturing children: constructions of childhood between Rousseau and Freud* (edited by Marilyn Brown) and Carolyn Steedman's *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority*. Steedman's Introduction in particular offers a clarity of definition that echoes through this thesis. The literary and aesthetic basis of Chapters One and Two is also drawn in part from Rosemary Lloyd's seminal study *The Land of Lost Content: Children and Childhood in Nineteenth Century French Literature*. As Lloyd and Steedman demonstrate, French literature of the latter part of the nineteenth century returned continually to the idea of the child and childhood, in observation, memory and imagination. While the figure of Proust looms large here, Victor Hugo, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and Colette, together with Gérard Nerval's *Sylvie* and Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, also offer a language and imagery of childhood that resonate in the visual arts and the music of the Third Republic.

As Georges Starobinski acknowledges, musical 'cultures of childhood' have received much less attention than literary or artistic ones. Starobinski's own writings on themes of childhood in nineteenth-century music (particularly Schumann, Brahms and Musorgsky) provide a firm foundation for further research. Starobinski, along with David Metzger ('"We Boys": Childhood in the Music of Charles Ives') and Roger Neustadter's 'The Obvious Child: The Symbolic Use of Childhood in Contemporary Popular Music', offers a clear methodology for integrating philosophical, historical and musical discussion. Jerome Reel's survey of 'The Image of the Child in Opera' was a starting point for the opening discussion of Chapter Six, although Reel inexplicably



omitted *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* from his study. W. Wright Roberts' pair of articles 'Child Studies in Music', which appeared in *Music and Letters* in 1928, offer an early critical appraisal of differing musical portrayals of childhood, taking as their basis the *Kinderscenen* of Schumann and Musorgsky's song cycle *The Nursery*.<sup>24</sup> Roberts' conclusions are explored and evaluated across Chapters One and Two. More extensive studies of Schumann by John Daverio (*Robert Schumann: Hero of a "New Poetic Age"*) and Eric Jensen (*Schumann*), together with articles by Timothy Taylor ('Aesthetic and cultural issues in Schumann's *Kinderszenen*') and Berthold Hoeckner ('Schumann and Romantic Distance'), inform the discussion of Chapter One. Richard Taruskin's indispensable documentary and analytical studies of Musorgsky are supplemented by the cultural and sociological writings of Orlando Figes (*Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*), Bruce Lincoln (*Between Heaven and Hell: The Story of a Thousand Years of Artistic Life in Russia*) and Andrew Wachtel (*The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth*). These sources, juxtaposed with early French responses to Musorgsky's music, present a new perspective on Musorgsky's song cycle *The Nursery* that focuses the argument of Chapter One and impacts upon Chapter Two.

Strangely little has been written about children and childhood in French music. The current knowledge essentially comprises Paul Roberts' brief but penetrating appraisal in his *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, and Elisabeth Giuliani's even briefer but equally interesting survey 'Music et l'enfance' (in the 1990 issue of *L'Avant-scène Opéra* dedicated to the operas of Ravel), reinforced in numerous other studies of Ravel by passing references to the theme and the value of childhood. Chapters One and Two here therefore present a broader survey of the 'invention of childhood' in French music along with a new approach to the musical *enfantines* of the nineteenth century. They thus provide a framework not only for later chapters but also for more comprehensive future studies of musical realisations of childhood.

A broad cultural perspective of Third Republic France comes from Charles Sowerwine's *France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society*, Robert Anderson's *France 1870-1914: Politics and Society* and the many writings of Alistair Horne (notably *Seven Ages of Paris* and *The Fall of Paris*), supplemented by the æsthetic and

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<sup>24</sup> *Kinderscenen* (an older spelling of *Kinderszenen*) is the title preferred by *Grove Music Online*.

philosophical histories of Jerome Kern (*The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*) and Roger Shattuck (*The Banquet Years*). The documentary research and cultural insights of Phillippe Jullian (*The Triumph of Art Nouveau: Paris Exhibition, 1900*), Miriam Levin (*When the Eiffel Tower was new: French visions of progress at the centennial of the Revolution*), Annegret Fauser (*Musical encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair*), Debora Silverman (*Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style*) and Christophe Prochasson (*Paris 1900: Essai d'histoire culturelle*) particularly inform Chapter Three.

Some of the best insights into French music of this period come from the composers, critics, musicians and 'dilettantes' of the time, in particular Jean Marnold, Louis Laloy, Pierre Lalo, Émile Vuillermoz, Michel Calvocoressi, Manuel da Falla, Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht, Claude Debussy and Ravel himself. More recently, the work of Robert Orledge, Roger Nichols, Richard Langham Smith and Roy Howat has been invaluable, providing outstanding documentation and a sympathetic understanding of the inspirations, motivations and interactions of the creative artists and their society. Broader historical and musicological context comes from the many published researches of Jann Pasler, Steven Huebner, Carlo Caballero and Katharine Ellis. Some explanation is probably in order for not having made more of Jane Fulcher's extensive surveys of the music and cultural history of this period (*French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* and *The Composer as Intellectual: Music and Ideology in France 1914-1940*). While Fulcher uses a broad range of sources and makes many strong arguments, she engages little with the music *per se*, and her discourse is occasionally marred by jarring errors of documentation and representation.<sup>25</sup>

The commentaries and memoirs of Ravel's friends and colleagues provide the richest fund of eloquent and insightful reflections on the man and his music; I note in particular *Ravel et nous* (Hélène Jourdan-Morhange), *Maurice Ravel par quelques-uns de ses familiers* (including essays by Émile Vuillermoz, Colette and Tristan Klingsor), the special January 1938 edition of the *Revue musicale* ('Hommage à Ravel'), and

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<sup>25</sup> In her brief discussion of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* Fulcher stated that the world première of the opera took place at the Opéra-Comique, a fundamental error that distorted her subsequent discussion of the work. For a full critical appraisal of *The Composer as Intellectual*, including discussion of these issues, see Carlo Caballero's review in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 55:3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 563-78.

Manuel Rosenthal's recollections (*Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal, recueillis par Marcel Marnat*), together with the writings of Roland-Manuel. Amongst those who wrote particularly on Ravel's affinity with childhood and fairytales are René Chalupt ('La féerie et Maurice Ravel'), Guy de Pourtalès ('Petit hommage à Ravel') and Fred Goldbeck ('Les fées et les marionnettes'), together with Roland-Manuel and Jourdan-Morhange.

In addition to the indispensable documentary researches of Arbie Orenstein on Ravel, the writings of Jean-Michel Nectoux, François Lesure and Denis Herlin, Roger Delage and Hervé Lacombe respectively on Fauré, Debussy, Chabrier and Bizet have been particularly valuable. The manuscripts and journals in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, together with the *Cahiers Maurice Ravel*, have provided a wealth of documentary evidence. Stephen Zank's *Maurice Ravel: A Guide to Research* was of crucial importance in locating many early reviews and commentaries. Amongst the many biographical and musical studies of Ravel, the most engaging and informative are those by Orenstein (*Ravel, Man and Musician*), Gerald Larner (*Maurice Ravel*) José Bruyr (*Maurice Ravel, ou, le lyrisme et les sortilèges*), Vladimir Jankélévitch (*Maurice Ravel*), Christian Goubault (*Maurice Ravel: Le jardin féérique*), David Sanson (*Maurice Ravel*), Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt (*Ravel: Variations sur l'homme et l'oeuvre*) and in particular Marcel Marnat's invaluable *Maurice Ravel*, supplemented by Pierre Narbaitz's *Maurice Ravel: Un Orfèvre Basque* and Étienne Rousseau-Plotto's *Ravel: Portraits basques*. *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (edited by Deborah Mawer) was an essential resource: in addition to Richard Langham Smith's chapter cited below, I acknowledge in particular those of Roy Howat ('Ravel and the piano'), Michael Russ ('Ravel and the orchestra'), Peter Kaminsky ('Vocal music and the lures of exoticism and irony'), Barbara Kelly ('History and homage') and Mawer herself ('Introduction', 'Musical objects and machines' and 'Ballet and the apotheosis of the dance'). I also acknowledge Barbara Kelly's chapter 'Ravel after Debussy: Inheritance, Influence and Style' (in *Berlioz and Debussy: Sources, contexts and legacies*, edited by Kelly and Kerry Murphy), together with her article 'Maurice Ravel' in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Ivry's *Maurice Ravel: A Life* has been largely disregarded, since Ivry consistently misrepresents historical, biographical and

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<sup>26</sup> Kelly's edited collection *French music, culture and national identity, 1870-1939* was due for publication just as this thesis was completed.

musical facts and his almost complete dearth of documentation makes it impossible to ascertain the veracity of his assertions and purported quotations.<sup>27</sup>

A survey of the literature relating to the three works under particular discussion in this thesis reveals a number of areas which have warranted further investigation. Very little has been written about Ravel's *Trois chansons pour chœur* at all; they are referred to only fleetingly in most of the biographies and commentaries and have never been the subject of a dedicated study. *Ma mère l'Oye* has been the subject of much interpretation but, again, surprisingly little analysis, possibly because of the outward 'simplicity' of its construction. The present thesis addresses these neglected areas. *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* is the most substantial, complex and well-analysed work discussed in the thesis. However, Chapter Six, by developing the musical, literary and dramatic parameters established in the preceding chapters, offers new analysis from a more integrated musico-dramatic perspective.

Ravel's own poetry (in *Noël des jouets* and the *Trois chansons*) and his settings of the poetry of others (in songs and operas) have been accorded limited analytic attention hitherto. Given this lacuna, Chapter Four extends the discussion of Ravel's use of language beyond its direct relations to the literary fairytale. The discussion in Chapter Four was informed by essays by Arthur Hoérée ('La mélodie et l'œuvre lyrique'), René Dumesnil ('Maurice Ravel poète'), André Mirambel ('L'inspiration grecque dans l'œuvre de Ravel') and, more recently, Marie-Pierre Lassus ('Ravel l'enchanteur: Structure poétique et structure musicale dans *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*').

While Ravel's two operas have never been the focus of a dedicated, extended study (a serious gap in the literature), *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* has inspired essays and chapters that approach it variously from analytical, dramatic, literary and psychological perspectives, together with one recent (1999) full-length study by Mathias Schillmöller, *Maurice Ravels Schlüsselwerk L'Enfant et les sortilèges: Eine ästhetisch-analytische Studie*. Schillmöller's is a well-organised, straightforward and sympathetic appraisal. Like the present thesis, it draws connections between *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* and

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<sup>27</sup> Ted Libbey reviewed Ivry's biography thus in *The Los Angeles Times Book Review* (7 January 2001, p. 5): 'Benjamin Ivry spends lots of time jumping to conclusions based on far-fetched suppositions and vague, third-party testimony. [...] The most perceptive things in Ivry's book are the comments of others. [...] Ivry's book is gossip seeking to elevate itself to the level of serious biographical and musicological discourse'. (Reproduced in *Biography* 24:3 (Summer 2001), pp. 738-9.)

works such as *Ma mère l'Oye*, *Noël des jouets* and *Histoires naturelles* (though not the *Trois chansons*), traces the lineage from Ravel's *enfantines* through those of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Georges Bizet, Modest Musorgsky and Claude Debussy, and explores (albeit briefly) the concept of childhood in the popular imagination of the *Années folles*.

Despite these shared elements, in its scope and focus Schillmöller's study does not impinge greatly upon the present thesis. Schillmöller seeks primarily to explore and assess the labels that have been applied to the opera since its creation: *fantaisie lyrique*, *opérette américaine*, *opéra féerie*, *divertissement*, *enfantine*. He does this with accuracy and insight, locating the work convincingly within a historical musical (rather than cultural) context. This rather categorical approach does, however, generate a degree of conceptual and musical segregation; the present thesis adopts a more reconciliatory perspective.

As the first major study of the opera in German, Schillmöller rightly devotes a large portion of his book to the translation and synthesis of existing primary and secondary material. There is consequently a reduced focus on original and detailed discussion of the opera's music, text and imagery. Schillmöller deals only briefly with questions of musical structure, orchestration, vocal writing, tonality and motivic treatment. His analyses, while clear and convincing, are more descriptive than penetrating, setting out without seeking to interpret. Struggling to reconcile the work's 'kaleidoscopic' character with its dramatic coherence, he deals effectively with musical issues at a local level without identifying or drawing together underlying conceptual threads.

The present Chapter Six enlarges upon many of the musical aspects identified by Schillmöller in the development of a more holistic appraisal of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. Like the opera itself, the chapter takes as its basis the character of the Child, tracing his development through the work's integrated dramatic, literary and musical narratives. This chapter was also informed by the work of Christine Prost ('Maurice Ravel: *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*'), Carolyn Abbate (*In Search of Opera*) and Peter Kaminsky ('Of Children, Princesses, Dreams and Isomorphisms: Text-Music Transformation in Ravel's Vocal Works'), together with Richard Langham Smith's chapter 'Ravel's operatic spectacles' in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* and Pascal

Saint-André's elucidation of the opera's musical narrative ('Argument: *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*' in *L'Avant-scène opera*).

The critiques and commentaries of the 1925 Monte Carlo première and 1926 Opéra-Comique season of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* make fascinating reading; combined with analyses and reviews from performances across the rest of the twentieth century, they provide the basis for Chapter Eight. Valuable information was also gleaned from Deborah Mawer's recent *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, which partially documents the performance histories of *Ma mère l'Oye* and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*.

The psychological and psychoanalytical implications of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* were remarked upon by Melanie Klein as early as 1929 ('Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse') and have subsequently been explored by Langham Smith, Christine Milner ('Le corps de Sido') and Julie Kristeva (*Colette*, the third volume of her trilogy *Le génie féminin: la vie, la folie, les mots*). Steven Huebner's essay 'Ravel's Child: Magic and Moral Development' (in *Musical Childhoods and the Cultures of Youth*, ed. Susan Boynton and Roe-Min Kok) also explores this perspective, counterbalanced by a thoughtful application of the developmental theories of Jean Piaget. Chapter Eight challenges the work of Melanie Klein on factual and contextual grounds, offering an alternative framework for analysis through a survey of the historical and cultural implications of psychoanalysis in the 1920s. It draws on sources including Shelley Turkle's *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud's French Revolution* and Jean-Pierre Mordier's *Les débuts de la psychanalyse en France, 1895-1926*, together with literary perspectives on psychoanalysis presented in the early 1920s by Louis Cazamian and Albert Thibaudet. The discussion concludes by offering a Jungian, rather than Freudian, approach to psychoanalytic interpretation, supplementing Jung's writings with Frieda Fordham's *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology* and various psychoanalytical dictionaries.

Colette's autobiographical writings were indispensable for Chapters Four and Eight, and her poignant descriptions of French civilian life during the First World War underlie the discussion of Chapter Seven. Herbert Lottman (*Colette: A Life*), Margaret Crosland ('Colette and Ravel: The Enchantress and the Illusionist') and Maurice Bouvier-Ajam ('Ravel et Colette') have all explored the collaboration between Ravel and Colette from a primarily literary perspective, while Arbie Orenstein (*L'Enfant et*

*les sortilèges: correspondance inédite de Ravel et Colette*'), Richard Langham Smith ('Ravel's operatic spectacles') and Marcel Marnat (*Maurice Ravel*) have done the musicological equivalent. Questions remain, however, concerning the gestational history of the libretto and the process and degree of collaboration between Ravel and Colette. Chapter Four explores this in some detail, presenting new analysis of Ravel's musical manipulation of the libretto, supplemented by an exploration of the creation and use of language in Ravel's own poetry and Colette's other writings, in ways that offer the foundation for an alternative approach to the collaboration.

The broad range of subject matter covered in this thesis necessarily implies that one of its key functions is to synthesise musical history and analysis with concepts drawn from social and political history, literature and the visual arts. The new musical insights presented here are thus underpinned by a firm cultural context.

## Chapter One

# Imagery and imagination: Historical and musical cultures of childhood (1)

Si les hommes arrivés à la maturité ont  
tant de peine à retrouver le moindre souvenir de leur enfance,  
c'est peut-être tout bonnement que leur bêtise actuelle  
n'est plus capable de comprendre leur génie passé.<sup>1</sup>

Abel Hermant

### 1.1 Introduction

No human condition is invested with richer or more varied perceptions, ideals and emotions than childhood. It is the sole human experience that is at once inescapably universal and utterly individual: we were all children, but we each lived that childhood differently.

Childhood has a particularly pervasive influence upon the creative process. As Peter Ackroyd put it in his biography of Shakespeare:

If there is one aspect of a writer's life that cannot be concealed, it is childhood. It arises unbidden and unannounced in a hundred different contexts. It cannot be denied or misrepresented without severe psychic disturbance on the surface of the writing. It is the very source of the writing itself and must necessarily remain undefiled.<sup>2</sup>

Maurice Ravel's output is a product of a middle-class childhood and youth experienced in Paris in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His compositions most directly linked to childhood are informed by his perceptions and memories and by his adult interactions with children, as well as by particular musical traditions and idioms.

Writing about childhood – even scholarly writing – is a necessarily subjective process. As Ludmilla Jordanova argues:

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<sup>1</sup> 'If men who have reached maturity have so much trouble in recalling the least memory of their childhood, it is perhaps quite simply that their present stupidity is no longer capable of understanding their former genius.' Abel Hermant, *Confessions*, quoted in Rosemary Lloyd, *The Land of Lost Content: Children and Childhood in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005), p. 43.



Childhood is a state that historians have themselves experienced [and] they are, without exception, directly personally implicated in their scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

Since a degree of subjectivity therefore seems inescapable, I acknowledge that my own late twentieth century, middle-class Australian upbringing has informed my perception of that other childhood and that musical output, half a world and more than a century distant.

The French words for children and childhood, *enfant* and *enfance*, like the English *infant*, derive from the Latin *infans*, meaning literally ‘one who is incapable of speech’.<sup>4</sup> Children cannot contextualise, explore or define the state of childhood, which is a philosophical and essentially adult entity, founded in observation and memory. Thus, the terms *children* and *childhood* represent two quite distinct concepts and fields of research. A child is a physical being, and the history of children can be defined in socio-economic terms, by indicators such as participation in education and the workforce, and rates of disease and mortality. Childhood, however, is a set of adult constructions and beliefs; the history of childhood can be viewed as the history of those changing constructions. Encompassing philosophies of family, community, art and culture, the history of childhood is a history, not of experience, but of perception.

## 1.2 Perceptions and philosophies of childhood

Across the centuries, constructions of childhood have been shaped and defined by a series of writers, philosophers and doctrinaires. The Augustinian view of original sin held that children are in need of redemption from the moment of their birth, that ever since Eve ate the apple they have been born corrupt into a corrupted world. Hugh Cunningham cites as typical of this view a German sermon of the 1520s that declared:

Just as a cat craves mice, a fox chickens and a wolf cub sheep, so infant humans are inclined in their hearts to adultery, fornication, impure desires, lewdness, idol worship, belief in magic, hostility, quarrelling, passion, anger, strife, dissension, factiousness, hatred, murder, drunkenness, gluttony and more.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova ‘New Worlds for Children in the Eighteenth Century: Problems of Historical Explanation’, *History of the Human Sciences* 3:1 (1990), p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Rey and Danièle Morvain (eds.), *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (Paris: Robert, 1995), p. 690.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (New York: Longman, 1995), p. 47.

The primary duty of parenthood, therefore, was to ensure the child's eternal salvation, through the forceful inculcation of piety, tractability and filial respect. However, in 1693 John Locke, whose post-Cromwellian England was equally stern in its approach to child-rearing, set against the doctrine of original sin the concept of the *tabula rasa*, or 'blank slate'. Locke's treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* contended that we are born with no innate ideas, conceptions or predispositions to good or ill: the adult self is instead formed entirely through experience and education. Locke advocated that children should be encouraged to develop healthy bodies and virtuous characters through appropriate and comprehensive education. Despite his own Protestant faith, Locke's views owed much to the humanism of the Florentine Renaissance and particularly to the writings of Erasmus who, in the same decade as the sermon quoted above, compiled a series of writings on education and child-raising. Erasmus too stressed the importance of education in the formation of character, emphasised the need for a balance between work and play, and, in an analogy close to Locke's *tabula rasa*, likened the child to wax, which can be moulded when soft.<sup>6</sup>

*Some Thoughts Concerning Education* both foreshadowed and influenced the writings of the Enlightenment philosophers Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who promoted the idea that childhood was not a state in need of correction, but one to be nourished, protected and celebrated. Rousseau's *Émile* (1762), part child-rearing manual and part novel, has been labelled as 'the most significant work on education after Plato's *Republic*'.<sup>7</sup> Priscilla Robertson writes:

...for the first time in history, [Rousseau] made a large group of people believe that childhood was worth the attention of intelligent adults, encouraging an interest in the process of growing up rather than just the product.<sup>8</sup>

While Rousseau agreed with Locke that children are born without original sin, he did not accept the concept of the *tabula rasa*: he suggested instead that children were born intrinsically good, and that their goodness would develop naturally if they were raised learning equally from books and the natural world.<sup>9</sup> Rousseau advocated an approach to child-rearing that was not only 'enlightened' but recognisably modern. His campaign

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<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society*, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Michele Erina Doyle and Mark K. Smith, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau on education', *the encyclopaedia of informal education* (1997), <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-rous.htm> (accessed 8 October, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Priscilla Robertson, 'Home as a Nest: Middle Class Childhood in Nineteenth Century Europe', in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: Harper, 1975), p. 407.

<sup>9</sup> Robertson, 'Home as a Nest', p. 421.

for mothers to breastfeed their children in order to improve the health of the child and to foster familial intimacy and tenderness, for example, proved to be one of the major stimuli in the wholesale abandonment of wet-nursing in France across the century following the publication of *Émile*. The immense social and cultural impact of *Émile* was also felt across the Channel: Caroline Fox, wife of Henry Fox (later the first Baron Holland) and mother of Charles James Fox, wrote to her sister Emily in 1762 that ‘dear little Harry [her second son] is a pleasant child to have here; he really works very hard all day out of doors, which is very wholesome and quite according to Monsr. Rousseau’s system’.<sup>10</sup>

Rousseau’s educational ideology was further developed in the early nineteenth century by Charles Fourier, whose *Théorie de l’Unité Universelle*, first published in 1822, offered guidelines for the education and role of children in his utopian society. Fourier suggested that children’s natural propensity to ‘busyness’ fitted them to early engagement in the work of the community. His work reveals an acute understanding of developmental psychology that foreshadows the work of Jean Piaget.<sup>11</sup>

Fourier aside, many of the philosophers of the nineteenth century turned their attention away from the practicalities of child-raising, focusing instead on the symbolism of the child and childhood, while also enshrining the idea of childhood as a precious and, significantly, irretrievable stage of life. This rapid development of a sentimentalised, idealised viewpoint also owes much to Rousseau, whose *Émile* contained the first known nostalgic writing about childhood<sup>12</sup>:

Love childhood, indulge its sports, its pleasures, its delightful instincts. Who has not sometimes regretted that age when laughter was ever on the lips and the heart was ever at peace? Why rob these innocents of the joys which pass so quickly, of that precious

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<sup>10</sup> Stella Tillyard, *Aristocrats: Caroline, Emily, Louisa and Sarah Lennox, 1740-1832* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), pp. 239. Four years later, Emily (Duchess of Leinster) established a school on the coast some way from her family estate near Dublin, where her many children could learn and live out of doors, according to Rousseau’s dictum. She even offered Rousseau – who had just fled Paris – employment as their tutor, but he declined. (Tillyard, *Aristocrats*, pp. 244-5.)

<sup>11</sup> Amongst other things, Fourier identified what he termed the five ‘dominant characteristics’ of young children as (1) *Rummaging* (the inclination to handle and examine everything), (2) *Industrial commotion* (a taste for noisy occupations), (3) *Aping* (the desire to imitate), (4) *Industrial miniature* (‘a taste for miniature workshops’), and (5) *Progressive attraction* of the weak towards the strong. (Charles Fourier, *Théorie de l’unité universelle* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1838), reproduced in Albert Fried and Ronald Sanders (eds), *Socialist Thought: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1964), and available online, ‘Charles Fourier, 1772-1837: Selections from his writings’, ed. Stephen Kreis, *The History Guide: Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History* (13 May 2004),

<http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/fourier.html> (accessed 8 March 2008).)

<sup>12</sup> According to Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society*, p. 66.

gift which they cannot abuse? Why fill with bitterness the fleeting days of early childhood, days which will no more return for them than for you?<sup>13</sup>

Far from St Augustine's doctrine of original sin, writers and philosophers now imagined and wrote longingly of childhood as the Garden of Eden, 'before the fall': adulthood represented the snake and the apple and the banishment from that garden. Amongst the writers who used such analogies directly were Jean Paul Richter (whose *Levana* (1807) was the first major treatise on education post-Rousseau)<sup>14</sup> and E.T.A. Hoffmann, who wrote in *Beethovens Instrumentalmusik*:

Haydn's compositions are dominated by a feeling of childlike optimism. His symphonies lead us through endless, green forest-glades, through a motley throng of happy people. Youths and girls sweep past dancing the round; laughing children, lying in wait behind trees and rose-bushes, teasingly throw flowers at each other. A world of love, of bliss, of eternal youth, as though before the Fall...<sup>15</sup>

Similar philosophies were expressed by Johann Herder, Justus Thibaut, Novalis [Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg] and Wilhelm Wackenroder, who all wrote on childhood and education in a manner that combined Enlightenment ideals of equality and individualism with a particularly German Romantic brand of nostalgia. As Georges Starobinski notes, these writers took childhood extremely seriously:

...investing it with the characteristics of the 'ideal' and with the highest symbolic significance, to the point of comprising within that symbolism all their aesthetic conceptions of art and the artist of genius.<sup>16</sup>

Thibaut recalled Christ's words 'Let the little children come to me; the kingdom of God belongs to such as these', saying that 'in [children] we find all that is most noble in the human spirit, the complete spontaneity, integrity and good faith'.<sup>17</sup> Herder meanwhile declared in his preface to *Alte Volkslieder* (1774) that 'in its early years, the human soul is also the soul of the people'.<sup>18</sup> Herder perceived the characteristics of simplicity, truthfulness and fantasy as common to both the *volksgeist* and the child.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society*, pp. 66-7.

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of Jean Paul's writings on childhood, see Joel D. Black, 'Levana: Levitation in Jean Paul and Thomas de Quincey', *Comparative Literature* 32:1 (Winter, 1980), pp. 42-62, and Dorothea Berger, *Jean Paul Friedrich Richter* (New York: Twayne, 1972).

<sup>15</sup> E.T.A. Hoffmann, 'Beethoven's Instrumental Music', in David Charlton (ed.), *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: 'Kreisleriana', 'The Poet and the Composer'*, *Musical Criticism*, trans. Martyn Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Starobinski, 'Les Kinderscenen op. 15 de Schumann: Composantes litteraires et biographiques d'une genèse', *Revue de musicologie* 88:2 (2002), p. 364.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Starobinski, 'Brahms et la nostalgie de l'enfance', p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Starobinski, 'Brahms et la nostalgie de l'enfance', p. 146.

This projection of the child onto the ‘spirit of the people’ reflects a very Romantic conflation of self and nationhood. Georges Starobinski has outlined the importance of these interactions in the music of Johannes Brahms, whose most important ‘childhood’ work was a collection of children’s folk-song settings (*Volks-Kinderlieder*, 1857-8), dedicated to the Schumann children.<sup>19</sup>

A century after the publication of *Émile*, Charles Nodier would assert, ‘How happy children are, and how pitiable are adults when they no longer have sufficient wisdom to become children again’.<sup>20</sup> His words foreshadow those of Abel Hermant (quoted as the epigraph to this chapter), and both passages reflect a perception of childhood that goes beyond the purely nostalgic. The idea that childhood was not just remembered happiness but the source of adult creativity and inspiration was one that had particular currency for writers, and also touched many musicians. Marcel Proust spent his adult life searching for the ‘times lost’ that defined his creative self, and Charles Baudelaire encapsulated a popular perception when he wrote, ‘Genius is no more than childhood recovered at will...’<sup>21</sup>

In the twentieth century, constructions of childhood became central to the new science and philosophy of psychoanalysis. For Freud, understanding one’s childhood self, with its attendant memories, reactions, repressions and traumas, represented a pathway to adult wholeness and healing. For all its revolutionary implications, Freudian thought was firmly located in the evolving history of childhood. Locke’s emphasis on the role of childhood in shaping the adult being, Rousseau’s nostalgia, Baudelaire’s source of inspiration and Proust’s intensity of sensation and memory: all these echo in Freud’s conception of the child.

### **1.3 Scenes from a (German) childhood: the beginning of a tradition**

The core thesis of Philippe Ariès’ seminal study *L’Enfance et la vie familiale sous l’ancien régime* was that the Western European perception of childhood as a distinct stage of life, with associated and particular experiences and rights, was effectively a

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<sup>19</sup> Starobinski, ‘Brahms et la nostalgie de l’enfance’, p. 146. A similar trait can also be traced in Gerard Nerval’s *Sylvie*, in which, as Lloyd notes, ‘Nerval uses his depiction of childhood songs and dances to suggest the continuing existence of what he considers most profoundly French...’ (Lloyd, *The Land of Lost Content*, p. 74.)

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Lloyd, *The Land of Lost Content*, p. 25

<sup>21</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Le peintre de la vie moderne’, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Y.-G. le Dantec and Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 1159.

creation of a post-1789 society. If Ariès' theses have been subjected to widespread challenge and debate across the half-century since their publication<sup>22</sup>, the 'invention of childhood' in Western art music is inarguably a nineteenth century phenomenon. In his study of Gabriel Fauré, Émile Vuillermoz wrote of the *Dolly* suite:

The inspiring subject, whose unusual character should have endeared itself to composers of all times, is of relatively recent vintage. This tenderness before a cradle dates from [the age of] Romantic sentimentality. The classicists, and for sterner reasons, the primitives ignored it. [...] The reign of the infant king, in art as well as in society, doesn't predate 1830.<sup>23</sup>

A foreshadowing of this *règne de l'enfant roi* came from François Couperin, who included in his *Septième ordre de pièces de clavecin* (1716-1717) a set of four short movements collectively entitled *Les Petits Ages*. Spanning infancy, childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, these pieces are one of the rare musical depictions of childhood by a major composer before 1800. Children did, however, inspire an important musical genre: the lullaby, or cradle song (*Wiegenlied, berceuse*).<sup>24</sup> Characterised by their lulling, repetitive figurations, cradle songs echoed in medieval carols and some eighteenth century choral music<sup>25</sup>, before finding their way decisively into art music in the nineteenth century. Chopin and Liszt both composed substantial *berceuses* for piano, Brahms wrote two *Wiegenlieder* to commemorate the birth of children of friends, and in 1922 Maurice Ravel would compose a *Berceuse sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré*, which he dedicated to the newborn Claude Roland-Manuel.<sup>26</sup> Ravel's 1905 song *Noël des jouets* also has the character of a *berceuse*, with its gentle compound metre and restfully descending accompaniment figurations. The song's Christmas setting places it in the more specific tradition of the Nativity *berceuse* (a

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society* (Introduction and Chapter 1), Lloyd deMause, *The History of Childhood* (Introduction) and Linda Clark, 'France', in *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, ed. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner (Westport: Greenwood, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, *Gabriel Fauré*, trans. Kenneth Schapin (New York: Da Capo, 1983), p. 114.

<sup>24</sup> Starobinski, 'Brahms et la nostalgie de l'enfance', p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> James Porter, 'Lullaby', *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, www.grovemusic.com (6 January 2008).

<sup>26</sup> The birth of Claude Roland-Manuel, the child of Ravel's pupil, biographer and friend, was of particular emotional significance, since the Roland-Manuels' first child had been born dead nearly two years earlier. Ravel wrote to his friends on this occasion, 'I deeply sympathise with you, because of the affection I have for you both, and for children too – despite my own negligence in this department.' (Letter in the Archives Roland-Manuel, *Lettres autographes et manuscrits, correspondances de Maurice Ravel* (Catalogue, Exposition and sale, 24 March 2000; Paris: Thierry Bodin, 2000), p. 38.) Despite his 'negligence', Ravel was an experienced performer of lullabies: on his visits to his friend Jane Courteault (née Gaudin) in 1913-14 he would play her infant daughter Annie to sleep. (Étienne Rousseau-Plotto, *Ravel: portraits basques* (Anglet: Atlantica-Séguier, 2004), p. 53.)

genre which includes the *Coventry Carol*, the central passage of Chopin's first Scherzo, based on a traditional Polish carol, and Brahms' *Geistliches-Wiegenlied* of 1863-4); Stuckenschmidt has observed that the opening piano motif suggests an inversion of the carol *Silent Night*, as demonstrated in Example 1.1.<sup>27</sup>

**Example 1.1** *Noël des jouets*, bars 1-4

*Noël des jouets*, however, replaces the traditional figures of the Nativity scene with enamelled angels suspended by brass wires, mechanical animals and a Child made of painted sugar. In this respect it gestures towards a more modern image of childhood which will be discussed in Chapter Two.

As Vuillermoz suggests, the tradition of depicting childhood in European art music really began with Robert Schumann, whose 1838 piano cycle *Kinderscenen* [*Scenes from childhood*] was ‘the first significant piece of instrumental music inspired by impressions of childhood’.<sup>28</sup> Precisely thirty years later, Modest Musorgsky began work on his song cycle *Detskaya* [*The Nursery*]. The first completed version of *The Nursery*, comprising five songs composed between April 1868 and December 1870, was published and first performed in 1872. Two more songs, ‘On the Hobbyhorse’ and ‘The Cat “Sailor”’ were completed in September 1872 and published as *At the Dacha*, before being incorporated into re-editions of *The Nursery*. The songs were the first to take on the voice and perspective of the child, passing through different moods and emotions with characteristically youthful rapidity.

<sup>27</sup> H-H Stuckenschmidt, *Ravel: Variations sur l'homme et l'oeuvre*, trans. Pierre Landy (Paris: Éditions J.-C. Lattès, 1981), p. 72.

<sup>28</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, *Gabriel Fauré*, p. 114.

*The Nursery* and *Kinderscenen* are the most important musical depictions of nineteenth-century childhood to emerge before the French *enfantines* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They represent the two genres most closely associated with such depictions (the short, focused and intimate mediums of song and illustrative piano miniatures) and they are the two works alongside which all other musical *enfantines* would be juxtaposed until well into the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup>

*Kinderscenen* is inextricably bound to the Romantic aesthetic of childhood, not least through Schumann's well-documented associations with the philosophers of his time. Its thirteen movements present a view of childhood that, as Daverio puts it, achieves a delicate balance between 'art, a product of the grown-up world, and artlessness, the province of childhood'.<sup>30</sup> Georges Starobinski links this 'stylised naïveté' to a broader ideal (also with literary connections) of profundity of meaning and feeling achieved through simplicity and truthfulness of expression – a concept with particular relevance for Ravel, as Chapter Five explores.<sup>31</sup>

Manuel Rosenthal noted Ravel's special admiration for 'Träumerei', the seventh movement of *Kinderscenen*, claiming it as the sort of piece that 'all composers dream of writing', perfect in its simplicity and profoundly touching.<sup>32</sup> In its piano writing, *Mère l'Oye* has something of the simplicity of expression that characterises *Kinderscenen*, while its uncharacteristically long and lyrical melodies recall Ravel's own praise for Schumann's 'perpetual flow of melody'.<sup>33</sup> The movements of *Kinderscenen* have frequently been termed song-like, not just for the lyrical character of their melodies but also for their self-contained, almost strophic forms, which create

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<sup>29</sup> Georges Bizet's *Jeux d'enfants*, composed in 1871 and published in 1872, just antedates this critical duopoly. Nevertheless, as Chapter 2 explores, the suite has something of both *Kinderscenen* and *The Nursery* (although Bizet probably never knew the latter work). Although Schumannesque in character, it is realised with an awareness of the physicality of childhood that can also be found in *The Nursery*, together with a very French succinctness and clarity.

<sup>30</sup> John Daverio, *Robert Schumann: Hero of a "New Poetic Age"* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1997), p. 166.

<sup>31</sup> Starobinski, 'Les *Kinderscenen* op. 15 de Schumann', pp. 362, 387-8.

<sup>32</sup> Marnat (ed.), *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>33</sup> Marnat (ed.), *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal*, p. 11. Rosenthal quotes Ravel as a lifelong admirer of Schumann's piano music (more so than his orchestral works), who declared that 'Schumann invented much of our pianistic writing' (p. 8). Ravel won a first prize in his preparatory class at the Conservatoire with his performance of Schumann's G minor Sonata and in succeeding years, his repertoire included the Op. 17 *Fantaisie* and the *Andante and Variations for Two Pianos*, which he performed with his teacher Henry Ghys in February 1892 (Orenstein, *Ravel, man and musician*, pp. 14-5). More than twenty years later Ravel would orchestrate Schumann's *Carnival* on a commission by Nijinsky.



character through the repetition, rather than development, of musical material. Their effect is one of absorption and focus or, as W. Wright Roberts wrote of *Kinderscenen*, ‘the child’s wholeheartedness of mood’.<sup>34</sup>

Schumann’s friends, like Ravel’s, frequently commented on his ‘childlikeness’.<sup>35</sup> Daverio writes that Clara Wieck Schumann was particularly able to stimulate or reawaken this quality in her husband.<sup>36</sup> For a composer saturated in the writings of Jean Paul and his disciples, childlikeness was inextricably connected with the recovery of lost innocence. If *Kinderscenen*, composed shortly before Schumann’s marriage in 1838, is in part a loving reminiscence of Clara’s own childhood (the two first met when Clara was nine years old), it reflects even more directly the qualities with which Schumann invested his adult image of Clara. As Starobinski writes:

Clara possessed the purity that, in the aesthetics of Hoffmann, was a moral *a priori* for every great creation. Schumann felt unworthy of her and aimed to return with her help to the lost paradise of innocence.<sup>37</sup>

*Kinderscenen* also looks forward to the children who were to come for the Schumanns: as Robert wrote to Clara, ‘What I shyly poeticised [in *Kinderscenen*] perhaps reality will bring us’.<sup>38</sup> The amalgam of memory and expectation that characterises *Kinderscenen* was itself foreshadowed in a letter Schumann wrote to his mother upon leaving home aged 18 (and subsequently reworked into his diary):

All the bells of past childhood, the present, and the future flow into *one* chord – the shining future would like *to drive out* the past, and so tender, undefined feelings are *gently* fighting in our breast...<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> W. Wright Roberts, ‘Child Studies in Music’, *Music and Letters* 9:1 (January 1928), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Frederick Jensen, *Schumann* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2001), p. 338

<sup>36</sup> Daverio, *Robert Schumann*, p. 166.

<sup>37</sup> Starobinski, ‘Les *Kinderscenen* op. 15 de Schumann’, p. 388. The perceptive Clara was aware that Schumann’s idealised image of her as an innocent child had its pitfalls: she wrote to him, ‘No Robert: If you call me a child, that has a kindly ring: but be careful, if you think of me as a child, then I will get up and tell you, ‘You’re wrong!’ (Quoted in Starobinski, ‘Les *Kinderscenen* op. 15 de Schumann’, p. 382.)

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Timothy Taylor, ‘Aesthetic and cultural issues in Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*’, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 21:2 (1990), p. 167.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Berthold Hoeckner, ‘Schumann and Romantic Distance’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50:1 (Spring 1997), p. 83. Schumann’s association of bell-sounds and childhood evocations directly recalls a passage from Jean Paul’s *Flegeljahre*, the novel Schumann most admired and which he first read around this time:

Suddenly an old, familiar, but wonderful chiming of the bells at midday emanated from the distance, an old sounding as from the starry morning of his dark childhood; [...] full of yearning he thought of his distant parents, the still-life of his childhood – and the gentle Wina.

(Quoted in Hoeckner, ‘Schumann and Romantic Distance’, p. 62. Hoeckner does not note the correspondence drawn here between the two passages.)

Schumann's *Album für die Jugend*, composed a decade after *Kinderszenen*, was the first piano work by a major composer that was simultaneously pedagogical and pictorial in conception. Written both for children to play (unlike *Kinderszenen*) and about childhood, the *Album* taught pianistic skills to Schumann's own children whilst depicting their games and preoccupations. The *Album* is a musical equivalent of the 'Little Book of Memories for our Children' that Schumann began in February 1846.<sup>40</sup> Both were created to be permanent records of the young Schumanns' childhoods, and indeed Robert hoped that these musical and written records would *define* their recollections of their childhoods. *Album für die Jugend* was written 'for children' as a reflection of a current reality rather than an imagined past: many of its movements are based around games Schumann played with his children (as Jensen observes, he was 'interested and involved in [their] lives to a far greater extent than was normal amongst his contemporaries'<sup>41</sup>); others, like the little canon and fugue, seem a preliminary insight into the processes of composition ('this is what Daddy does at work').<sup>42</sup>

As W. Wright Roberts notes, when Eugénie Schumann enquired of her mother what the pieces in the *Album* headed only by asterisks depicted, Clara replied, 'he may have meant the thoughts of parents about their children'.<sup>43</sup> Even in the *Album für die Jugend*, therefore, we may detect the presence of the adult observer who is so clearly intuited in *Kinderszenen*. Schumann himself wrote that *Kinderszenen* constituted 'reflections of an adult for adults'.<sup>44</sup> The final movement, 'Der Dichter spricht' ['The poet speaks'] retrospectively confirms what is easily intuited across the cycle: 'the [adult] poet' is present throughout, watching, commenting, imagining and remembering.

The title 'Der Dichter spricht' has two significant implications for the present thesis, which Timothy Taylor touches on in his article 'Aesthetic and cultural issues in Schumann's *Kinderszenen*'. Firstly, by calling the movement 'The *poet* speaks' (rather than 'the composer', or 'the artist', or even 'the watcher'), Schumann invokes the idea of 'speaking music – music as language', as Taylor puts it.<sup>45</sup> This concept of music as speech (or speech as music) and musical storytelling echoes in Musorgsky's *The*

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<sup>40</sup> Jensen, *Schumann*, p. 336.

<sup>41</sup> Jensen, *Schumann*, p. 336.

<sup>42</sup> Jensen, *Schumann*, p. 340.

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, 'Child Studies in Music I', p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Daverio, *Robert Schumann*, p. 166.

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, 'Aesthetic and cultural issues in Schumann's *Kinderszenen*', p. 161.

*Nursery*, and is central to Ravel's musical depictions of childhood. Just as Roberts alludes to Schumann's 'peculiar type of versified melody, with its indefinable air of storytelling'<sup>46</sup>, so we might describe the stories unfolded across the long melodies of *Ma mère l'Oye*. Secondly, through the title of 'Der Dichter spricht', Schumann consciously placed himself within his work as both creator and subject, in a way that earlier composers did not. *Kinderscenen* thus set a precedent for both the creation and the analysis of programmatic music: it is thanks, in part, to Schumann that we may now search for the presence of Musorgsky in *The Nursery*, Fauré in *Dolly*, Debussy in *Children's Corner* and Ravel in *Ma mère l'Oye*.

#### 1.4 Scenes from a (Russian) childhood

After 1872 *Kinderscenen* would be united with Musorgsky's *The Nursery* as reference points for subsequent compositions about children and childhood. When César Cui reviewed *The Nursery* upon its publication in 1872, however, he had only one work with which to compare it:

The theme of *The Nursery* is as yet unprecedented; the idea has not been touched upon by anyone. Schumann wrote children's scenes, but the scenes are written for the piano and are without text or clearly defined program; all of them are permeated by Schumann's personality – we see Schumann's children through his eyes. Mr Musorgsky has done the opposite: the program is most definite; the children's personalities are amazingly defined; Musorgsky himself retires to the background and the children tell about themselves, each child revealing his own personality.<sup>47</sup>

This essential difference of perspective – Schumann's children, seen 'through his eyes' and Musorgsky's, 'telling about themselves' – was thus identified as soon as *The Nursery* appeared. The two works came to be seen as representative of subjective and objective, idealised and realistic musical portrayals of children and childhood, a dichotomy typified in the pair of articles by W. Wright Roberts that appeared in *Music and Letters* in 1928. These articles were probably the first extended study to examine multiple works on the basis of their approach to their common subject, children and childhood. Roberts took as his exemplars *Kinderscenen* and *The Nursery*, with the specific intent of identifying and discussing this opposition of childhoods real and imagined:

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<sup>46</sup> Roberts, 'Child Studies in Music I', p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> In Aleksandra Anatolevna Orlova, *Musorgsky's Days and Works: A Biography in Documents*, trans. and ed. Roy J. Guenther (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1983), pp. 277-8.

The child of these idealist composers [i.e. Schumann] lives in a sheltered world, built round him by the fond fancies and wishes of his elders. [Musorgsky] saw children, not from the vantage ground of the parent, but just as one section of a humanity which was to be loved, pitied, and understood.<sup>48</sup>

The guiding principle of *The Nursery* was a vivid and expressive naturalism, the portrayal of what Roberts termed ‘a *real* nursery’, rather than a nursery imagined or remembered. The child whose voice we hear is by turns inquisitive, demanding, excited, sulky, peaceful and hurt, their mood changing line by line and thought by thought – a technique that demands shifting metres, phrase lengths and patterns of accompaniment. Where Schumann captured the focus of individual moods, Musorgsky, nearly half a century before James Joyce, wrote perhaps the first musical stream of consciousness, a continuous flow of thoughts and emotions underpinned by a flickering, childlike intensity.

Unlike *Kinderscenen*, there is considerable humour in *The Nursery*: well-sung and acted performances can provoke audiences to frequent laughter. And if the listener can be instantly amused by the child’s gruesome delight in the idea of the bogeyman eating the bones of wicked children, the vividly pictorial sneeze, the pathetically sobbed ‘so there!’ that closes ‘In the corner’, and the melodramatic tumble from the hobby horse, one senses that laughter is never far from the child’s lips either. Roberts laments that ‘much of the song [...] about the cockchafer is laboured to repulsiveness; he might have been writing about Fafner’.<sup>49</sup> And yet that very childish exaggeration prompts a smile: the grumbling chromaticism that, like the beetle, flies up and smacks the child on the forehead, serves to halt the flood of words, making the child recognise and laugh at the absurdity of his tale.

On its first French performance in 1901, the critics, almost without exception, acclaimed *The Nursery* as the most successful attempt at a ‘realistic’ musical study of childhood<sup>50</sup>: Alfred Bruneau wrote of the cycle’s ‘pure truthfulness’, which he

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<sup>48</sup> Roberts, ‘Child Studies in Music II’, *Music and Letters* 9:2 (April 1928), pp. 152-3.

<sup>49</sup> Roberts, ‘Child Studies in Music II’, p. 155.

<sup>50</sup> Musorgsky’s excessive devotion to naturalism did offend one Parisian critic who, while praising the cycle’s vivid portraiture, criticised the very techniques that created that effect: Arthur Pougin castigated Musorgsky for the many ‘errors’ of rhythm and notation that characterise ‘With the nurse’ and the unsettling effect of the many changes of metre: ‘What rhythmic sense does he expect this to make?’ he asked. The severely academic Pougin argued that Musorgsky’s lack of formal musical education was a severe limitation he had never overcome, suggesting that his ‘considerable eccentricity’ was a result of his inability to transcribe his ideas effectively (Arthur Pougin, *Essai historique sur la musique en Russie* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1904), pp. 194, 197.)

described as ‘splendidly simple’.<sup>51</sup> Claude Debussy, reviewing *The Nursery* for *La revue blanche*, wrote:

The gestures, the delicately troubled soul of the child are captured with a kind of truthful intensity that is to be found nowhere else. The *Doll’s Lullaby* seems to have been divined word by word, thanks to this prodigious capacity to imagine and assimilate the fairy landscapes so special to a child’s mind.<sup>52</sup>

Ravel was probably present at this concert, one of a series in which Musorgsky’s songs were performed by Pierre d’Alheim and his Russian wife Marie Olénine, who championed the music of the Mighty Handful (and Musorgsky in particular) in Paris.<sup>53</sup> Upon d’Alheim’s death in 1922 Ravel wrote to Olénine:

The name of Pierre d’Alheim marks an important era in my life as a musician. I cannot forget the day, so long ago, when, with him, you came to reveal Musorgsky’s music to us.<sup>54</sup>

Musorgsky’s striking originality, bold harmonic colours, metric freedom and clear contours remained a lifelong source of inspiration for Ravel. Vladimir Jankélévitch drew direct connections between Musorgsky’s musical language and several of the works central to this thesis:

...more than any other composer Ravel enjoyed Musorgsky [...] he enjoyed the fresh, acidulated and astringent flavour of the consecutive seconds which bring those prickly, crumpling sounds to *The Nursery*. In *Noël des jouets*, the *Histoires naturelles*, the scene with Father Arithmetic in *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, we find again that minute precision of notation, this taste for detail, this capricious lack of continuity in the speech, this microscopic realism, in fact, which characterises the composer of genius who wrote *Pictures at an Exhibition*.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> In Christian Goubault, *La critique musicale dans la press française de 1870 à 1914* (Geneva and Paris: Editions Slatkine, 1994), p. 420.

<sup>52</sup> Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, François Lesure, ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 29.

<sup>53</sup> It was a time of burgeoning interest in Russian music, stimulated by the close political and cultural relations established through the newly signed Franco-Russian alliance. Pierre d’Alheim published a biographical study of Musorgsky in 1896, while Albert Soubiès published his *Musique russe et musique espagnole* in 1894 (reprinted in 1896) and followed it with a *Histoire de la musique en Russie* in 1898. Alfred Bruneau published *La musique en Russie* in 1902 and *Musiques de Russie et musiciens de France* the following year, and in 1904 Arthur Pougin put out his *Essai historique sur la musique en Russie*. Elaine Brody (Paris: *The Musical Kaleidoscope, 1870-1925* (New York: Braziller, 1987)) and André Schaeffner (‘Debussy et la musique russe’ in *Musique russe*, ed. Pierre Souvtchinsky (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1953) have detailed the ever-increasing French engagement with Russian musical culture across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

<sup>54</sup> In Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 221.

<sup>55</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Ravel*, trans. Margaret Crosland (Westport: Greenwood, 1959), pp. 17-8. Jann Pasler also deals with Ravel’s connections with Russian music and musicians: see ‘Stravinsky and the Apaches’, *The Musical Times* 123:1672 (January 1982), pp. 403-404, and ‘A Sociology of the Apaches:

Ravel certainly appears to have had a particular admiration for *The Nursery*: amongst the scores he copied for study purposes was at least one of the cycle's seven songs.<sup>56</sup>

Musorgsky wrote his own texts for *The Nursery*, and set his words with minute attention to the natural rhythms and inflections of childish speech. The petulant accents of 'In the Corner', the injured howl in 'On the hobby horse', the lulling repetitions of 'With the doll' and the excited flood of words in 'The Beetle' and 'The Cat "Sailor"' are striking examples of what Jankélévitch termed 'microscopic realism'.<sup>57</sup> In a letter to Lyudmila Shestakova in July 1868 (just after composing 'With *Nyanya*'), Musorgsky wrote:

This is what I would like: for my characters to speak onstage as living people speak, but in such a way that their essential nature and force of intonation, supported by an orchestra that forms a musical canvas for their speech, shall hit the target squarely. That is, my music must be the artistic reproduction of human speech in all its subtlest twistings; that is, the sounds of human speech, as the exterior manifestation of thought and feeling, must, without exaggeration or strain, become music...<sup>58</sup>

The second song of *The Nursery*, 'In the Corner', portrays the child in disgrace with his Nurse for upsetting the ink and tangling her wool. Sent to the corner, he whines and mutters to himself self-pityingly, lamenting his harsh punishment and protesting his innocence. Musorgsky's setting captures both the inflections and the directness of childish speech, together with the rapidly changing emotions that stimulate each utterance (Ex. 1.2).<sup>59</sup>

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"Sacred Battalion" for *Pelléas*' in *Berlioz and Debussy: Sources, contexts and legacies: Essays in honour of François Lesure*, ed. Barbara Kelly and Kerry Murphy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 157.

<sup>56</sup> Orenstein, *Ravel, man and musician*, p. 243. Ravel could have acquired a score of *The Nursery* in French translation as early as 1896, when a edition titled *Enfantines* appeared from Bessel, with French texts translated by Michel Delines. In the same year *Le Monde musical* published the seven songs with French texts by Hettange (under their individual titles rather than collectively as *Enfantines* or *Chambre d'enfants*) (F-Pn musique).

<sup>57</sup> Richard Taruskin suggested that Musorgsky's approach to text-setting was profoundly influenced by the writing of the German literary historian Gervinus, who wrote in 1868 that 'music must take speech as its model, and in particular, the aspect of speech that effects expression in real life: stress or accent'. (Taruskin, *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton UP, 1993), pp. 71-2, 77.)

<sup>58</sup> In Taruskin, *Musorgsky*, pp. 73-4.

<sup>59</sup> The translation shown in Example 8.1 carries Musorgsky's principles of naturalistic word-setting into a singable English text. The literal translation runs as follows:

'The kitten played around and spoiled your wool / And the needles all came out because of that / And Mishenka behaved himself / Mishenka was as good as gold / But Nanny is a bad old thing / And her nose is very dirty / Misha's hair is smooth and nicely brushed / Nanny's cap is never straight'.

Example 1.2 Musorgsky, 'In the Corner', bars 38-52.

Klu - bo - chek raz - mo - tal, kot - jon - o - chek, I pru - toch - ki raz - bro - sal, kot - jon - o - chek, A  
 I did - n't spoil your work, the kit - ten did, And I did - n't spill the ink, the kit - ten did, But

Mish en - 'ka byl paj 'in ka, Mish en - 'ka byl um - ni - ca. A Nja - nja zla - ja  
 Mish en - ka did no - thing wrong, Mish en - ka was ve - ry good. But Nan - na is a

sta - ra - ja, u nja - ni no - sik to za - pach - kan - nyj, Mish - a chis - ten - 'kij, pri -  
 cross old thing, and Nan - na's got a smudge u - pon her nose, Mish - a's clean and Mish - a's

che - san - nyj, A u nja - ni chep - chik na bo - ku.  
 hair is brushed, Nan - na's got her cap all an - y - how.

Musorgsky's contention that musical speech, faithfully transcribed, can reveal the speaker's inner emotions resonates in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, whose opening scene closely echoes the emotional content and text-setting principles of 'In the Corner' in particular. In his review of Ravel's opera, Louis Laloy wrote that *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* had 'a direct and penetratingly intense accent which up till then had only been achieved by Musorgsky in *The Nursery*'.<sup>60</sup>

Musorgsky's naturalistic approach to text-setting also shaped Ravel's 1906 *Histoires naturelles*, which he later described as 'preliminary studies' for his first opera *L'Heure espagnole*.<sup>61</sup> The affinity between the two song cycles was noted once again by Louis Laloy, who reviewed the première of the *Histoires naturelles*: '...all the spirit of Musorgsky's *The Nursery* is to be found there, but united with such surety of taste and such prodigious authority'.<sup>62</sup> Laloy suggested that the two cycles shared not just a philosophy of text-setting but a similar perspective and a childlike candour. He wrote that soprano Jane Bathori presented the *Histoires naturelles* with simplicity and directness, like 'a little girl looking at the beasts and laughing at their comical appearance or the antics they get up to, but feeling very fond of them just the same'.<sup>63</sup> Gerald Larner has similarly observed that the *Histoires naturelles* '[echo] something of Mussorgsky's *Nursery* songs in their naturalistic word setting and vivaciously detailed piano part'.<sup>64</sup> Performed on the same programme, the two cycles complement each other remarkably well. Both demand an alert expressivity and straightforward – never exaggerated – communication from the performers, while the busy charm of *The Nursery* sets off the more leisured satire of the *Histoires naturelles*.

Yet if *The Nursery*, in its musical language, can be termed the first 'realistic' musical portrayal of a child and a childhood, its conception and imagery encapsulate much of the Romantic mythology surrounding childhood in nineteenth-century Russia. While Russia lagged behind much of Western Europe in its 'discovery' of the nostalgic,

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<sup>60</sup> In Deborah Priest, *Louis Laloy (1874-1944) on Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 244.

<sup>61</sup> Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, p. 411 and Orenstein, *Ravel, man and musician*, p. 163.

<sup>62</sup> In Priest, *Louis Laloy on Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky*, p. 248. The original review appeared in *Le Mercure musical* (15 February 1907) pp. 155-7.

<sup>63</sup> In Priest, *Louis Laloy on Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky*, p. 248. Ravel dedicated 'Le paon' to Bathori and 'Le martin-pêcheur' to her husband Émile Engel.

<sup>64</sup> Gerald Larner, *Maurice Ravel* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 95.



idealised, even sanctified view of children and childhood that proliferated during the first half of the nineteenth century, once it caught up it did so with a vengeance. As Orlando Figes writes:

No other culture has been so sentimental or quite so obsessed about childhood. Where else can one find so many memoirs where the first few years of the writer's life were given so much space? Herzen's, Nabokov's and Prokofiev's – all of them inclined to linger far too long in the nursery of their memory. The essence of this cult was a hypertrophied sense of loss – loss of the peasant, child-like Russia contained in fairy tales. Little wonder, then, that the cultural élites became so fixated on folklore – for it took them back to their happy childhoods, to the days when they had listened to their nannies' tales on woodland walks and the nights when they had been sung off to sleep with lullabies. Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* (1852-7), Aksakov's *Childhood Years* (1856), Herzen's *Past and Thoughts* (1852-68), Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1947) – this is the canon of a literary cult that reinvented childhood as a blissful and enchanted realm [...] They all summoned up a legendary world, [...] mixing myth and memory, as if they were not content to recollect their childhood, but felt a deeper need to retrieve it, even if that meant reinventing it.<sup>65</sup>

And reinvent it they did. More than any other nation the Russians mythologised their childhoods, investing them with a particular (and remarkably standardised) set of images and events in order to define them as 'happy' and, crucially, 'Russian'. Andrew Wachtel suggested that Tolstoy's semi-autobiographical trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* was central to this newly created idea of the Russian childhood:

Members of the Russian gentry class perceived Tolstoy's idyllic picture of life on a country estate, of the child's family and surroundings, and of the child himself not as the description of an individual life but as the paradigmatic Russian childhood.<sup>66</sup>

The similarity between certain passages of *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* and the nostalgia expressed in Rousseau's *Émile* (as quoted in section 1.2 above) is striking:

Happy, happy, irrecoverable days of childhood! How can one fail to love and cherish its memories? Those memories refresh and elevate my soul and are the source of my greatest delight.<sup>67</sup>

Upper-class Russians spent their childhoods almost entirely in the care of wet-nurses and nannies (*nyanyas*). Most had little to do with their parents at all: the more strictly autobiographical of nineteenth century memoirs are littered with such phrases as 'Our lives were entirely separate...', 'he did not see his parents for months on end....',

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<sup>65</sup> Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 129.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford UP, 1930), p. 58.

‘Mother was extremely kind but we hardly ever saw her’, ‘we had to address them in French with the formal *vous*’.<sup>68</sup> The physical and emotional separation that typically existed between upper-class Russian children and parents made the figure of the peasant nanny (*nyanya*) central to the mythology of childhood.<sup>69</sup> It was she who oversaw the early development of the child, the first steps and the first words – Russian words, for while French was the language of the schoolroom and parlour, Russian was the tongue of the nursery. It was the *nyanya* who cared for children when they were ill and to whom they turned when hurt or frightened. She was the source of comfort and love, of wisdom and of chastisement. She oversaw the everyday life of the child, bathing and dressing, providing instruction in the natural, social and sacred worlds and in the folklore and song that was their heritage. The crucial role of Musorgsky’s *nyanya* in forming his musical identity is revealed in an autobiographical sketch from 1880: Musorgsky wrote of the ‘old Russian tales’ told by his nurse that kept him awake at night and ‘bound him for life to the spirit and music of Old Russia’.<sup>70</sup>

Although the *nyanya* speaks in only two of the original five songs in Musorgsky’s *Nursery*, her person pervades all five in a way that is unmistakably similar to the attitude of Tolstoy and other nineteenth-century memoirists. In ‘With *Nyanya*’ she is the storyteller, the link to the Old Russia, while ‘Doll’s Lullaby’ sees the child recreating for her doll the lullabies and fairytales with which she herself is surely sung to sleep by her *nyanya*. ‘In the corner’ presents the *nyanya* as the source of discipline and in ‘The beetle’ she is looked to for comfort and instruction about the natural world. In ‘Prayer at bedtime’ she is the keeper of the faith, teaching her charge to pray in keeping with the reverence and ritual of the Old Religion.

The separate origin of the final two songs is demonstrated by the guiding presence of the mother instead of the nurse, comforting the child when he (or she) falls from the rocking horse, and when he (or she) is hurt in attempting to protect the canary from the stalking cat:

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<sup>68</sup> In Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, pp. 120-1.

<sup>69</sup> Traditions of wet-nursing and *nyanyas* persisted much longer in semi-feudal Russia than in France. Amongst those who shared long and close relationships with their *nyanyas* were Pushkin, Musorgsky and Diaghilev (the last of whom was painted with his ‘*Nyanya Dunia*’ in a famous portrait by Léon Bakst). (Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, p. 83.)

<sup>70</sup> Michel Calvocoressi, ‘Musorgsky’s Youth: In the Light of the Latest Information’, *The Musical Quarterly*, 20:1 (1934), p. 2, and Bruce Lincoln, *Between Heaven and Hell: The Story of A Thousand Years of Artistic Life in Russia* (New York: Viking, 1998), pp. 201-2.

My darling, what's the matter? You mustn't cry now, it will soon be better, my love! Come, stand up properly: there, my child, look isn't that lovely! Can you see? In the bushes on the left! Oh, what a wonderful little bird! What wonderful plumage! See it? Now come! All right?

The words of this mother-figure recall many romanticised Russian memories of childhood, as typified in the following (rather empurpled) autobiographical sketch:

The sacred fire of fantasy lived in her soul [...] she enjoyed the love and trust of the young [...] she could sympathise with other peoples' sorrow like no one else [...] a feeling for beauty lay at the root of her soul. She was especially sensitive to the beauty of nature...<sup>71</sup>

In the light of the less fictionalised memoirs quoted above – and Figes observes that ‘there were few cultures in which the mother was as remote as she tended to be in the Russian noble family’<sup>72</sup> – such reminiscences reflect a need to propagate an image of childhood defined by a sense of ‘what *should* have been’.

While Musorgsky's cycle undoubtedly gains much effectiveness by vividly evoking the rhythms and cadences of the child's voice – in this it can certainly be labelled ‘realist’ – its stylised imagery of the mother, *nyanya* and nursery are almost Schumannesque in their idealised nostalgia. Richard Taruskin is one of the few to note this, in a pointed insight:

The voice that speaks from *The Nursery* is that of a pampered gentry brat. That, too, was a self-portrait, and a very nostalgic one.<sup>73</sup>

More than nostalgia and personal memory, however, *The Nursery*, like *Kinderscenen*, gestures towards the philosophical conceptions of childhood surrounding its creation. Figes' description in the passage quoted above of the ‘peasant, child-like Russia’, along with his emphasis on fairytales and folklore, reinforces the philosophies of Herder who made much of the connection between childhood and the *volksgeist*. This interaction was of particular importance in a Russia that spent much of the nineteenth century turning away from Western Europe in order to define a new national identity. Central to this burgeoning nationalism was a rediscovery of its folk heritage together with a new commitment to everyday use of the Russian language. If a return to speaking Russian was primarily an assertion of national identity, it also meant a

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<sup>71</sup> Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood*, p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, p. 120.

<sup>73</sup> Taruskin, *Musorgsky*, p. 385.

rediscovery of the ‘lost’ language of childhood with its associated heritage of folklore, fairytale and song. The child, in the popular imagination, thus became entwined with the very soul of Russia.

Folklore and religion, family relationships, an entrancing natural environment, the use of the Russian language and its meticulously realistic setting: all are recurring idylls and idioms in nineteenth-century Russian art, literature and music. By focussing and expressing them all through the child in *The Nursery*, Musorgsky placed his cycle in the nineteenth-century tradition of Romantic idealistic nationalism: the child is at once Musorgsky himself (in nostalgic memory) and a little ‘Russian soul’.

In *The Nursery*, then, the boundary between the real and the wished-for, or ideal, is as blurred as in *Kinderscenen*. Despite their differing focus, intent and narratives, they both demonstrate the key point of this chapter: that all adult depictions of childhood are necessarily subjective and second-hand.

## **1.5 Conclusion: Childhood observed, childhood remembered, childhood imagined**

If Ravel’s musical language owed something to both Schumann and Musorgsky, how did his conception of childhood relate to either of theirs? Roland-Manuel wrote that, for Ravel, ‘genius was *not* Baudelaire’s rediscovered childhood, but a childhood that was conserved, ennobled and communicated’.<sup>74</sup> While one could quibble with the second of Roland-Manuel’s three terms – the idea of ‘nobility’ sits uncomfortably with such a self-deprecating and pragmatic composer – the sense of childhood as real and present experience was undoubtedly one with which Ravel identified. We may sense an adult presence as storyteller in *Ma mère l’Oye* but the suite’s sense of active participation (and indeed communication) is quite distinct from Schumann’s ‘watching, commenting adult’.

The russophilia of Ravel’s age suggests a more natural affinity with Musorgsky’s musical language and portrayal of childhood. However, Ravel’s musical *enfantines* were arguably more personal than Musorgsky’s, less bound up with nationalistic sentiment and more directly connected with his own experiences of childhood and

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<sup>74</sup> In Nichols (ed.), *Ravel Remembered*, p. 192.

family life, his adult interactions with children and the *zeitgeist* of a time and place very different from Musorgsky's Russia.

No matter how determinedly objective our portrayals of childhood may try to be, individual experiences and perceptions of such an emotive subject will always stimulate an intrinsically personal response. Subjectivity, however, is one thing, sentimentality another – a vital distinction when considering the music and child-centred philosophies of the nineteenth century. W. Wright Roberts writes:

Schumann may have had as much love and reverence for childhood as had Moussorgsky. But of such insight, even with words to help him, he would have been incapable. Somehow, somewhere, if he had attempted such a song, *Gemüth* would have found him out. If only in the accompaniment, his own voice would have been heard, singing of his feelings, celebrating them in the German way.<sup>75</sup>

*Gemüth* (or *Gemütlichkeit*), is, by and large, as foreign a concept to the French imagination as the word is to the language. Ravel's intrinsic pragmatism, dry wit and lack of sentimentality were qualities that also characterised his era. As Chapter Two explores, the France of his childhood was focused on physical and emotional rebuilding after a long period of bloody upheaval. It was a time not for meditation but for creation.

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<sup>75</sup> Roberts, 'Child Studies in Music II', pp. 154-5.

## Chapter Two

### ‘Le règne de l’enfant’:

## Historical and musical cultures of childhood (2)

...puis elle ouvrit la porte d'une chambre où s'offrait  
un spectacle extraordinaire et vraiment féerique.  
Les murs ne se voyaient pas, tellement ils étaient revêtus de joujoux.  
Le plafond disparaissait sous une floraison de joujoux  
qui pendaient comme des stalactites merveilleuses.<sup>1</sup>

Charles Baudelaire

### 2.1 Introduction

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, France regained the impetus initiated by Rousseau, leading the way in musical, artistic and literary portrayals of children and childhood. Georges Bizet's set of piano duets entitled *Jeux d'enfants* [*Children's games*] was composed in 1871 and published, like Musorgsky's *The Nursery*, in 1872. *Jeux d'enfants* was followed by more duet collections: Fauré's *Dolly* (1894-1896), André Caplet's *Un tas de petites choses*<sup>2</sup> and Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye* (1910), together with the six volumes of Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht's *La Nursery* (1905-1911; they also appeared in 2-hand versions). *Enfantines* for solo piano on similar subjects came from Claude Debussy (*Children's Corner*, 1908) and Déodat de Séverac (*En vacances*, 1911; a second volume, begun in the same year, was never completed), together with a host of individual piano pieces and songs by the likes of Louis Aubert, Alfred Bruneau, Gabriel Grovlez, Xavier Leroux, Albéric Magnard, Jules Massenet, Gabriel Pierné, Francis Poulenc, Albert Roussel and Erik Satie.

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<sup>1</sup> '...then she opened the door of a room in which was revealed an extraordinary and truly magical sight. The walls were invisible, they were so adorned with toys. The ceiling disappeared beneath a fountain of toys that hung like marvellous stalactites.' Charles Baudelaire, 'Morale du joujou', *Œuvres complètes*, p. 581.

<sup>2</sup> The dating of this work is uncertain. It was the last work to be published before Caplet's untimely death in 1925, but some of its component movements were composed much earlier. See Roy Howat, 'Un tas de petites choses et de petits mystères pour quatre mains', in *André Caplet, compositeur et chef d'orchestre*, ed. Denis Herlin (Paris: Editions Symétrie, in press).

This body of work – all French, all composed during the Third Republic – comprises by far the most substantial contribution to the genre of musical depictions of childhood. Why is this so? What was it about France – Paris, specifically, since that is where all these composers spent most of their creative lives – and this particular period of history that so drew composers to write about children and the state of childhood? Through comparison of musical idioms and imagery with contemporaneous trends in literature and the visual arts and the changing shape and focus of French family life, we may identify some of the reasons for this outpouring of musical *enfantines*, and create a composite image of the childhoods they depicted.

## 2.2 From *Émile* to *Claudine*

For all its far-reaching impact, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* typified, rather than created, the sentiments of its age towards children and childhood. The work would not have had such immediate and lasting success had European society not been ready and waiting for it. As Linda Clark writes:

[*Émile* was] not a totally new approach to child rearing and education, but rather the most notable example of a new genre of treatises on childhood by pedagogues and medical doctors.<sup>3</sup>

The burgeoning Romantic ideology of childhood that found its most comprehensive expression in *Émile* may also be observed in the increasing presence and changing representations of children in European visual arts from the mid to late eighteenth century. The haunting eyes of Joshua Reynolds' *The Strawberry Girl* (1773), the sense of movement in Thomas Gainsborough's *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly* (1756), the soft lines of the little girls in the paintings of Jean-Baptiste Greuze, and the stylised but sincere affection in Étienne Aubry's portrait of *Paternal Love* (1775) are all typical of the new warmth and naturalness with which children were increasingly depicted. Nevertheless, in the angles, the subjects and the activities of these paintings one is always aware of the presence of the 'watching, commenting adult', just as in the music and literature of Romanticism discussed in Chapter One. Reynolds' *Strawberry Girl* is a typical example (Plate 1). Small and pale against her dark background, she is a

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<sup>3</sup> Clark, 'France', p. 278.

picture of pathos: as she gazes up into the eyes of the adult viewer, she invites them to project upon her all their conceptions of childhood lost or forsaken.<sup>4</sup>

**Plate 1**      **Joshua Reynolds, *The Strawberry Girl***  
1772-73, 76x63cm (The Wallace Collection, London)



Juxtaposing the subject matter, composition and techniques of the artists of the Enlightenment with those of the Impressionist movement a century later offers evidence of a changing view of childhood comparable to the relative perspectives and imagery of *Kinderscenen* and *The Nursery*. Auguste Renoir, Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot in particular painted children with not only a new degree of realism but also a crucial shift of perspective: works like Renoir's *Girl with Watering Can* (1876) and *Mme Charpentier and her Children* (1878) are painted not from the adult's angle of vision but the child's. Rosemary Lloyd described this shifting viewpoint thus:

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<sup>4</sup> Two years after *The Strawberry Girl*, Reynolds painted a young *Miss Crewe*, who dressed up as a strawberry seller for her portrait. The contrast between the paintings is stark: unlike the *Strawberry Girl* who really does have to sell strawberries on the streets of London for her living, Miss Crewe is enjoying her fancy dress, grinning impishly from beneath her preposterously large dark hat and cape. She is the picture of Rousseau's rosy, healthful, outdoorsy child, set against a wide, rolling landscape that contrasts with the dark cliffs and trees behind the *Strawberry Girl*.



Just as Impressionism in general had raised the horizon to reduce the space allotted to the sky and thereby to increase the emphasis placed on material values, so here the cropped perspectives, the refusal to suggest a benevolent or sentimental adult viewer by opening up a view from on high, all indicate that we are forced to see the child as children, to admit not only that we are there as an inquisitive or bored child, but that we look on with the eyes of childhood.<sup>5</sup>

Mary Cassatt's 1878 painting *Little girl in a blue armchair* encapsulates this perspective (Plate 2). Fed-up, perhaps, with posing gracefully, the child sprawls in her chair, hot, grumpy and tired. She is painted with tenderness and intimacy but without any romantic illusions: her pursed mouth and frown seem to herald an inevitable squall. Her expression, her distinctive little face, her naturalistic attitude and even the looming armchairs all foreshadow the Child who would be created by Colette and Ravel almost fifty years later.

**Plate 2**      **Mary Cassatt, *Little girl in a blue armchair***  
1878, 90x130cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington)



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<sup>5</sup> Lloyd, *The Land of Lost Content*, p. 3.

Berthe Morisot's *Sur le balcon* (1871-2) and her brother-in-law Édouard Manet's *Gare St Lazare* (1873) reflect not just this changing artistic perspective but also the increasing visibility and importance of children in European society. The little girls in each painting appear not in their own homes, nor against the stylised landscapes of the studio portrait: they are out in the streets, in the real world. There is a strong sense of physical engagement: both children hold tight to iron railings, immersed in the scenes before them – the view of Paris from Montmartre in *Sur le Balcon*, and the smoke and bustle of the railway station in *Gare St Lazare* (Plates 3 and 4).

**Plate 3**      **Édouard Manet, *Gare St Lazare***  
1873, 93x112cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington)



A striking comparison between *Sur le balcon* and *Gare St Lazare* can be drawn, however, in their different portrayals of the two mothers. In Manet's painting she sits with a book in her lap, her face turned to the street and away from her child, while the attention of the mother in *Sur le balcon* is not on the city spread below her but on the face of her little daughter.

**Plate 4**

**Berthe Morisot, *Sur le balcon***

1871-2, 21x17cm, The Art Institute of Chicago



This very feminine imagery of maternal love recalls the tender intimacy in the many paintings of mothers and children by Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842). It also has a literary precursor: the poetry of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786-1859) focused on parent-child relationships and childhood memories with tenderness, affection and an attractive lightness of touch.<sup>6</sup> If children in Desbordes-Valmore's poems can sometimes appear more as images and reflections than living characters, others give a sense of physical awareness equivalent to that of Manet and Morisot. *L'Enfant au miroir* captures the child's flickering thoughts, her quick movements and her straightforward rhythms of speech:

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<sup>6</sup> Desbordes-Valmore published work from the first decades of the nineteenth century until her death, and more poems were published posthumously. ('Bibliographie', *Marceline: Le site officiel de Marceline Desbordes-Valmore*, <http://www.desbordes-valmore.net>, Association Marceline, Douai (accessed 8 October 2007).)



*L'Enfant au miroir*  
C'est frais dans le bois sombre,  
Et puis c'est beau  
De danser comme une ombre  
Au bord de l'eau!  
Les enfants de mon âge,  
Courant toujours,  
Devraient tous au village  
Passer leurs jours!<sup>7</sup>

*The Child to the Mirror*  
In the dark woods it's cool  
And it's fine  
To dance like a shadow  
By the water!  
Children of my age,  
Always running,  
Should pass all their days  
In the village!

Desbordes-Valmore's poems lacked the metaphysical grandeur of those of her younger compatriot Victor Hugo, who was said to have declared (with disarming modesty) that 'Christopher Columbus only discovered America. I have discovered the Child.'<sup>8</sup> Hugo's collection *L'Art d'être grand père*, together with many individual poems, are typically Romantic in conception, idealising the child-image ('all men are copper and lead; the child is gold'<sup>9</sup>), and writing with nostalgic affection of his own childhood. In *Mon enfance* he asserted in Baudelaireian style that the seeds of his own genius had been sown early:

*Mon enfance*  
Mes souvenirs germaient dans mon âme échauffée;  
J'allais, chantant des vers d'une voix étouffée,  
Et ma mère, en secret observant tous mes pas,  
Pleurait et souriait, disant: C'est une fée  
Qui lui parle, et qu'on ne voit pas!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *Poésies*, ed. Yves Bonnefoy (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 235-6.

<sup>8</sup> Clovis Hugues recounted this *bon mot* in an article in *La France* in December 1890; quoted by Albert Schinz in an article whose title Hugo would have undoubtedly applauded: 'Victor Hugo, le Grande Poète Humanitaire, Champion de la Cause de la Paix Universelle, Promoteur de l'Idée des États-Unis d'Europe', *The French Review* 9:1 (November 1935), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Jean Boutiller, '*L'Enfant et les sortilèges*: Fantaisie lyrique de Madame Colette et de M. Maurice Ravel' [review], in *L'Enfant* (1926), p. 185.

<sup>10</sup> Victor Hugo, *Poésie*, vol. I, ed. Bernard Leuilliot (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 163.

*My childhood*

My memories arise in my lighted soul  
I used to go, singing verses in an undertone  
And my mother, watching over my steps in secret  
Would weep and smile, saying, 'It's a fairy  
That we cannot see who speaks to him!'

While Hugo's poems are always written through the voice and perspective of the adult, the children in his novels are much more realistic – indeed, better-written – characters. France had no equivalent to the immortal David Copperfield or Pip until after the nineteenth century had passed its midpoint; Dupuy observed in 1931 that only after 1870 do we find 'the Child affirming himself, in a definitive way, as *a new character* [italics mine] in the French novel'.<sup>11</sup> Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) led the way with its vivid portraits of the children Éponine, Cosette and Gavroche. The scene in which the young Éponine tells her sister a story (quoted here in Rosemary Lloyd's translation) captures the rhythms and repetitions of the childish voice with vivid realism:

We'll imagine that this is my little girl. I'll be a lady. We'll pretend I come to see you and you'll look at her. Little by little you'll see her moustaches and that'll surprise you. And then you'll see her ears, and then her tail, and that'll surprise you. And you'll say to me, 'Heavens above!' And I'll say to you: 'Yes, Madam, that's the sort of little girl I've got. Little girls are like that these days'.<sup>12</sup>

Clark notes that with the increasing significance of the child-character in the adult novel came a new portrayal of these children, no longer small adults but '[beings] immersed in [their] own imaginative world'.<sup>13</sup> This sense of creative absorption characterises the flashback scenes of Gérard Nerval's novella *Sylvie*, whose dreamlike narrative and 'muffled nostalgia'<sup>14</sup> would echo in *À la recherche du temps perdu* and Alain-Fournier's *Le grand Meaulnes* (1914).<sup>15</sup> In the words of Catherine Savage, Meaulnes 'is less concerned with the experience of the past, which Proust's narrator will find meaningful and satisfying, than with his attempt to live it again'.<sup>16</sup> His search

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<sup>11</sup> In Lloyd, *The Land of Lost Content*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> In Lloyd, *The Land of Lost Content*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, 'France', p. 291.

<sup>14</sup> Charles E. Carlut (ed.), *19<sup>th</sup> Century French Short Stories* (New York: Dell, 1966), p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Ravel read *Le grand Meaulnes* while on active service in 1916, and seriously contemplated using it as the basis for a fantasy for cello and orchestra in the early 1920s. He did not, however, even begin to sketch the work. (Orenstein, *Ravel, man and musician*, p. 75n10.)

<sup>16</sup> Catherine H. Savage, 'Nostalgia in Alain-Fournier and Proust', *French Review*, 38:2 (1964), p. 170.

for his ‘lost domain’ and his eventual failure to reconcile reality with his childhood ideal is a theme that echoes through nineteenth and early twentieth century literature.

Meaulnes’ creator Alain-Fournier wrote to Jacques Rivière in 1906:

My credo in art and literature is childhood; to succeed in capturing it without any childishness, with its depths that border on mystery. Perhaps my future book will be a continuous coming and going between dreams and reality – ‘dream’ meaning the immense, indefinite life of childhood, hovering above the other and endlessly reverberating with echoes of the other.<sup>17</sup>

As Alain-Fournier suggests in part here, the narrative power of *Le grand Meaulnes* is derived from the juxtaposition of Meaulnes’ dreamlike quest with the solid reality of the narrator François Seurel. It is François who evokes the physical experiences of childhood: the smells of the country schoolroom – ‘fried herrings and scorched wool, [...] the stable and the hayloft’<sup>18</sup> – and the summer bathing expedition with its ‘hot sand and caked mud’, the painful coolness of the bottle of lemonade, and, with the boys’ first sheepish attempts at catcalls, the uncomfortable intensity of adolescent sexuality.<sup>19</sup>

This sense of the physicality and individuality of childhood experience (which found a feminine equivalent in Colette’s *Claudine à l’école*) was a characteristic of the Third Republic’s music as well as literature; sections 2.3 and 2.5 below discuss its importance to the duet suites of Bizet and Fauré. Alain-Fournier’s ‘continuous coming and going between dreams and reality’, or between childhood experienced and childhood remembered, is that of *Sylvie*, and, more obliquely, Marcel Proust; it was also a recurrent image in the music of its time. Christopher Palmer suggests that Alain-Fournier’s images had a particular resonance for Ravel:

All his life [Ravel] sought to preserve intact a child’s purity of vision. [...] In a more general sense, the theme of dream *versus* reality – childhood *versus* the adult world in Alain-Fournier’s conception – is exactly mirrored in Ravel’s work.<sup>20</sup>

The interaction – for it is more than opposition – of childhood and adulthood, dreams and reality, is the subject of Chapter Seven. Ravel’s *Ma mère l’Oye* and other works such as Debussy’s *Children’s Corner* suggest the dichotomous perspective of childhood

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<sup>17</sup> In Christopher Palmer, ‘Debussy, Ravel and Alain-Fournier’, *Music and Letters* 50:2 (April 1969), p. 270.

<sup>18</sup> Alain-Fournier, *Le grand Meaulnes*, trans. Frank Davison (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959), pp 23, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Alain-Fournier, *Le grand Meaulnes*, pp. 127-8.

<sup>20</sup> Palmer, ‘Debussy, Ravel and Alain-Fournier’, pp. 270-1.

both lived and remembered: while both are reflections on the state and condition of childhood, both were also inspired by interactions with real children and engagement with real childhoods. A similar duality infused the Impressionist paintings, which are both ‘impressions’ of a child – Morisot and Cassatt painted their own children – and ‘impressions’ of childhood.

### 2.3 ‘Messieurs les enfants’<sup>21</sup>

The increasing child-centeredness apparent in the arts in the last quarter of the century was given new impetus and focus by France’s rapidly changing social and political landscape. The French experience of the nineteenth century was chaotic and traumatic: between 1789 and 1871 the country suffered a series of revolutions, wars, kings and dictators that culminated with the disastrous Franco-Prussian War, the debilitating Siege of Paris and the brief and bloody Commune. In 1871, the newborn Third Republic found itself with a desperate need to reassess and recreate French society, values and political priorities. As a new commitment to social change that gave reformist agendas their chance to develop, it is perhaps not surprising that children – an immortal symbol of redemption and renewal – became an increasingly vital part of the national consciousness. In the first years of the Third Republic, the passing of a series of laws concerning education and child labour formalised philosophical conceptions of childhood, necessarily defining it (in Caroline Steedman’s words) ‘not just as a category of experience, but also as a time-span’.<sup>22</sup> Symbolic acknowledgement of this new social order came from Hippolyte Durand, who published a book in 1889 (a good year for symbols) tellingly titled *Le règne de l’enfant*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ernest Legouvé, quoted in Linda Clark, ‘France’, p. 283. (‘Children had become *messieurs les enfants*, around whom the household centred.’)

<sup>22</sup> Caroline Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995), p. 7. Early movement towards French social reform came with the Loi Guizot in 1841. Described by Colin Heywood as ‘The first piece of social legislation in France’, the Loi Guizot had placed some limitations on children’s participation in industrial labour. However, the law was effectively a ‘dead letter’, being ‘unnecessarily passive in its acceptance of existing practices’ and ‘wretchedly feeble’ in its enforcement. In 1874, the Loi Guizot was replaced with the first of a series of more effective and enforceable laws governing child labour (further restrictions would be introduced in 1892 and 1900), which would eventually set the minimum working age at thirteen and curtailing the maximum working day for those under eighteen to ten hours. A succession of contemporaneous Education Acts made primary education compulsory, secular and free. (Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France: Work, Health and Education among the ‘Classes Populaires’* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988 pp. 231, 255-6, 318-9.)

<sup>23</sup> Durand, *Le règne de l’enfant* (Paris: Lecène et Oudin, 1889).

If music has traditionally been the slowest of the arts to respond to aesthetic trends – compare for example the relative dates of literary and musical Romanticism – it is indicative of both the artistic energy and the interdisciplinary engagement of the Third Republic that composers took up the new conceptions of children and childhood with an alacrity that matched their poet and painter colleagues. Georges Bizet's first significant composition after the declaration of the Third Republic was no grand fanfare but a suite of delightfully unpretentious pieces for piano duet entitled *Children's games*. *Jeux d'enfants* was both the first major work by a French composer since Couperin on the subject of children and childhood and the first significant French piano duet suite<sup>24</sup>; it also effectively launched the whole genre of the Impressionist piano piece (soon to be continued in Emmanuel Chabrier's *Dix pièces pittoresques* of 1880).

*Jeux d'enfants* played a founding role in establishing a tradition of *enfantines* for piano duet. Its popularity in the succeeding half-century made it 'part of the common culture', so beloved as to risk becoming clichéd and a point of comparison for the subsequent duets of Fauré, Ravel, Caplet and Inghelbrecht.<sup>25</sup> The duet was an entirely appropriate form of expression for musical *enfantines*: duet playing necessitates focused interaction and physical intimacy, qualities that particularly characterised the middle-class perception of childhood in late nineteenth-century France.

In his biography of Bizet, Winton Dean inevitably compared *Jeux d'enfants* to *Kinderscenen*, noting that

...here is a typically French wit and detachment combined with a warmth and a sympathy that recall Schumann, but without the adult nostalgia of the *Kinderscenen*.<sup>26</sup>

Hervé Lacombe agreed, suggesting that in the suite Bizet remembers and relives the delights of childhood without wishing necessarily to recapture them.<sup>27</sup> Nostalgia often implies regret and a sense of loss in the contemplation of something irretrievable. The realisation of memory *without* nostalgia, through the engagement with real and contemporary children and childhoods, is a crucial distinction between *Kinderscenen*

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<sup>24</sup> Frédéric Robert, *Georges Bizet: L'Homme et son œuvre* (Paris: Seghers, 1965), p. 126.

<sup>25</sup> Mary E. Davis, 'Modernity à la mode: Popular Culture and Avant-Gardism in Erik Satie's *Sports et divertissements*', *The Musical Quarterly* 83:3 (1999), p. 455.

<sup>26</sup> Winton Dean, *Georges Bizet: His Life and Work* (London: Dent, 1965), p. 150. The comparison seems inescapable: Émile Vuillermoz similarly linked Fauré's *Dolly* to *Kinderscenen*, writing that '*Dolly* is the happy homage that all modern composers have wanted to offer to children since Schumann's *Kinderscenen*' (Vuillermoz, *Gabriel Fauré*, p. 114).

<sup>27</sup> Hervé Lacombe, *Georges Bizet: Naissance d'une identité créatrice* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), p. 531.



and the series of French works that includes *Jeux d'enfants*, *Dolly*, *Children's Corner* and *Ma mère l'Oye*. Thus, more than Schumann (even in the *Album für die Jugend*), Bizet concerned himself with the physical experience of childhood – the noisy exuberance of the child on the rocking horse, the giggles and swipes of the child trying to capture soap bubbles and the murmuring voices of children entirely engaged in fantasy play in 'Petit mari, petite femme'.

Bizet's focus on children's play also points to a crucial shift in the cultural perception and realisation of childhood. The nineteenth century saw changes to the structure and functioning of European society so profound and far-reaching that they were called an Industrial Revolution. A creation of that revolution was a new middle class, as numerous, powerful and vital to their societies as the cogwheels of the production lines they controlled. Although France was slower to industrialise than Britain (in large part because of its political instability), by the middle of the century the process was in full swing. While in the ever-expanding urban conurbations the children of the poor worked harder than they ever had (until child labour laws restricted their exploitation), the children of the middle class were experiencing the newly-created bourgeois childhood. Increasingly well-educated, the middle classes enthusiastically responded to the Romantic ideology of childhood, while their newfound wealth ensured that their conceptions could now be supported in very material form.

An extraordinary upsurge in the publication of dedicated children's literature during the latter part of the century reflects of the ever-increasing numbers of children attending school.<sup>28</sup> The number of toyshops in Paris similarly grew with astonishing rapidity from the 1860s.<sup>29</sup> By December 1924, the culture of *messieurs les enfants* had become so entrenched that the journal *Les Annales* could devote an entire issue to the modern child, reacting *against* a perceived excess of child-centeredness. Articles deploring the degeneration of the 'modern child' alternates here with nostalgic longings

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<sup>28</sup> In 1872, 290 new works of dedicated children's literature were published (up from just 80 in 1811); by 1890 over a thousand such works reached Parisian bookstores (Maurice Crubellier, *L'Enfance et la jeunesse dans la société française, 1800-1950* (Paris: Colin, 1979), p. 358). Amongst the most popular children's books were the stories of the Comtesse de Ségur (born Sophie Rostopchine). First published between 1857 and 1871 (and continually reprinted), Sophie de Ségur's stories were the first of a long series of children's books published by Hachette in the *bibliothèque rose* collection (the name *bibliothèque rose* follows the famous *bibliothèque bleue*, the blue-grey bound popular novels distributed by travelling salesmen between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries). Older children were fascinated by the works of Jules Verne, whose fantastic settings were perfectly suited to the enthusiastic futurism of the latter part of the century (Crubellier, *L'Enfance et la jeunesse*, pp. 362-3).

<sup>29</sup> Clark, 'France', p. 290.

for the ‘good old days’, whilst elsewhere idealised Baudelairean imagery depicts the peace and focussed intimacy of childhood as a haven that contrasts with the hectic and decadent *zeitgeist*. Yvonne Sarcey’s acerbic depiction of extravagant children’s birthday parties (a topic with amusingly contemporary resonance) admirably encapsulates the tone of the issue.<sup>30</sup>

These increasingly material cultures of childhood are given fascinating expression in the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, London. In the museum’s collection of European dolls’ houses dating from the Renaissance into the twentieth century, by far the most striking change in contents and arrangement occurs between the houses built before and after a perceptual turning-point around 1850. The former show nurseries that, but for their cradles, could be mistaken for an adult’s bedroom: they are places simply for sleeping and learning in. As the century advances, the nurseries progressively fill with children’s amusements: in an English model from 1900 the floor of the nursery is almost invisible beneath a carpet of dolls, games and toys. These material preoccupations are reflected in much of the music about children and childhood. In his 1928 study, W. Wright Roberts suggested that:

More and more [music about children] has concerned itself with a cargo of externals – toys, machines, mechanical things, and less with inward vision. [...] There is a limbo of modern music, stocked with marches of tin soldiers and laments for broken dolls and the other mechanical properties of the child’s world as seen by the trivially minded adult.<sup>31</sup>

As Roberts himself acknowledges, however, certain composers were able to turn that ‘cargo of externals’ into a convincing ‘inward vision’. Maurice Ravel did something of the sort in *Noël des jouets*: the song takes one of the most poised and stylised of scenes, the Nativity, turns its participants into wooden, sugar, enamelled and painted toys, and then suddenly and exultantly brings them to life. The song’s premise has an added resonance for a composer who delighted in these ‘externals’ all his life, filling his home in Montfort l’Amaury with toys, games and miniature figures and proudly displaying

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<sup>30</sup> The articles in this issue of *Les Annales*, collectively entitled ‘L’Enfance’, are summarised in Mathias Schillmöller, *Maurice Ravels Schlüsselwerk L’Enfant et les sortilèges: Eine ästhetisch-analytische Studie* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 75-76. Schillmöller suggests that Ravel, then putting the finishing touches to *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, ‘probably read that journal’ and thus was perhaps influenced by these essays (p. 75). However, the almost comically reactionary and conservative tone of this special number makes it hard to imagine Ravel taking it very seriously, even if he did indeed acquire a copy, and it was in any case published too late to affect the conception or realisation of *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*.

<sup>31</sup> Roberts, ‘Child Studies in Music II’, p. 157.

them to visiting friends. On a broader scale, the ‘mechanical properties of the child’s world’ are the driving force of *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*; they teach the Child how to live in his world with a power and grace that go far beyond triviality. Here once more we see the interaction of the real and the imagined, the childhood lived and the childhood remembered, a fairytale set in a twentieth-century nursery and written about a true child of his time.

The dolls’ houses of Bethnal Green offer another important symbol of a changing society: from about 1870, in the salon or living room of every little house, a piano is prominently displayed. The piano was *the* instrument of the industrial age: Arthur Loesser described it as ‘the factory’s natural prey’.<sup>32</sup> Owning a piano was a status symbol for the family with the wealth and leisure to indulge in pastimes such as music. In Vienna in 1800, approximately one in twenty households owned a piano; in Paris, less than half a century later, Martin d’Angers could estimate in the *Gazette musicale* that the proportion of piano-owning families was about one in five (60 000 instruments distributed among some 300 000 families), and the numbers were increasing daily.<sup>33</sup> The availability and popularity of pianos grew to such an extent that in 1920 the French government was able to raise substantial revenue by placing a tax on musical instruments. This became known as the ‘piano tax’, because, in the words of Roger Nichols, ‘every middle-class household had one’.<sup>34</sup> The piano was a symbol of bourgeois domesticity: the centre of music-making in the home, it was the instrument most naturally suited to express the nineteenth-century childhood.

And these middle-class children learnt the piano in their thousands. According to an estimate by the critic Oscar Comettant in 1868, some twenty thousand people were then making their living in Paris teaching piano.<sup>35</sup> All these teachers needed works to assign to their young pupils, a need amply met by a host of composers. While a survey of dedicated pedagogical works is beyond the compass of this study, amongst the profusion of charming, average, ‘poor’ or ‘insipid’ works there remain several pieces of

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<sup>32</sup> Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 233.

<sup>33</sup> Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos*, p. 386.

<sup>34</sup> Roger Nichols, *The Harlequin Years: Music in Paris 1917-1929* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 126.

<sup>35</sup> In Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos*, p. 429. One suspects that either Comettant or Martin d’Angers must have been respectively over-enthusiastic or conservative in their calculations, otherwise, even allowing for an extra two decades of piano-buying, the proportion of piano teachers to piano-owning families would have been around 1:3 – not nearly enough for any teacher to earn a living.

exceptional quality, written by composers of stature, whose intent and realisation is revealing. While Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye* is the best-known of these works written specifically for small hands, two other composers deserve wider recognition. Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht, who applied the damning adjectives quoted above to the generality of 'little pieces for beginners'<sup>36</sup>, aimed to rectify the perceived paucity of quality music for small hands with his attractive and cleverly realised *La Nursery* series (1905-1911), based on French children's songs. André Caplet's duet suite *Un tas de petites choses*, designed to be played by pupil and teacher (or 'small hands' and 'big hands'), combines a straightforward *prima* part with a *seconda* rich in harmonic and rhythmic subtleties. The set is subtitled *Do ré mi fa sol / en tous tons* – that is, while the student plays only the notes C, D, E, F and G (both hands in octave unison), the teacher's part moves through numerous tonalities. A manuscript copy of the first piece was dedicated by Caplet to Claude Debussy's daughter in 1909 with the inscription:

For the ten little fingers of Chouchou Debussy (3 years, 8 months), with late but very respectful salutations, and to prove that it's perfectly possible to play a little piece in the key of D $\flat$  without being encumbered by a heap of troublesome flats.  
From her first fiancé, André Capié [*sic*].<sup>37</sup>

Rather than concerning himself with the material 'trivialities' of childhood, Caplet adopted generic musical forms in four of his five movements: 'a little berceuse', 'a little Slovakian dance', 'a little barcarolle', and 'a proper little French march' (which contains snippets of the *Marseillaise* with the footnoted directive 'Stay seated – it's not the official version').

The sophisticated overall effect of *Un tas de petites choses* makes it a particularly rewarding work for children to perform. While its pedagogical worth is immediately apparent, Caplet also aimed to write a work that children would genuinely enjoy learning and performing. Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye*, too, was created principally to delight, rather than instruct, the children who played it. This shift of compositional intent typifies the *zeitgeist* of the suites' creation, as Willy [Henry Gauthier-Villars] acknowledged in his review of the première of *Ma mère l'Oye* (although he couldn't resist a dig and a pun):

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<sup>36</sup> D-E Inghelbrecht, *Mouvement contraire: souvenirs d'un musicien* (Paris: Domat, 1947), p. 260.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Howat, 'Un tas de petites choses et de petits mystères pour quatre mains'.

*Ma mère l'Oye*, subtle fantasies that let small hands partake of the most audacious conquests of modern harmony; Slavic fairytales of a Rimsky-Korsakov ['Korsagossa'] in kiddy transposition in 'L'Impératrice des Pagodes', and grovelling avowals in 'La Belle et la Bête' from a tiny Fafner, complete with his box for 75 centimes.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.4 *En famille*

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, middle-class French families enjoyed a life generally closer and more liberal than most of their European counterparts. A key indicator of social change across the century was the wholesale middleclass abandonment of the tradition of wet-nursing, down from over 80% in the immediate pre-Revolutionary years to almost zero by the 1870s, when it was still common in Germany and Italy. Priscilla Robertson notes that by this time only the children of small tradesman and artisans (whose mothers were needed in the family shop) were sent out to wet-nurse.<sup>39</sup> Foreign visitors to Paris also noted a lack of perceived 'discipline' among French children who were, as a rule, much less whipped than their British and German counterparts. French families were less likely to employ a dedicated nanny than British ones (the fashion was for a *bonne* who was maid-of-all-work instead), so parents tended to spend more time with their children.<sup>40</sup> Children ate with their parents from an early age, a practice that, while viewed with some astonishment elsewhere, was felt to develop a Gallic appreciation of fine food, together with a proper understanding of good manners and intelligent conversation.<sup>41</sup> The practice undoubtedly also promoted family interaction and closeness. Linda Clark has observed that from the Second Empire the familiar (*tu*) form was increasingly and reciprocally used between parents and children, an important gesture towards intimacy and liberality.<sup>42</sup>

Gustave Droz's *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé* (1866) encapsulated and promoted the late nineteenth-century view of French family and childhood. Part-novel and part-treatise (like Rousseau's *Émile*), *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé* was one of the bestsellers of its age, running to one hundred reprintings within twenty years of its first publication.<sup>43</sup> Droz wrote of a family life that was warm, loving and intimate, with the

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<sup>38</sup> Henri Gauthier-Villars, 'Lettre de l'Ouvreuse', *Comœdia*, 25 April 1910.

<sup>39</sup> Robertson, 'Home as a Nest', p. 410.

<sup>40</sup> Robertson, 'Home as a Nest', p. 424.

<sup>41</sup> Robertson, 'Home as a Nest', pp. 411, 418-9.

<sup>42</sup> Clark, 'France', p. 290.

<sup>43</sup> Edward Blakeman, notes to *La Boîte à Joujoux – Claude Debussy; Ma mère l'Oye – Maurice Ravel*, cond. Paul Tortelier, Ulster Orchestra (Compact disc, Switzerland: Chandos, CHAN 8711, 1989).

child as the axis about which the family revolved. In particular, Droz advocated paternal participation in child-rearing, writing extensively about the delights of fatherhood. One of his work's most striking passages is the detailed description of the birth of his son – holding his wife's hand, her cries of pain, the doctor's bluff reassurance, the extended family waiting in the next room and the overwhelming flood of emotions when his child was placed in his arms:

What caused this indefinable emotion was this living proof of fatherhood, this little being who was my very own.

[...]

'*Sac..cré*', murmured my father in my ear, holding me in his arms; he still carried his cane and his hat in his hand – '*Sacr...*'

But he couldn't finish the word: despite his wish to appear brave, a great tear shone and trembled on the tip of his nose. He muttered 'Hum!' behind his moustache, and finally dissolved in tears on my shoulder, saying, 'It is greater than I am'.

And I did the same, for it was greater than me, too.<sup>44</sup>

The changing focus of French family life is reflected with particular clarity in Fauré's *Dolly* and Debussy's *Children's Corner*, two suites composed for and about the childhoods of two particular little girls (and half-sisters at that). Before her elopement with Claude Debussy in 1904, Chouchou's mother-to-be Emma was married to the banker Sigismond Bardac, by whom she had two children, Raoul (born in 1881) and Hélène, born in 1892 and affectionately and universally known as 'Dolly'. Between 1893 and 1896 Gabriel Fauré presented Dolly with a series of piano duet pieces for her second, fourth and possibly also first birthdays, New Year's Day 1895 and in the autumn of 1896.<sup>45</sup> The pieces were collectively published as *Dolly* in 1897 and first performed by Alfred Cortot and Édouard Risler in 1898. As Carlo Caballero notes, *Dolly* is one of only two instrumental works to which Fauré attached programmatic titles (his publisher was responsible for titles like the op. 77 *Papillon* and those added to reprints of the op. 84 *Pièces brèves*).<sup>46</sup> Caballero writes that this unusual concession stimulated the music's many witty allusions: Dolly's lisping pronunciation of her older

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<sup>44</sup> Gustave Droz, *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé* (Paris: Havard, 1888 (41<sup>st</sup> ed.)), pp. 248-9.

<sup>45</sup> Roy Howat, 'Preface' to Gabriel Fauré, *Dolly Op. 56* (London: Edition Peters, EP 7430, 1995), p. 3. The first piece, 'Berceuse', probably given to Dolly on her first birthday in June 1893, was adapted from a piece composed by Fauré early in 1863 (at the age of 17) and presented to Suzanne Garnier with the title *La chanson dans le jardin*. (Jean-Michel Nectoux, *Gabriel Fauré: A musical life*, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 86.)

<sup>46</sup> According to Caballero, Fauré's only other programmatic title was *Une châtelaine en sa tour...* (for harp, Op. 110); one might also add the piano duets *Souvenirs de Bayreuth*, co-written with André Messager. (Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French musical aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), pp. 249-50.)

brother Raoul's name inspired 'Messieu Aoul!', while Raoul's dog Ketty is the subject of 'Ketty-Valse'. 'Messieu Aoul!' quotes the universally known French lullaby *Do, do, l'enfant do*, while 'Le Jardin de Dolly' makes fleeting reference to Fauré's own First Violin Sonata. Marguerite Long suggested that the inspiration of 'Le pas espagnol' (a piece whose flourishes indicate a jovial homage to Chabrier's *España*) was a bronze equestrian statue sculpted by Fauré's father-in-law Emmanuel Fremiet, of which young Dolly was particularly fond.<sup>47</sup>

Although its musical language is relatively straightforward, *Dolly* is by no means designed for beginners. It demands sophisticated interaction between the two performers – hand crossings, close imitation, fast unison scales and slow final chords that can all too easily become unintentional appoggiaturas. Fauré did, however, enjoy playing the suite with piano-student children of his acquaintance.<sup>48</sup>

*Dolly* is unique both for identification of an individual child and for its depiction of her interactions with her family. In 'Messieu Aoul!' we might read the boisterous, slightly uncoordinated affection of a teenaged older brother, while Dolly's own absorption and imagination are captured in the central 'Le jardin de Dolly'. The 'Berceuse' and 'Tendresse' celebrate family intimacy and tenderness: canonic passages in both movements suggest parent-child imitative play. In 'Ketty-Valse' we join in Dolly's games with the family pet (who seems to go walking on the piano keys in the central passage), and in 'Le pas espagnol' we see her dressed up and dancing with childish abandon.

Claude Debussy's *Children's Corner* also filters the composer's thoughts and imaginings about the state of childhood through a work written again for a real child, his daughter Claude-Emma (Chouchou), and her nursery. The birth of Chouchou in 1905 was probably the single most transformative event in Debussy's life. Upon his late and rather unexpected entrance into parenthood he wrote to Louis Laloy:

As of a few days ago, I am the father of a little girl – the joy of that has overwhelmed me a little and still frightens me.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Nectoux, *Gabriel Fauré*, p. 87.

<sup>48</sup> Nectoux, *Gabriel Fauré*, p. 87.

<sup>49</sup> In Claude Debussy, *Correspondance (1872–1918)*, ed. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 929.

Debussy unreservedly adored his daughter. The extent to which her progress, play and personality occupied his attention is repeatedly demonstrated in his correspondence with friends, acquaintances and his publishers. On 14 February 1911 he wrote to André Caplet:

I don't have much else to tell you, unless you're interested in learning that Chouchou has just completed her first symphonic poem for voice, two paper-combs, piano *ad libitum*; the latest title is *The Elephant on the branch*. It's very dramatic!<sup>50</sup>

When absent from home, Debussy wrote to Emma of his love and longing for his family, and inquired minutely about Chouchou's doings. Touring central Europe in late 1910, he sent a series of postcards from Vienna to his daughter:

Once upon a time, there was a papa who lived in exile...  
\*\*\*\*\*

...and everyday regretted his little Chouchou.  
\*\*\*\*\*

...The Inhabitants of the city looked at him pass by and whispered: 'Why is this monsieur so sad, in our city, so beautiful and gay?'  
\*\*\*\*\*

[a fourth card is missing]  
\*\*\*\*\*

So, Chouchou's papa went into a boutique maintained by an old gentleman, very ugly, and his daughter even more ugly; he politely tipped his hat, asked with the gestures of a deaf-mute for the most beautiful 'postcards' to write to his dear little girl... The old man, very ugly, was terribly touched by that; as was his daughter – she died on the spot!  
\*\*\*\*\*

The same papa went back to his hotel, wrote a story which would make goldfish cry, and put all his tenderness into the signature below, which is his most beautifully glorious title.  
Lepapadechouchou<sup>51</sup>

Debussy's friends, like Ravel's and Schumann's, also remarked on his childlike characteristics – his innocence, playfulness and love of toys. As Alfredo Casella wrote in 1933:

To the end [Debussy] remained what the French call *grand enfant*. That same wonderful innocence and limpidity of feeling which is the fundamental characteristic of his art transpired in all his deeds and words. At fifty he amused himself more than did his little daughter Chouchou with the toys brought home for her by her mother.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> In Debussy, *Correspondance*, p. 1392.

<sup>51</sup> In Jacqueline Charette, *Claude Debussy through his letters* (New York: Vantage, 1990), p. 129.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Paul Roberts, *Images: The piano music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus, 1996), p. 201.



Paul Roberts suggests that Chouchou's birth allowed Debussy's childlike qualities to find expression.<sup>53</sup> Debussy's active participation in Chouchou's childhood almost certainly owed something to his unsettled early years. The family flight from the Franco-Prussian War to Cannes in 1870 and the subsequent arrest and imprisonment of his Communard father were traumatic experiences that undoubtedly forced the young Claude (the eldest child) to assume certain adult responsibilities too early. Hence, perhaps, *Children's Corner*, a suite of six pieces from 1908, dedicated to Chouchou 'with affectionate apologies for what follows'. Through the depiction of a nursery filled with the material delights that his own childhood had lacked, *Children's Corner* immortalises the stable, peaceful, loving and contented infancy desired for their children by parents who have suffered serious childhood upheaval.

On Debussy's admission, *Children's Corner* owes something to Musorgsky's *The Nursery*. Debussy's friend Robert Godet recounted the following anecdote, reprinted in Edward Lockspeiser's 1937 article 'Musorgsky and Debussy':

[Debussy's review of *The Nursery*] came to the notice of Jules de Brayer<sup>54</sup>, who was overjoyed. 'Like a good-natured master,' Godet writes, 'not wishing to discourage a hard-working pupil, he said to his friend: "Enfin Debussy, vous y êtes ?" ["You've finally got there, Debussy?"]'. Eight years later Debussy sent him a copy of the *Children's Corner* and, recalling his article on *The Nursery*, remarked, 'Voyez, Brayer, j'y suis, j'y reste' ['See, Brayer: here I am, here I stay']. So it was *The Nursery*, it seems, that inspired Debussy to write a set of children's pieces.<sup>55</sup>

Chouchou's nursery is less tempestuous than Musorgsky's, more poetic, and more centred on indoor play: we watch the dancing snow through the window, but we don't go out to make snowmen. Where Musorgsky's children tell their own stories, Debussy seems to share the narrative with his daughter, just as he shared her games. However, Debussy's praise for Musorgsky's 'prodigious capacity to imagine and assimilate the fairy landscapes so special to a child's mind' could be applied equally to his own *Children's Corner*. Robert Orledge quotes Debussy speaking of *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* in similar terms, invoking not just the 'fairy landscapes' he ascribed to

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<sup>53</sup> Roberts, *Images*, p. 202.

<sup>54</sup> Concert promoter, Jules de Brayer was instrumental in introducing Musorgsky's music to France, performing excerpts from *Boris Godunov* at the 1878 Paris Exposition Universelle and championing his works amongst his many composer acquaintances (who included Chabrier and Fauré as well as Debussy).

<sup>55</sup> Edward Lockspeiser, 'Musorgsky and Debussy', *The Musical Quarterly* 23:4 (1937), pp. 426-7.

Musorgsky, but something more personal: ‘I want to sing my interior landscape with the naïve candour of childhood’.<sup>56</sup>

Edward Blakeman wrote of Gustave Droz’s *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé* that ‘for the French it marked the beginnings of a new attitude towards children: they were no longer to be sternly regarded as miniature adults, but acknowledged as independent and imaginative beings in their own right’.<sup>57</sup> Yet as *Émile* was just the most famous of many treatises on child-rearing, expressing the sentiments of its age, so *Monsieur, Madame and Bébé* (and, later on, *Dolly* and *Children’s Corner*) are testimony to the extent to which their themes – close family life and the joys of child-raising – were already present in France. These works articulated rather than inspired the sentiments of the society for which they were written.

## 2.5 Conclusion: Scenes from a (French) childhood

Maurice Ravel’s family was unusual in many respects. His father was an engineer-inventor who built railways in Spain with Gustave Eiffel and was a pioneer of the internal combustion engine; his Basque mother sang her sons to sleep with Spanish lullabies. However, in its closeness and egalitarian spirit the Ravel family was typical of its time. Both parents were involved in the raising of their sons (aided, at least in their first Parisian years, by Marie’s Basque aunt Gracieuse Billac).<sup>58</sup> A family photo taken in about 1884 (Plate 5) shows Pierre-Joseph Ravel seated on a chair in a garden, with his younger son Édouard perched on his knee and Maurice leaning against his shoulder. The informality and tenderness of the scene are striking; both boys are relaxed and the affection in their gestures is obviously not rehearsed.

Both Ravel sons lived with their parents until the latter’s deaths, a circumstance that ensured that they maintained their familial roles well into adulthood. Édouard married late in life and Ravel never; neither of them had children. Ravel’s view of childhood, then, was defined in part by his view of himself as the child he always remained within his family circle.

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<sup>56</sup> Claude Debussy, interview with Henry Malherbe (*L’Excelsior*, 11 February 1911), reproduced in Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), p. 223.

<sup>57</sup> Blakeman, notes to *La Boîte à Joujoux – Claude Debussy; Ma mère l’Oye – Maurice Ravel*.

<sup>58</sup> Étienne Rousseau-Plotto, *Ravel: Portraits basques* (Anglet: Atlantica-Séguier, 2004), p. 24.

**Plate 5**

**Pierre-Joseph Ravel with Édouard and Maurice Ravel**

Photograph, c. 1884, reproduced in Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1947), Plate 1



Although Ravel remained childless, he was an adopted uncle for the children of many of his friends. The dedication of *Ma mère l'Oye* to Mimi and Jean Godebski reflects a relationship and source of inspiration similar to that which prompted Fauré's *Dolly*. Such works are testimony to the role of children as active and visible participants in the family and in late nineteenth century French society. The artists, writers and musicians of this period engaged with the physical presence of the child in a way that their German predecessors did not. Hugo's and Desbordes-Valmore's assimilation of childish speech and thought processes, together with the vivid sensory experiences of Colette's and Alain-Fournier's protagonists, found their musical equivalents in *Jeux d'enfants*, *Dolly* and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. The interweaving of perspective that can be identified in works such as *Children's Corner* – childhood simultaneously observed, evoked and remembered – also has its equivalents in art and literature, in the shifting, dreamlike narrative of *Sylvie* and the child of Morisot's *Sur le balcon*.

The five movements of *Ma mère l'Oye*, a work subtitled *Cinq pièces enfantines* (best translated as *Five pieces for children*, but also literally *Five childlike pieces*), do, however, comprise a pianistic depiction of childhood quite different from their predecessors. Unlike Debussy, Schumann or Bizet, Ravel didn't write about toys and games; unlike Fauré and Musorgsky, he didn't attempt portraiture. The words 'la poésie de l'enfance', used by Ravel in the summation of *Ma mère l'Oye* in his 'Autobiographical Sketch' (quoted in the present Introduction), might suggest a nostalgic Romantic idealisation, even sacralisation, of childhood that harks back to Schumann. But sacralisation and nostalgia are never Ravelian characteristics and *Ma mère l'Oye* – like the *Trois chansons* and like *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* – has no trace of sentimentality.

'The idealist looks not at things, but through them', W. Wright Roberts wrote in 1928.<sup>59</sup> Ravel, no idealist, looked at things through *other* things, and when he looked at childhood he did it through the prism of fairytale. In this, his 'childhood' works – *Ma mère l'Oye*, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* and the *Trois chansons* – are distinct from the works of all the other composers dealt with in this and the previous chapter. Chapters Three to Six discuss Ravel's adaptation of the idioms and imagery of the fairytale, tracing their sources in musical and literary history and exploring the relationship between fairytales and conceptions of childhood.

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<sup>59</sup> Roberts, 'Child Studies in Music II', p. 157.

## Chapter Three

### ‘Therein lies a tale’:

## Historical and musical cultures of fairytales

« Bon Dieu ! ma sœur », dit alors Dinarzade,  
« que votre conte est merveilleux ! »  
« La suite est encore plus surprenante »,  
répondit Scheherazade...»<sup>1</sup>

*Les mille et une nuits*

### 3.1 Introduction

On 27 May 1899, Maurice Ravel appeared on the podium of the Salle du Nouveau Théâtre to conduct the orchestra of the Société nationale de musique. Almost certainly his conducting début, it was also the first public performance of his first orchestral work, the ‘Ouverture de féerie’ entitled *Shéhérazade*. The work was unfavourably reviewed and was neither published nor heard again in Ravel’s lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Five years, later however, the Salle du Nouveau Théâtre saw the première of a second Ravelian *Shéhérazade*, this time a set of three orchestral songs set to texts by his friend Tristan Klingsor (Léon Léclère) and performed by Jane Hatto. At the end of his life, Ravel meditated a work (a ballet or an oratorio, or something in between) called *Morgiane*, again based on the tales told by the indefatigable Scheherazade.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ““Good Heavens, my sister!””, said Dinarazade, “Your story is wonderful!” “What follows is even more marvellous”, replied Scheherazade...” (*Les mille et une nuits*, trans. Antoine Galland 1704-1712, reprinted Paris: Garnier, 1949; available online via The University of Quebec at Chicoutimi, April 2006, [http://classiques.uqac.ca/collection\\_documents/galland\\_antoine/mille\\_et\\_une\\_nuits\\_t1/](http://classiques.uqac.ca/collection_documents/galland_antoine/mille_et_une_nuits_t1/) (accessed 17 September 2007), p. 57.)

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Lalo’s blistering review was the first of many he directed at Ravel: ‘If this is what M. Ravel believes to be an overture “composed according to the classical plan”, one must admit that M. Ravel has a great deal of imagination’. Henry Gauthier-Villars called Ravel a ‘mediocrely gifted debutant... who will perhaps become something if not someone in about ten years, if he works hard’ (Orenstein, *Ravel, man and musician*, pp. 24-25). Ravel himself withdrew *Shéhérazade* from circulation, later confessing that it was ‘badly constructed and crammed with whole-tone scales. There were so many of them, in fact, that I had enough of them for life’. (Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1947), p. 28.)

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Marnat, *Maurice Ravel* (Paris: Fayard, 1986), p. 778. Ravel’s rapidly declining health prevented him from even sketching the work.

What was it that so appealed to Ravel in the stories known collectively as *The Thousand and One Nights*? Always attracted to the many-faceted subject, Ravel was undoubtedly drawn by the idea of a series of tales placed within a broader narrative. Equally prismatic was his decision to use Antoine Galland's translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* both for the *Shéhérazade* of 1898 (the overture for a projected opera) and for *Morgiane*. Galland's *Les mille et une nuits*, published across the first decade of the eighteenth century, offered a connection to an age that was a lifelong source of fascination for Ravel, partly inspiring works as diverse as *Daphnis et Chloé*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and the *Chansons madécasses*.

Perhaps what drew Ravel most of all was the guiding thread of *The Thousand and One Nights*: its celebration of the power of storytelling. Scheherazade wins life and love through her combination of vivid imagination and fine-honed skills; Ravel's own life and work were shaped around similar qualities. Threads and themes of fantasy and fairytale, together with compelling musical and dramatic narratives, underpin his entire musical output, from the earliest songs and first *Shéhérazade* to the unwritten *Morgiane* of the 1930s. Ravel's first completed song, *Ballade de la reine morte d'aimer* (1893), on a text by Roland de Marès, tells a story of courtly love that gestures towards the troubadour tradition. The theme and textures of *Chanson du rouet*, composed five years later (on a poem by Leconte de Lisle), nod to Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, whose protagonist is the heroine of Goethe's *Faust*, the great wonder-tale of the late eighteenth century. From 1906 until 1914, Ravel worked sporadically at the opera *La Cloche engloutie*, based on Gerhardt Hauptmann's play *Die versunkene Glocke* (translated by Ferdinand Hérol). Although he never completed the opera, its fantastic themes and mixture of human and supernatural characters, together with some of its music, would reappear a decade later in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*.<sup>4</sup> Black magic and white came in close succession in two piano works from 1908 and 1910, the triptych *Gaspard de la nuit* (based on the prose-poems of Aloysius Bertrand) and the fairytale duet suite *Ma mère l'Oye*. Animistic themes and images are a shared element across music as diverse as the song *Noël des jouets*, the wittily anthropomorphic song cycle *Histoires naturelles* and the almost-alive clocks of the opera *L'Heure espagnole*. To this catalogue of works inspired by fantasy and fairytale we might even add *Rapsodie espagnole* and *Boléro* (and *L'Heure espagnole*), which portray the exoticism of Spain

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<sup>4</sup> Orenstein, *Ravel, man and musician*, pp. 209-210.

through a blend of realism – Manuel da Falla wrote of Ravel’s ‘subtly genuine Spanishness’<sup>5</sup> – and fantastic stylisation.

This chapter teases out some of the threads of fantasy and fairytale woven through Ravel’s *œuvre* with particular reference to the three key works of this study, *Ma mère l’Oye*, the *Trois chansons pour chœur* and *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*. It traces their tangled paths of interaction and inspiration from the literary, artistic and musical traditions of Ravel’s beloved eighteenth century to the energetic Third Republic.

### 3.2 What is a fairytale?

For the word ‘fairytale’, the Oxford English Dictionary offers only ‘a tale about fairies’, or ‘an unreal or incredible story’.<sup>6</sup> This definition cannot begin to encompass the elements that define a fairytale, not least because in many of the famous narratives we call fairytales there are no fairies as such. So what is a fairytale?

We can simplify the equation by defining what a fairytale is *not*. Fairytales are not fables, which are created with the specific purpose of instructing and bettering their listeners. Many fables (including those of Æsop and the seventeenth-century French writer La Fontaine) project their moralistic narratives on animals or inanimate objects. The subjects of fairytales, by contrast, are almost invariably human. Fairytales are not myths or legends, which typically deal with specific, named characters, mortal (in legends) or immortal (in myths). Fairytales ‘could happen to anyone’, as Bruno Bettelheim puts it.<sup>7</sup> They deal with everyday protagonists to whom the audience can relate, characters ‘seeking to improve their own lot’, rather than aiming to benefit a community as a hero of legend will do.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike myths, legends or fables, a defining element of fairytales is the presence of magic. Magic shapes the narrative and controls the destinies of the characters, facilitating or hindering, rewarding or punishing as required. Magical objects and creatures are necessary characters, and magic is accepted by non-magical characters as

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<sup>5</sup> Manuel da Falla, *On music and musicians*, ed. Federico Sopena, trans. David Urman and J. M. Thomson (London: Boyars, 1979), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> ‘fairy-tale’, *OED Online*, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50081801> (accessed 15 September 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 14.

something real and powerful. Fairytales are also governed by a basic narrative imperative: a problem or a quest must be confronted and resolved, and the ending should be (although is not always) happy. Fairytales, as Max Lüthi writes, deal with the basic motifs of human existence: ‘life and death; good and evil; temptation and intrigue; weakness and innocence; despair, guidance and assistance’.<sup>9</sup> These fundamental issues are clarified and expressed simply and directly: characters and actions are good or bad, right or wrong; there is no middle ground. The importance of this polarity will become apparent when considering Ravel’s *Trois chansons*.

The lessons of fairytales are conveyed more gently and their applications are less obvious – though not less present – than those of fables. In G.K. Chesterton’s words:

There is the lesson of ‘Cinderella’, which is the same as that of the Magnificat – *exaltavit humiles*. There is the great lesson of ‘Beauty and the Beast’; that a thing must be loved *before* it is loveable. There is the terrible allegory of the ‘Sleeping Beauty’, which tells how the human creature was blessed with all birthday gifts, yet cursed with death; and how death also may perhaps be softened to a sleep.<sup>10</sup>

Fairytales reassure us that, while struggle and hardship may be a fundamental part of human existence, if we grapple with them head-on they can be overcome and happiness can result.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative cores of the ‘canon’ of Western European fairytales are found in tales told in every age, on every continent and in every language and society. That fairytales have endured so long and continue to be loved, told and retold across the ages suggests they have qualities of particular importance to the human psyche: as Jung postulated and Chapter Eight explores, they are an important manifestation of the ‘collective unconscious’. Perhaps more than anything else, fairytales are reassuring. Their structures are clear, their premises obvious, their narrative patterns predictable and satisfying. Fairytales are an escapist literature; they are at once stable and comforting and a stimulus to the creative imagination. Their themes of magic and fantasy and their hoped-for conclusion of good triumphant can offer a means to explain and, in imagination, control an otherwise inexplicable and uncontrollable world. If, like fables, they set out a clear moral order, unlike fables, the assertion of that order brings hope

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<sup>9</sup> Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (New York: Ungar., 1970), p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> G.K. Chesterton, ‘The Ethics of Elfland’, in *Orthodoxy* (London: Bodley Head, 1908/1957), p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 8.



and comfort. Fairytales give us faith that miracles do sometimes happen (the woodcutter is a prince stolen at birth, the milkmaid marries the king). Unpleasant kings can lose their thrones and wicked magic spells are undone. There remains the promise of an honourable and righteous society, in which a kind and just person will accede to the throne, in which a benevolent fairy will guard the gates of the kingdom and bless the passing years. The tales reassure us that, contrary to all appearances, the world really is an orderly and benevolent place and anybody can live happily ever after if they follow the rules of a good story.

These key qualities (to which this thesis will return in later chapters) have been admirably summarised by Jack Zipes:

No matter what the plot may be, the tales all celebrate our capacity as readers and potential transmitters of tales to wonder. We want to remain curious, startled, provoked, mystified and uplifted. We want to glare, gaze, gawk, behold and stare. We want to be given opportunities to change, and ultimately we want to be told that we can become kings and queens, or lords of our own destinies. We remember wonder tales and fairy tales to keep our sense of wonderment alive and to nurture our hope that we can seize possibilities and opportunities to transform ourselves and our worlds.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.3 Folktale to fairytale

While fairytales are one of the most ancient forms of human artistic expression, they existed almost exclusively as an oral tradition until the sixteenth century, and did not become an accepted literary genre until the end of the seventeenth. Written and published by aristocrats, the literary fairytale formalised, stylised, elaborated and transformed the folk fairytale. While the collections of literary fairytales published from the Italian Renaissance (Straparola's *Piacevoli Notti* of 1550 and Basile's *Pentamerone* of 1634) until the early nineteenth century (the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm) now form the basis of the European fairytale canon, the genre can be said to have been most firmly established in France in the age of Louis XIV. In 1697 the academician Charles Perrault published his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l'Oye* [*Histories or stories from times past, with morals: Tales of Mother Goose*]. Of the eight tales in this collection, six remain amongst the best-known and most popular today: 'La belle au bois dormant' ['The Sleeping Beauty'], 'Le petit chaperon rouge' ['Little Red Riding Hood'], 'La Barbe bleue' ['Blue Beard'], 'Le Chat

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<sup>12</sup> Jack Zipes, 'The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale', *Lion and the Unicorn* 12:2 (Dec 1988), pp. 12-13.

botté' ['Puss in Boots'], 'Cendrillon' ['Cinderella'] and 'Petit Poucet' ['Tom Thumb'].<sup>13</sup> Perrault's title ('Mother Goose') proclaims his tales' connection with folk culture: the Dictionary of the Académie Française of 1694 lists among the 'vulgar usages' of the word *conte* [tale], '*Contes de ma mère l'Oye*: Foolish tales such as those told by old people to amuse children'.<sup>14</sup>

In the same year as Perrault's tales appeared, the Baroness Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy published her laconically-titled *Les Contes de fées* [Fairytale], which was followed in 1698 by a second collection, *Contes nouveaux, ou les Fées à la mode* [New stories, or Fairies in fashion]. In their origin and intent Mme d'Aulnoy's tales represent an aristocratic tradition in many ways distinct from Perrault's: that of the salon fairytale. Invented and told as parlour games, salon fairytales were one of the few intellectual outlets for women during the reign of Louis XIV. While many of these storytellers drew on tales they had heard as children from their nursemaids, their recreations were devised to display their inventive powers, eloquence and wit: intricate allegories, subtle caricatures and biting reflections of the foibles of the personalities and tastes of the day were particularly prized.<sup>15</sup> As Dorothy Thelander notes, while these literary fairytales took on the plot structures of their folk ancestors, they were realised quite differently:

Some of them are considerably more complex than folk tales are likely to be. They pay more attention to detail, particularly in their description of their characters' clothing and appearance. Their wit is more sophisticated, their attitude to their heroes and heroines more ambivalent. [...] The tales reflect a concern with love, marriage, and advancement in social terms that is foreign to the folk fairy tale.<sup>16</sup>

The third important fairytale collection of the Louis XIV epoch was the translation by the orientalist and archaeologist Antoine Galland of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Arabic manuscripts known collectively as *The Thousand and One Nights*. Published between

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<sup>13</sup> Four of Perrault's tales have near equivalents in the *Pentamerone*: 'The Sleeping Beauty' ('Sun, Moon and Talia'), 'Tom Thumb' ('Nennillo and Nennella'), 'Puss in Boots' ('Caglioso') and 'Cinderella' ('Cenerentola'). Straparola's 'Constantino Fortunato' is another 'Puss in Boots' story. (Heidi Ann Heiner, 'Il Pentamerone' and related pages, *SurLaLuneFairytale*s, March 2004, <http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/pentamerone/index.html> (accessed 17 September 2007)).

<sup>14</sup> 'Conte', *Dictionnaires d'autrefois: Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 1<sup>er</sup> édition* (1694), accessed through The ARTFL Project: The University of Chicago and Analyse et Traitement Informatique de la Langue Française, <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/dicos/> (accessed 17 September 2007). Charles Perrault was a member of the Académie Française when the 1694 dictionary was created.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1994), pp. 18-23.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Thelander, 'Mother Goose and her Goslings: The France of Louis XIV as seen through the Fairy Tale', *The Journal of Modern History*, 54:3 (September 1982), p. 470.

1704 and 1712, at the instigation of Galland's friend Charles Perrault, the collection was translated into English, German, Italian, Dutch and Russian within fifty years, and remained the standard French translation of the tales for the next two centuries.

Galland's stylised and sanitised publication was in many ways a better depiction of the social mores and literary conventions of his own age than those of the Syria of the manuscripts, or the mythologised Arabia in which the tales are set. In their different fashions, Perrault and d'Aulnoy similarly transformed their tales from the mutable stories of the folk tradition into permanent mementos of a very particular time and place, reflecting its morals, values, social nuances and perceptions of such institutions as family, government and religion.<sup>17</sup> Ravel, always drawn by processes of translation and refraction, undoubtedly appreciated the multifaceted perspectives of Galland, Perrault and d'Aulnoy, whose creations defined his personal 'canon' of fairytales.

When, in the salons of Louis XIV, the aristocracy claimed the fairytale for its own, its focus and intent necessarily altered. Earthy and fantastic, fairytales had historically been part of the vernacular culture. As such they belonged to young and old alike, for in the medieval village children lived, worked and played alongside adults. In the manor houses, however, there was greater generational separation, and children were more typically cared for by nurses and wet-nurses. While most upper-class children were told folktales and fairytales by their peasant nurses, as adults they heard only the elegant tales of the troubadours or *trouvères*. Concurrent with the late-seventeenth century transferral of fairytales from oral to written tradition, then, was a shift in their target audience. Mme d'Aulnoy's tales – although probably drawn in part from those she had heard as a child – were recreated and published with an adult audience in mind. The intended audience of Perrault's *Ma mère l'Oye* is a little less clear-cut: Crubellier described them as 'the first dedicated children's literature'<sup>18</sup> while Jack Zipes suggests that they were primarily written for an adult audience.<sup>19</sup> Given their acknowledged connection to popular culture and the folk fairytale, Perrault may have believed that his tales, like those told traditionally, were for everyone. Whatever the case, the adult appropriation of fairytales would continue for the best part of the next two centuries. In eighteenth century England, for example, fairytales were generally considered

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<sup>17</sup> For detailed discussion of these issues, see Thelander, 'Mother Goose and her Goslings'.

<sup>18</sup> Crubellier, *L'Enfance et la jeunesse dans la société française*, p. 352.

<sup>19</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairytale* (Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1994), p. 17.

inappropriate for children since they provided too great a stimulus to the imagination, and discouraged rational thought. Their themes of magic, superstition and fantasy were also perceived by many to be dangerously ungodly.<sup>20</sup>

It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that fairytales came to be seen as intrinsically connected with childhood. C.S. Lewis described ‘the whole association of fantasy and fairytale with childhood’ as ‘local and accidental’, claiming that the fairytale, when it became unfashionable in the salons, was banished like so much excess furniture to the nursery.<sup>21</sup> Yet there were more factors at play in this transferral than the vagaries of literary fashion. As childhood came gradually to be defined politically and socially as a distinct stage of being, so, along with its separate needs and rights, came dedicated infrastructure and institutions, children’s literature foremost amongst them. One of the first prolific producers of children’s literature was Mme Leprince de Beaumont, who published sixty volumes between the 1750s and 1770s.<sup>22</sup> Amongst her stories was ‘La Belle et la Bête’, which appeared in her *Magasin des Enfants* in 1756 (like most published fairytales it drew on earlier versions of the tale, in particular Mme de Villeneuve’s version of 1740).<sup>23</sup> The tales of the Brothers Grimm began appearing in 1812 and were quickly translated into French, English and Italian; their rapid success probably stimulated a surge in reprintings of Perrault’s tales, which were now drifting inexorably towards the children’s camp.<sup>24</sup> Writers like Dickens championed the cause of fairytales, believing them necessary for children: in Dickens’ novels, characters brought up listening to fairytales (David Copperfield, for example) tend to fare better than those who are not (Paul Dombey); these latter unfortunates remain ‘stunted emotionally and morally’.<sup>25</sup> By the mid to late nineteenth century, fairytales were introduced to school curricula across Europe, a process that served to define both the ‘canon’ of classic fairytales and their definitive association with childhood.<sup>26</sup> This revival of a broader interest in fairytales stimulated the complex and poignant tales of Hans Christian

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Kotzin, ‘The Fairy Tale in England, 1800-1870’, *Journal of Popular Culture* 4:1 (summer 1970), pp. 134-7 and Zipes, ‘The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale’, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> C.S. Lewis, ‘On three ways of writing for children’, in *Of this and other worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1982), p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society*, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> In the early 1860s, 59 new editions of Perrault’s *Ma mère l’Oye* were published, up from one in 1805 and ten in 1835. (Michel Faure, *Musique et Société du Second Empire aux années vingt* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), p. 149.)

<sup>25</sup> Kotzin, ‘The Fairy Tale in England’, p. 144.

<sup>26</sup> Zipes, ‘The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale’, p. 24.

Andersen and Oscar Wilde (the latter resident in Paris during the last years of his life), which can be read by children but are best understood in maturity.

### 3.4 *Fêtes galantes*

In his essay 'Memories of a lazy childhood' Ravel wrote:

...for me, there are not several arts, but one only: music, painting and literature differ only as much as in their means of expression'.<sup>27</sup>

His integrated artistic vision resonates in the culture of the early eighteenth century, for the themes and forms of the literary fairytale found expression in the visual arts and music of the period as well. A defining tradition of the era, not itself fairytale but related to it on many levels, was the *fête galante*. *Fêtes galantes* – costume picnics taken by the rich and elegant – combined fantasy and imagination with stylisation of poses, attire and background as precise and artificial as that of the fairytale's character, plot, gesture and phrase.

While *fêtes galantes* really happened (Louis XIV himself was said to delight in them), their enduring image has been defined by the idyllic paintings of Antoine Watteau (1684-1721).<sup>28</sup> Elements of *fête galante* imagery had existed in art and literature since the Middle Ages, from the troubadour's songs of courtly love to depictions of idealised village festivals and shepherds and shepherdesses in a rural Arcadia. If Watteau was not the first artist to paint these and other related motifs, his *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* (1717) appears to be the first painting to be termed a *fête galante* by its artist.<sup>29</sup> Over the years 1714-1717, Watteau produced about 50 paintings in this style.<sup>30</sup> The world of the *fête galante* is a world shaped around love: lovers converse, serenade each other, offer flowers or disappear into distant bushes. If it is primarily an outdoor world of wooded glades and overgrown gardens, it is not disconnected from human creations: buildings are visible in the distance, characters are grouped around the stonework in the foreground or a marble statue offers a symbolic key to the scene's interpretation.

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<sup>27</sup> Ravel, 'Mes souvenirs d'un enfance parasite', originally published in *La Petite Gironde*, 12 July 1931, reprinted in *Paris-Soir*, 4 January 1938, and in *Musical 4* (1987), pp. 10-14, with an introduction by François Lesure; in English translation in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, pp. 393-5.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Posner, *Antoine Watteau* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), p. 151).

<sup>29</sup> Posner, *Antoine Watteau*, pp. 151, 182.

<sup>30</sup> Posner, *Antoine Watteau*, p. 117.

Creations of a culture and a people terminally disassociated from harsh realities, *fêtes galantes*, like fairytales, depicted a deliberately timeless, fantastic world. In paintings such as *La Perspective* women and children wear contemporary clothes but men wear costumes that recall the seventeenth century, while in *Les Plaisirs du bal* African child-servants lean over Italianate balconies (Plate 6). Yet like the fairytales, the paintings retain deliberate connections to their time and place: some of the faces are those of people Watteau knew (and the question of who was disappearing into bushes with whom was certainly a major preoccupation for the bored inhabitants of Versailles). Posner describes the scenes as ‘oddly familiar but distant, imaginatively believable but improbable’.<sup>31</sup> *Les Plaisirs du bal* seems to mirror Perrault’s descriptions of the Sleeping Beauty’s court, which itself had a distinct resemblance to Versailles that would, as F. André Favat notes, have been obvious to contemporary readers.<sup>32</sup>

Donald Stone has observed that the background of *L’Embarquement pour Cythère* derives from traditional Chinese landscape paintings, an appropriation typifying the stylised exoticism of *fêtes galantes*.<sup>33</sup> *Chinoiserie* was a defining influence on Watteau’s younger colleague François Boucher (1703-1770), dominating his works of the 1740s<sup>34</sup>; Oriental themes and images were also prominent in Sèvres porcelain from at least this decade and probably earlier. Fairytales, traditionally located ‘long ago and far away’, lent themselves particularly well to the popular taste for the exotic and the oriental, as the immediate and enduring success of Galland’s *Les mille et une nuits* demonstrated. If Boucher ‘dreamed of China as a fairyland’<sup>35</sup>, it is not coincidental that Ravel’s ‘Argument’ for the ballet version of *Ma mère l’Oye* stipulated that the designs for the ‘Laideronnette’ scene should be ‘Chinese, in the style of Boucher’<sup>36</sup> – a scene perhaps similar to that of Boucher’s *Vue d’un jardin chinois* (Plate 7).

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<sup>31</sup> Posner, *Antoine Watteau*, p. 148.

<sup>32</sup> F. André Favat, *Child and Tale: the Origins of Interest* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), p. 9. A clear (if subtle) caricature is suggested by Perrault’s description of the magnificent settings for the seven fairies at the princess’s christening feast, which included ‘a great golden case, in which lay a spoon, a fork and a knife of finest gold, surmounted with diamonds and rubies’.

<sup>33</sup> Irene Cheng, ‘Chinese Culture in European Art, Literature and Thought: Lecture Series by Professor Donald Stone’, *Ex/Change* (Newsletter of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, City University of Hong Kong) 1 (2001), <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/ccs/> (accessed 22 August 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Perrin Stein, ‘Boucher’s Chinoiserie: Some New Sources’, *The Burlington Magazine* 138:1122 (September 1996), p. 598.

<sup>35</sup> Cheng, ‘Chinese Culture in European Art, Literature and Thought’.

<sup>36</sup> Orenstein, *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, p. 384.

**Plate 6**

**Antoine Watteau, *Les plaisirs du bal***  
c. 1716-17, 53x65cm (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London)



**Plate 7**

**François Boucher, *Vue d'un jardin chinois***  
c. 1742, 39x53cm (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon)



From the eighteenth century into the twentieth, the fairytale world of the *fête galante* was closely connected with music and theatricality. Watteau often painted theatrical players and scenes from the *commedia dell'arte*, and included images of music and musicians in many of his *fêtes galantes*. His peasants dance to the music of musettes, and his aristocrats listen to *concerts champêtres* [in the countryside]; guitarists and lutenists court their loves with songs and serenades and a young girl dances to the music of her little brother's reed flute; the French 'players' are accompanied by a shawm, a violin and a *cornemuse* and the Italians, in *commedia* costumes, sing to the guitar. In their extended essay on Watteau, the enthusiastic Goncourt brothers frequently used musical terminology to describe his paintings, which they hailed as 'the nuptials of Nature and Opera':

I know not what slow, ambiguous harmony murmurs beneath his laughing words; I know not what melodious, sweetly communicable sadness penetrates these *fêtes galantes*.<sup>37</sup>

Carolyn Abbate, discussing the central musette passage of the 'Menuet' from Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, compared Watteau's paintings to the musettes of François Couperin, which similarly stylise 'peasant bucolicism' into 'faux-naivety'.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most Watteau-esque characters in Ravel's output, however, are the Shepherds and Shepherdesses of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, picturesquely lamenting their separation to the sounds of tambour and musette (or *cornemuse*), and portrayed in colours – 'our blue dog, our purple goat' – that seem to take Watteau's fantasised costumes just one step further from reality.

In the decades after the Goncourts' essay, interest in Watteau and the *fête galante* tradition was revived in the Parnassian school of French poetry, typified in the work of Paul Verlaine, whose *Fêtes galantes* (1869) prompted some of Debussy and Fauré's

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<sup>37</sup> Edmond and Jules Goncourt, 'L'art du dix-huitième siècle: Watteau', *Edmond et Jules de Goncourt (Textes intégraux)*, Paul Adamy and Alain Barbie Sainte Marie (eds.) (14 May 2005), <http://freresgoncourt.free.fr/texartdixhuitieme/art18e/watteau/texte.htm> (accessed 27 August 2007)). Debussy, echoed this passage in a letter of July 1914 to Désiré Walter:

[*L'isle joyeuse* is] also slightly *L'embarquement pour Cythère*, with less melancholy than Watteau: there one meets the masks of the Italian comedy, young women dancing and singing; everything ends in the glory of the setting sun.

(In Debussy, *Correspondance*, p. 1835.)

<sup>38</sup> Carolyn Abbate, 'Outside Ravel's tomb', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52:3 (Autumn 1999), p. 501.



most inspired song settings.<sup>39</sup> Ravel's sole Verlaine setting to be published and performed during his lifetime was *Sur l'herbe* (1907), the third of the 22 poems in Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*.<sup>40</sup>

*Sur l'herbe*

L'abbé divague. – Et toi, marquis,  
Tu mets de travers ta perruque.  
– Ce vieux vin de Chypre est exquis  
– Moins, Camargo, que votre nuque.

– Ma flamme... – Do, mi, sol, la, si.  
L'abbé, ta noirceur se dévoile !  
– Que je meure, Mesdames, si  
Je ne vous décroche une étoile !

– Je voudrais être petit chien !  
– Embrassons nos bergères l'une  
Après l'autre. – Messieurs, eh bien ?  
– Do, mi, sol. – Hé! bonsoir, la Lune !<sup>41</sup>

*On the grass*

The abbot rambles on. – 'And you, Marquis,  
You've got your wig on all askew  
– This old Cyprus wine is exquisite  
– But less so, Camargo, than the nape of your neck.'<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Debussy composed two sets of *Fêtes galantes* (1891 and 1904). He also set five of Verlaine's poems as early as 1882, including early settings of two of the poems in the 1891 *Fêtes galantes* ('En sourdine' and 'Clair de lune'; these were published posthumously), 'Fantoches' (in an early version which he then revised for inclusion in the 1891 set), and *Mandoline* (in a version that he later published separately). The first two movements of Debussy's *Petite suite* (1889) also take their titles from Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* ('En bateau' and 'Cortège'), as does the third movement of his *Suite bergamasque* ('Clair de lune', originally titled 'Promenade sentimentale'). Fauré's *Cinq mélodies de Venise* op. 58 of 1891, to poems by Verlaine, include three *Fêtes galantes*, 'En sourdine', 'Mandoline' and 'À Clymène'. Fauré also set 'Clair de lune' in 1887. Both Fauré and Debussy were also inspired directly by Watteau and the *fête galante* without the intermediary of Verlaine: Fauré's ballet *Masques et bergamasques* (1919) was inspired by Watteau's paintings, and his famous *Pavane* is in the same tradition: Fauré envisaged it danced outdoors in period costumes to a hidden orchestra. Debussy meditated (but never drafted) a ballet with his friend Louis Laloy entitled *Fêtes galantes*; his *Suite bergamasque* is also a homage to the *fête galante* tradition. (Roy Howat, 'The Clavecinistes', *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven: Yale UP, in press).)

<sup>40</sup> Ravel's other completed Verlaine setting, *Un grand sommeil noir*, was composed in 1895 and published posthumously in 1953 (Marnat, *Maurice Ravel*, p. 725). He also left an incomplete setting (early 1890s) of Verlaine's 'Le ciel est, par dessus le toit' (reproduced in Arbie Orenstein, 'Some Unpublished Music and Letters by Maurice Ravel', *The Music Forum* 3 (1973), pp. 292-6).

<sup>41</sup> This final line offers a connection to another work beloved of Ravel, Aloysius Bertrand's prose-poems *Gaspard de la nuit* (published posthumously in 1842): 'Les deux juifs' includes the lines 'Ohé! ohé! Lanterulu! / Ma révérence à Madame la lune!' (Jacques-Henry Bornecque, *Lumières sur les Fêtes Galantes de Paul Verlaine* (Paris: Nizet, 1959), p. 155.)

<sup>42</sup> Camargo was a well-known dancer, famously depicted in a *fête galante* painting by Watteau's pupil Lancret. (Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), p. 421.)

– My flame... – Do, mi, sol, la, si.  
Abbot, your wickedness is laid bare!  
– May I die, ladies, if  
I do not capture one of your spangles!

– I wish I were a little dog!  
– Let us embrace our shepherdesses, one  
After the other. – Well, good sirs?  
– Do, mi, sol. – Hey! good evening, Moon!

Verlaine's poem encapsulates many elements of Watteau's *fêtes galantes* paintings, the rural setting, the musical accompaniment, the languid dalliance, even the ever-present little dog. It is one of the darkest poems of the set, however, its lecherous abbot and marquis hinting disturbingly at the decay beneath the elegant surface. The *ancien régime*? Or perhaps the *noirceur* of the human soul laid bare. In any case, Ravel was probably attracted to the poem by its finely-poised play of elegance and menace, together with the anti-clerical slant that would have appealed to his own agnostic and anti-establishment sentiments. His setting captures the strumming of Watteau's obligatory guitar, with Verlaine's darkness suggested in the exaggeratedly languid piano chords and extravagant *portandi* in the vocal part. The last verse brings a sudden descent into terrifying brutishness, the mask of elegant civility resumed only in the moonlit stillness of the final bars.

The ill-fated Nicolette, who gave her name to the first of Ravel's *Trois chansons*, typifies the complexity of interaction between the *fête galante* and the fairytale. A Perrault-via-Watteau-via-Verlaine creation, Nicolette is a sort of Red Riding Hood, whose elegantly antique attire (mob-cap and white clogs) and rural setting (picking flowers in the fields) reflects the stylised bucolicism of the *fête galante*. She finally elopes with a lord as depraved as Verlaine's Marquis, thus confounding her fairytale narrative; the implications of this will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

Both the literary fairytale and the *fêtes galantes* were timeless, exotic and distant yet familiar, at once fantastic and stylised, but with a hint of satire – all qualities that characterise Ravel's own fairytales.<sup>43</sup> Watteau's *fêtes galantes*, painted around the time of the death of the 'Sun King', brought to a troubled and dissolute era the magical poise of the fairytale. Like Verlaine, Debussy, Fauré and Ravel looked back to Watteau a

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<sup>43</sup> In addition to the three central works of this study, *Ondine*, who is initially alluring but vanishes with cackles and shrieks, and the Swan of the *Histoires naturelles*, 'growing as fat as a goose' on worms, offer two other examples of Ravelian fantasies that end in ironic revelations.

century and more after the French Revolution had made his idealised world as irrecoverably distant as the tales of Perrault, d'Aulnoy and Antoine Galland.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.5 *Opéra féerie*

There is a natural affinity between fairytales and opera, a narrative-based genre that traditionally celebrates the fantastic and mythological. Like the salon fairytale, the tradition of *opéra féerie* [fairytale opera] began in eighteenth century France; Rameau's *Les fêtes de Polymnie* (1745), Laruelle's *Cendrillon* (1759), Duni's *La fée Urgèle* (1765) and Dezède's *Alcindor* (1787) are all examples of the genre.<sup>45</sup> *Opéras féeries* shared the stylised fantasy and exoticism, the elegance of manner, the predictable narratives and the allegorical touches of the salon fairytale. *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* may be seen as their twentieth century heir, an opera-ballet with a fairytale storyline, originally conceived as a 'divertissement'.

Between Rameau and Ravel came another *opéra féerie* whose influence on *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* was perhaps more direct. Emmanuel Chabrier's *L'Étoile* (1877) is a bizarre and hilarious Arabian Night, set in a 'fantasy Orient'<sup>46</sup> in which a series of ridiculous situations and an over-fearful Royal Astrologer with a pronounced instinct for self-preservation take the place of actual magic and magical creatures. *L'Étoile* is pure *opéra bouffe*, with no pretence to realistic Orientalism: its 'exotic' effects are deliberately limited to the cymbal and timpani flourishes of the opening (even these are more reminiscent of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* than any more 'authentic' source). Yet if it was conceived in part as a spoof of the serious exotic operas then in fashion<sup>47</sup>,

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<sup>44</sup> For further discussion of *fête galante* imagery in French music, see also Paul Roberts, *Images*, pp. 87-112.

<sup>45</sup> M. Elizabeth C. Bartlet, 'Opéra féerie', in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, www.grovemusic.com (18 September 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Albert Van Loo, *Souvenirs d'un librettiste*, quoted in Roger Delage, notes to Chabrier's *L'Étoile*, cond. John Eliot Gardiner, Chorus and Orchestra of the Opéra de Lyon (Compact disc, France: EMI 7478898, 1984), p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles* (1863) and *Carmen* (1875), Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* (1877) and Delibes' *Lakmé* (1883) are amongst the most famous of the many exotically themed French operas of the last part of the nineteenth century, in a tradition derived at least in part from the Saint-Simonian movement of the 1830s. In geographical terms little had altered since Rameau's time: if Rameau's 'les Indes' referred to anywhere but *ce pays-ci* ('this country here', as eighteenth century French aristocrats called Versailles), his successors looked for exoticism towards their Spanish neighbours and the distant Orient alike. Amongst the prolific literature on the extent and effect of exoticism on French music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the reader is invited to consult works such as *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathon Bellman (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998), *Recovering the Orient: Artists, Scholars, Appropriations*, eds. Andrew Gerstle and Anthony Milner (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood, 1994), *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, John MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995),

*L'Étoile* is neither cynical nor sardonic. Its music is delightfully wholehearted and very witty, with an attractive straightforwardness and unpretentiousness.

Ravel called Chabrier ‘the one musician who has influenced me above all others’.<sup>48</sup> He claimed that ‘I would rather have composed [Chabrier’s] *Le Roi malgré lui* than the whole [of Wagner’s] Tetralogy’<sup>49</sup> and – perhaps more debatably – ‘if the Debussyan revelation did not touch me deeply, it’s because I was already conquered by Chabrier’.<sup>50</sup> Although *L'Étoile* was not publicly revived until 1925, Ravel was almost certainly familiar with it before then: a Chabrier devotee such as he would have acquired and explored as much of his music as possible, and excerpts from the opera were certainly sung, formally or informally, in salons and amongst his friends.<sup>51</sup> Chabrier’s ‘Duo de la chartreuse verte’, an hilarious parody of a *bel canto* aria (which reportedly reduced Debussy to tears of laughter<sup>52</sup>) may well have influenced Ravel’s own Donizetti pastiche, the Fire’s aria in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. While less obviously ‘bouffish’ than the ‘Duo de la chartreuse verte’, the aria shares its key (C major) and its characteristic *portando* figures. More generally, *L'Étoile*, like *L'Enfant*, is a ‘numbers’ opera, composed of clearly defined and musically independent episodes (*L'Étoile*, as an *opéra bouffe*, includes spoken dialogue). Both operas are fantastic in conception, and both are presented with childlike candour.

Fairytale was more obviously intertwined with representations of childhood in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (1791). Emanuel Schikaneder’s libretto drew heavily on Christoph Wieland’s *Dschinnistan*, a famous collection of fairytales published between 1786 and 1789. If Wieland’s tale ‘Lulu, oder Die Zauberflöte’ offers the most obvious connection to Mozart’s opera, his ‘Nadir und Nadine’, ‘Adis und Dahy’ and ‘Der Stein der Weisen’ also contain elements appropriated for Schikaneder’s libretto: mirrored

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and the many writings of Ralph Locke, including *Music, Musicians and the Saint-Simonians* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986) and his articles on ‘Exoticism’ and ‘Orientalism’ in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, [www.grovemusic.com](http://www.grovemusic.com) (19 September 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Letter to Madame Bretton-Chabrier, 4 December 1929, in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 303.

<sup>49</sup> José Bruyr, *Maurice Ravel, ou le lyrisme et les sortilèges* (Paris: Plon, 1950), p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Memories of a lazy child’, in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 394.

<sup>51</sup> Debussy certainly knew and loved this opera: ‘one of his delights was to sing to his own accompaniment sometimes the whole of *L'Étoile* from beginning to end’. (Rollo Myers, *Emmanuel Chabrier and his circle* (London: Dent, 1969), p. 19.)

<sup>52</sup> Francis Poulenc, *Emmanuel Chabrier* (Geneva and Paris: La Palatine, 1961), p. 44.

names, an apparently benevolent magician who turns out to be the villain, a Moor falling in love with the white maiden he serves, and a trial scene.<sup>53</sup>

Specifics aside, the basic outline of *Die Zauberflöte* includes some of the commonest themes in fairytales. There are tests or trials that the protagonists have to endure and magical objects that aid them in their quest. The heroes are captured and then released, or they escape. They make promises and deny themselves things (not to eat the food they are brought; not to speak). Vices are punished in appropriate ways: the Queen of the Night punishes Papageno for lying by making him temporarily dumb.<sup>54</sup>

David Buch has suggested that the Masonic symbolism of *Die Zauberflöte* has overshadowed the importance of its fairytale heritage. He convincingly argues that it is the fairytale that gives the opera its wide-reaching appeal, making it understandable and accessible to non-Masons.<sup>55</sup> Although the opera's fairytale characteristics are often viewed as ornamentation grafted onto a deeper symbolism, Buch argues that:

[T]he fairy-tale element itself offers many of the basic allegories in the opera and facilitates a double-edged purpose that was well-known at the time: to instruct and amuse simultaneously, 'improving' the listener while entertaining him. [...] The dramatic effect occurs not in spite of one-dimensional characters, simple, rustic language, and unusual plot, but because of them.<sup>56</sup>

Ravel cited Mozart repeatedly in interviews, lessons and conversations and took Mozart's aesthetics of clarity, elegance and beauty for his own (once declaring that his own music was 'quite simple, nothing but Mozart'<sup>57</sup>). In an interview given in Vienna in 1920 he lamented that he had not had the chance to hear a Mozart opera on his visit.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> David Buch, 'Fairy-Tale Literature and *Die Zauberflöte*', *Acta Musicologica* 64:1 (1992), pp. 41-2.

<sup>54</sup> Buch, 'Fairy-Tale Literature and *Die Zauberflöte*', p. 47. Other fairytale characteristics in *Die Zauberflöte* include the use of paired names: the high-minded Tamino/Pamina and the more amusing, 'common', Papageno/Papagena. The 'everyman' Papageno is particularly connected with German folk traditions of rustic innocence, an affinity emphasised by Mozart with his *volkslied*-like arias that contrast with the more lyrical, Italianate music of Pamina and Tamino.

<sup>55</sup> Buch, 'Fairy-Tale Literature and *Die Zauberflöte*', p. 31.

<sup>56</sup> Buch, 'Fairy-Tale Literature and *Die Zauberflöte*', p. 46.

<sup>57</sup> Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 38n2.

<sup>58</sup> Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 419. Ravel almost certainly saw performances in Paris, however: *Le nozze de Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte* were all in the repertoire of the Opéra-Comique, collectively receiving hundreds of performances from the late nineteenth century until after the First World War. In the 1920s *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte* passed into the repertory of the Opéra Garnier. (Stéphane Wolff, *Un demi-siècle d'Opéra-Comique* (Paris: Bonne, 1953), pp. 52-3, 61-2, 77-8, 127-9.)

The fairytale heritage of *Die Zauberflöte* is closely related to that of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* and *Ma mère l'Oye*: Christoph Wieland was influenced by Perrault (in style) and Galland (in exotic settings) as well as traditional German fairytales.<sup>59</sup> Mozart's imagery of children and childhood may also have had particular significance for Ravel. Both were known to delight in fairytales<sup>60</sup>, and both interwove fairytales with childhood in their operas. The Three Boys of *Die Zauberflöte* typify a childlike innocence and truthfulness (expressed in their pure harmonies as well as in their words and actions) and provide crucial guidance at Pamina's, Tamino's and Papageno's blackest moments. In their innocence, insight and honesty, the Boys seem to typify the German Romantic perception of childhood. Yet Elizabeth Giuliani argues that in his musical depictions of children and childhood Mozart, like Ravel, offered a perspective more complex than that of idealised Romantic perception, juxtaposing fantasy with reality, and innocence with experience. Giuliani writes of the character of Cherubino (*Le nozze de Figaro*) in words that could apply equally to the Child of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*:

Amadeus responds just as perfectly to the less angelic conceptions of childhood: perverse, lewd, fascinated by the forbidden and saved by sublimation...<sup>61</sup>

As an adult Mozart never recaptured the European-wide recognition and acclaim that he had experienced as a child prodigy and his inability to adjust to the confines of Viennese society probably hastened his early death. Buch writes that:

...musical composition was for Mozart a kind of escape to a world where he had precise control over the results of his efforts, forming a contrast to the disorder and perilous aspect of his own life.<sup>62</sup>

Just as the subject matter of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* promised Ravel comfort and inspiration in a time of personal hardship (Chapter Eight explores this in more detail), *Die Zauberflöte*, written in the last months of Mozart's short, intense and restless existence, perhaps offered a similar refuge in childhood and fairytale.

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<sup>59</sup> *Le cabinet des fées*, a compendium of French fairytales including those of Perrault and d'Aulnoy, was published between 1785 and 1789 and distributed widely. Many of these tales were also available individually in German translation by the mid-eighteenth century, while Wieland directly translated others into *Dschimmistan*. (Zipes, 'The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale', p. 18, and Buch, 'Fairy-Tale Literature and *Die Zauberflöte*', pp. 31, 37.)

<sup>60</sup> Mozart was by all accounts an affectionate father and almost certainly read fairytales to his children; he met Christoph Wieland in 1777. (Buch, 'Fairy-Tale Literature and *Die Zauberflöte*', p. 48.)

<sup>61</sup> Elisabeth Giuliani, 'La musique et l'enfance', *L'Avant-Scène Opéra*, 127 (January 1990), p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> Buch, 'Fairy-Tale Literature and *Die Zauberflöte*', p. 46.

### 3.6 In search of the *élan vital*

Jean Paul Richter, like Charles Dickens, advocated the importance of fairytale and fantasy in children's education. Richter specifically suggested that taking children to see *Die Zauberflöte* or another fantastic opera would help introduce them to the world of magic and fairytale.<sup>63</sup> Musical and theatrical representations of fairytales also encouraged adult theatregoers to reclaim their own lost belief in magic and fantasy. Across the 150 years from Leprince de Beaumont's fairytales to the turn of the twentieth century, the increasingly industrialised, post-Enlightenment adult population was compelled to relinquish its own belief in fairies for a new rational pragmatism. Since nurses were to be found less often in the nurseries of the new middle classes, the bringing up of children was, more than ever, the responsibility of their parents. It was, therefore, parents who told fairytales to their children – a conscious decision, representing a cultural shift more fundamental than that of fashion. Like attending an *opéra féerie*, passing on the lore of fairytales was, for the parents of the industrial age, a way of subconsciously preserving a belief in magic. As Crubellier puts it:

But at the point where these dedicated [children's] publications were triumphantly multiplying; [...] an astonishing reversal began: wonder, fantasy, a certain drollery [...] were recovered by a large sector of the adult population.<sup>64</sup>

Crubellier's words have a much broader application: beyond literature and fairytales themselves, a taste for wonder and fantasy found expression across the culture of the Third Republic.

Up until the late eighteenth century, many scientists (particularly chemists, chemistry then being not long separated from alchemy) searched for what was popularly known as the *élan vital*, a force that could bring inanimate objects to life.<sup>65</sup> In the more prosaic nineteenth century, stories of Pygmalion-like awakening were brought about not through Mary Shelley's lighting bolt but through mechanisation and the animation of inanimate objects. Overwhelmingly, the things that come alive in nineteenth-century fairytales are nineteenth-century creations: dolls and toys, things that already have some semblance of mechanical life, and things that were intimately

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<sup>63</sup> Berger, *Jean Paul Friedrich Richter*, p. 145.

<sup>64</sup> Crubellier, *L'Enfance et la jeunesse dans la société française*, p. 352.

<sup>65</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (London: Transworld, 2003), p. 88.

connected with the burgeoning culture of children and childhood. This trend was almost certainly stimulated by the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose armies of toy soldiers, Kingdom of Sweets, and men who fall in love with dolls (or girls pretending to be dolls) inspired variously Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*, Delibes' *Coppélia* and Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. One of the more famous scenes in the latter work is the Doll's Aria: her mechanism exaggeratedly runs down and must be rewound at the end of each verse. Hoffmann's 'Der Sandmann' and 'Nußknacker und Mausekönig' (upon which these works were based) were originally darkly Gothic, adult-oriented tales. The considerable modification and 'prettification' they underwent on their way to the theatre typifies the changing cultures of childhood and fairytales across the nineteenth century.

Amongst the many fairytales to take their settings from the crowded nurseries of the Third Republic was another ballet, Debussy's *La Boîte à Joujoux*. The work was composed in piano score in 1913, a year after the première of the ballet version of Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye*, whose success had perhaps inspired Debussy to try his own hand at another *enfantine*.<sup>66</sup> Debussy's original conception was that the ballet should be performed by marionettes; he later agreed with his librettist Hellé that it should be danced by children, suggesting that there would be no need to employ a ballet-master, since there would be only 'movements, not traditional ballet steps'.<sup>67</sup>

If not precisely a fairytale (there are no human characters and no magical acts, save the toys coming to life), the plot of *La Boîte à Joujoux* nevertheless contains several fairytale elements: there is a mysterious, 'Once upon a time...' prelude, entitled 'The Toybox asleep', a climactic battle and a coquettish Doll who, seeing the devoted Soldier wounded in her cause, finally rejects the wicked Polichinelle, marries the Soldier and lives happily ever after. The Polichinelle, however, is not consigned to outer darkness in the manner of a true fairytale villain: with a touch of social irony, he reforms and becomes a rural gendarme (*garde-champêtre*).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The outbreak of war evidently put paid to any immediate prospect of performance, and an increasingly unwell Debussy never received the necessary stimulus to complete the orchestration of the ballet. The work was not performed until 1919, orchestrated by André Caplet.

<sup>67</sup> Letters to Jacques Durand, 31 October 1913 and 19 (?) May 1914, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, pp. 1678, 1812.

<sup>68</sup> The work's conception and content bear a distinct resemblance to Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (1911) – another major work about the animation of an inanimate quasi-human figure, employing characters from the *commedia dell'arte*, as Robert Orledge has pointed out ('Another look inside Debussy's "Toybox"',



The toys of *La Boîte à Joujoux* carry on their secret life out of sight of the proprietor of their toyshop; the first scene ends when, at daybreak, the head of the proprietor is seen beyond the window, sending them frantically scuttling back to their places to become still and lifeless once more. Unlike the Nutcracker and his soldiers, these toys can only come to life when they are unobserved – or at least, observed only by those beyond the proscenium arch.<sup>69</sup> The *commedia dell'arte* characters – which include Arlequin and Pierrot, as well as the protagonists Soldier, Polichinelle, and Doll (Columbine?) – are given identifying themes, which are set out by Debussy and Hellé at the beginning of the work (Plate 8): a waltz for the doll, a martial trumpet-call for the soldier and a discordant, staggering figure for the Polichinelle. With these themes, so clearly established, Debussy deliberately reduces the *leitmotif* to the tinkling of so many musical boxes, in a gesture as pointed as it is effective. The toys dance to their musical boxes, and if, unlike Offenbach's Doll, they do not need winding, their themes remind us that their movements and even the narrative are controlled by the exigencies and limitations of their mechanisms.

*La Boîte à Joujoux* also contains Debussy's most extensive collection of musical quotations: in the second scene, the toy soldiers make their entrance to a *pianissimo* rendition of the theme of the 'Soldier's March' from Gounod's *Faust* (page 28-9 of the Durand piano score<sup>70</sup>) and the Doll and her Soldier are married to the distant strains of Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March' from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (page 44). Debussy also makes passing references to French folk tunes and children's songs, together with various of his own compositions.<sup>71</sup> Like the characters' musical-box

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*The Musical Times*, 117:1606 (December 1976), p. 989). Orledge notes that the combination of a diatonic theme with sliding chromatic harmonies (in, for example, the polka on pp. 46-7 of the piano score or in the opening Prelude) also has *Petrushka*-like qualities, as does the Soldier's characteristic rising fifth motif (p. 989). The composition of *La Boîte* closely followed that of the second book of Debussy's *Préludes*, whose many *Petrushkan* references have been observed by Roy Howat ('Larger Painting in Musical Structure: Debussy's Preludes', *The Art of French Piano Music*) and Mark McFarland, 'Debussy and Stravinsky: another look at their musical relationship', *Cahiers Debussy* 24 (2000), pp. 79–112.

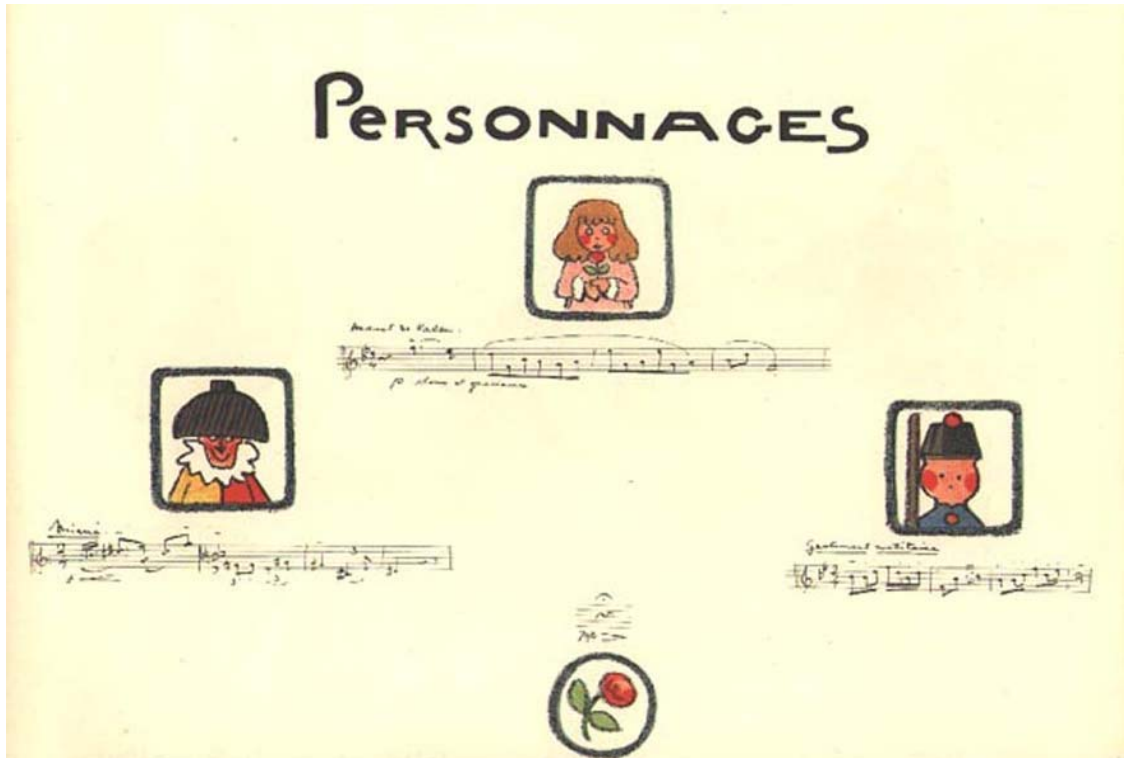
<sup>69</sup> As with the composition of *Children's Corner*, Debussy entered thoroughly into the spirit of the thing, writing to his editor in July 1913 that he was busy 'extracting confidences from Chouchou's old dolls and learning to play the drum', and, three months later, that 'the soul of a doll is more mysterious than even Maeterlinck imagined'. (Letters of 25 July and 27 September 1913, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, pp. 1646, 1667.)

<sup>70</sup> Claude Debussy, *La Boîte à Joujoux* (Paris: Durand, D&F 8935, 1913).

<sup>71</sup> Debussy took the theme of *Le petit nègre* for the entrance of the English Soldier on page 9, while the shepherd's pipe in the Third Scene (*Lent et mélancolique*, p. 38) recalls the first of the *Six épigraphes antiques* (although the latter work was not published until 1915, it was based on the incidental music for chamber ensemble that Debussy had composed for readings of Pierre Louÿs' *Chansons de Bilitis* in

tunes, Debussy's referential composing seems to reinforce their unreality: his toys are brought to life not of their own volition but through the inspiration and under the guidance of unseen others.

**Plate 8**      **André Hellé, *La Boîte à joujoux* (frontispiece)**  
In Claude Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux* (Paris: Durand, 1913)



If its creation perhaps owed something to *Ma mère l'Oye*, in its realisation *La Boîte à Joujoux* foreshadows elements of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* – another work whose fairytale storyline is realised in dance. The inanimate characters of Ravel's post-war opera-ballet are also those whose music is the most 'recycled'. The elegant Louis XV Armchair and Bergère dance a minuet (what else?), the Cup and Teapot juxtapose a foxtrot with faux-*chinoiserie* and the shepherds and shepherdesses dance their pastoral *fête galante*, while the Clock's mechanism runs down like Offenbach's Doll when he attempts a reprise of the opening material of his aria. Only the fairytale Princess and the animals are given music that is truly their own. While the inanimate *sortilèges* appear and disappear in self-contained isolation, the Princess converses with the Child and prompts his sole aria. The Cats lead him into the living, breathing Garden, where amongst the trees, insects, birds, frogs and squirrels he finds self-knowledge and

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1900-1901). For a broader discussion of Debussy's 'borrowings' in *La Boîte à joujoux*, see Robert Orledge, 'Another look inside Debussy's "Toybox"'.

reconciliation. Here again are echoes of the nineteenth century fairytale, in which inanimate characters can be brought to a semblance of life, but where only living beings (and fairytale princesses) have the power to truly change the world.

The year 1913 also saw the publication of Ravel's two *À la manière de...* pieces. Like *La Boîte* and *L'Enfant*, these works gesture towards the musical salon tradition of quotation and ironic 'recomposition' (also wittily explored in Saint-Saëns *Le carnaval des animaux*). Although Debussy wrote that *La Boîte à Joujoux* was written 'to amuse children, nothing more', his clever quotations, like Ravel's pastiches in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, add an extra layer of meaning and humour that would have appealed to alert parents watching the ballet performance with their children. They simultaneously suggest a connection to another salon tradition, the literary fairytale, with its layers of wit and subtle contemporary references and parodies.

### **3.7 'A shimmering city'**

In late nineteenth-century France, concepts of fantasy and fairytale were by no means confined to the creative arts. Hoffmann's imagery of dolls and other inanimate things coming to life became almost a reality, as an extraordinary series of inventions proved: the phonograph, a camera that could take still pictures and then, more miraculous still, moving ones; electric light, refrigeration, the telephone and, most important of all, the motor car. These contraptions found rapid applications in a society in which the middle classes were becoming both the most numerous and the most important consumers. Thus available, they stimulated the public imagination to an extraordinary extent: suddenly things that people had thought could only exist in fairytales were conceivably becoming reality.

One of the best illustrations of just how inspired people were by the possibilities of invention – and how little those inspirations were constrained by practical considerations – comes from the plans submitted in the mid-1890s as options for the grand layout of the 1900 Exposition Universelle. Among the submissions was one that proposed to tunnel, Verne-like, two kilometres beneath the surface of Paris and lay out the Exposition there, on the grounds that this would save on heating costs and prevent disruption to the city itself.<sup>72</sup> Around the same time, submissions for the proposed new

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<sup>72</sup> Philippe Jullian, *The Triumph of Art Nouveau: Paris Exhibition, 1900* (London: Phaidon, 1974), p. 24.

Métropolitain (which also opened in 1900) included Édouard Mazet's bright idea of stringing gondola-like carriages between the lampposts of Paris.<sup>73</sup> Bizarre as these suggestions now seem, the very fact of their proposition demonstrates how technological possibilities were inspiring the public imagination and opening up new worlds of fantastic speculation.

Technology, exoticism and fantasy of all descriptions came together in the Expositions Universelles staged in Paris in 1878, 1889 and 1900. The 1900 Exposition was the biggest and most fantastical of them all. Its main entrance was the Porte Binet on the Place de la Concorde, a marvellous (and inescapably garish) edifice described by Michel Corday (who was there) as 'at once imposing as a cathedral, as colourful as a mosque and as fine-cut as a pagoda'.<sup>74</sup> Passing through the Porte Binet (Plate 9) and crossing the Pont Alexandre III, the visitor would see across the Seine the Quai des Nations (Plate 10), a series of flamboyant elaborations and stylisations of the architecture and heritage of the participating countries. Jean Lorrain wrote of this scene, 'What sight could equal this mighty avenue of water lined with alhambras, generalifes, pagodas, cathedrals and kremlins?'<sup>75</sup>

In a day at the Exposition, one could ride the *trottoir roulant* (moving footpath) which took passengers from the Invalides to the Champs de Mars at a breathless 4.5kph (Plate 11)<sup>76</sup>, take the Trans-Siberian Railway from Russia to China (their pavilions were conveniently situated next to one another) or even a whirlwind, Jules Verne-inspired 'Tour du Monde' (the voyage enhanced by cinematographic projections). Later, one might experience medieval Paris, 'Andalusia in the time of the Moors' or an Algerian souk, and end the day watching coloured lights illuminate the fountains of the Palais Lumineux. One could even visit the 'Maison à l'Envers', where, entering through the 'roof', people could stroll around, admire the furniture suspended in the air and the chandeliers illuminating their feet (Plate 12).<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> David L. Pike, *Subterranean Cities: The World beneath Paris and London, 1800-1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2005), p. 49.

<sup>74</sup> In Christophe Prochasson, *Paris 1900: Essai d'histoire culturelle* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1999), p. 100.

<sup>75</sup> Philippe Jullian, *The Triumph of Art Nouveau*, p. 62.

<sup>76</sup> Béatrix Forissier, *25 Ans d'actualités à travers la carte postale: 1889-1914* (Paris: Éditions de l'amateur, 1976), pp. 37, 41.

<sup>77</sup> Jullian, *The Triumph of Art Nouveau*, p. 176.

**Plate 9**

**Exposition Universelle 1900, 'La Porte Binet'**

French postcard, 1900, reproduced on *Exposition Universelle, Paris 1900*  
[http://lemog.free.fr/lemog\\_expo\\_v2/index.php](http://lemog.free.fr/lemog_expo_v2/index.php)



**Plate 10**

**Exposition Universelle 1900, 'Sur la Seine: Les Palais des Nations'**

French postcard, 1900, reproduced on *Exposition Universelle, Paris 1900*  
[http://lemog.free.fr/lemog\\_expo\\_v2/index.php](http://lemog.free.fr/lemog_expo_v2/index.php)



**Plate 11**

**Exposition Universelle 1900, 'Trottoir roulant'**

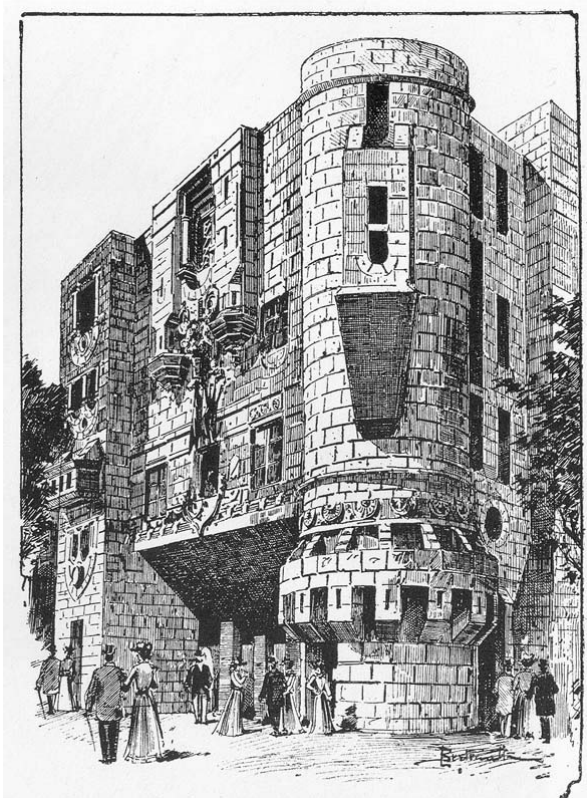
French postcard, 1900, reproduced on *Exposition Universelle, Paris 1900*  
[http://lemog.free.fr/lemog\\_expo\\_v2/index.php](http://lemog.free.fr/lemog_expo_v2/index.php)



**Plate 12**

**Exposition Universelle 1900, 'La maison à l'invers'**

French postcard, 1900, reproduced on *Exposition Universelle, Paris 1900*  
[http://lemog.free.fr/lemog\\_expo\\_v2/index.php](http://lemog.free.fr/lemog_expo_v2/index.php)





If the 1889 Exhibition had been a ‘victory of science’<sup>78</sup>, in which engineers took prominence over architects, the 1900 Exhibition saw the science itself subsumed in its own spectacular effects. As Philippe Jullian put it, ‘The mechanical Utopia of 1889 remained, but curiously transformed into a kind of fairyland magic’.<sup>79</sup> Miriam Levin described the Exhibition as a vision of progress in which,

[f]or consumers, the general emphasis was on the magical effects, the illusions, and the ease offered by the dynamo and electric lighting, rather than on understanding the structures and mechanisms of these inventions or the manner in which they were made and distributed.<sup>80</sup>

The terms and concepts of magic, fantasy, and *féerie* occur repeatedly in descriptions of the Exhibition written by those who attended it. As Charles Simond recalled:

The public was expecting a fair with sensational shows and it was offered a kind of dream-city, [...] a shimmering city...<sup>81</sup>

While the many black and white photos of these scenes are the most literally accurate representations left to us, the dreamy colours of the postcards reproduced as Plates 9 and 10 perhaps capture more expressively the spirit of the Exposition, as it was described and recalled.

Ravel, fourteen years old in 1889 and 25 at the turn of the century, would almost certainly have attended both Expositions. In 1889 he was young enough to retain a child’s sense of wonder at the marvels he saw, but old enough to want to understand how they worked.<sup>82</sup> His engineer and inventor father would also have been fascinated by the technological feats the Exposition celebrated; he no doubt enthusiastically explained as much as he could to his sons in 1889, and, eleven years later, would have delighted in the magical effects of the 1900 Exposition. As later chapters discuss, the ‘illusion of life’ that mechanisms could so magically create was a perpetual source of enchantment for Ravel, almost certainly inspired in part by his experiences at the Expositions. The visual and aural panorama that is *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* seems to

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<sup>78</sup> Jullian, *The Triumph of Art Nouveau*, p. 14.

<sup>79</sup> Jullian, *The Triumph of Art Nouveau*, p. 16.

<sup>80</sup> Miriam Levin, *When the Eiffel Tower was new: French visions of progress at the centennial of the Revolution* (Mount Holyoke College Art Museum: Massachusetts UP, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>81</sup> Jullian, *The Triumph of Art Nouveau*, p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> Ravel would also have wondered at the diverse, unfamiliar and often fantastic-seeming music of the 1889 Exposition (including, famously, the Javanese gamelan that so inspired Claude Debussy). See the comprehensive study of the Exposition’s musical events by Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

owe a debt of inspiration to Ravel's memories of the 1900 Exposition: the Louis XIV armchair, Chinese teacup, Wedgwood teapot, Donizetti-dancing Fire and antique pastorate have something of the colourful, diverse and fantastic stylisation of the Quai des Nations.

For all the vaunted benefits of the Exposition's *leçons des choses*, and despite the serious and self-aggrandising motives of many of the exhibiting nations (this was, after all, the apogee of colonialism and militarism; the storm clouds of the First World War were already gathering), for the general public the lasting memory was of a day spent in a sort of modern fairytale, in which they could move freely between any number of magical and exotic experiences. The Expositions Universelles were a collective expression and experience of the fantasy of the age.

### 3.8 Conclusion

Let us return to the question posed earlier in this chapter: what is a fairytale? What threads of imagery and imagination link Mozart's operas, Verlaine's poems, Watteau's and Boucher's paintings, Emmanuel Chabrier's 'fantasy Orient', and the 'shimmering city' of 1900? J.R.R. Tolkien, author of one of the great fairytales of the twentieth-century, defined the genre thus:

The definition of a fairy-story – what it is, or what it should be – does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of *Faërie*: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country.<sup>83</sup>

All the seemingly disparate works and images discussed in this chapter are connected by the threads of magic and fantasy obligatory to the literary fairytale. All are formalised and stylised and all are constructed on clear and regular structures and patterns; Chapters Four and Five return to this. All are, in a sense, escapist, depicting worlds imagined or half-glimpsed; Chapter Seven explores this concept. They are all narrative-based: Watteau's painting *La Perspective*, which depicts several couples in different stages of courtship, tells its story as clearly as do the separate (but related) fairytales of *Ma mère l'Oye*. And all of them are deliberately beautiful; or at least they intentionally contrast the beautiful with the ugly, ridiculous, distasteful or frightening. As C.S. Lewis puts it:

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<sup>83</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', p. 122.



For in the fairy tales, side by side with the terrible figures, we find the immemorial comforters and protectors, the radiant ones; and the terrible figures are not merely terrible, but sublime.<sup>84</sup>

The elegant, resonant and occasionally satirical prose of Perrault, d'Aulnoy and their contemporaries gave the fairytale its definitive French expression, and its forms and imagery can be found across the art and music of the eighteenth century. The key fairytale qualities of fantasy, idealisation, stylisation and exoticism were shared alike by salon tales, the *fête galante* and *opéra féerie*. They would reappear to shape much fantasy- and fairytale-inspired works of art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an era that frequently and consciously looked to the pre-Revolutionary age for artistic inspiration.

Despite their breadth and complexity, the interactions between the works and concepts discussed in this chapter may be summed up in two short minutes of music. 'Laideronnette', the central movement of Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye*, is based on Mme d'Aulnoy's salon fairytale 'Le serpent vert' ['The green serpent'], one of her 1697 collection of *Contes de fées* and itself a variant on the ancient tale of Cupid and Psyche. Laideronnette sails to the land of the (exotic, oriental) Pagodes and Pagodines, a land Ravel imagined depicted in the style of a painter, Boucher, whose subjects included not just *chinoiserie* but the Cupid and Psyche story (as well as his friend Watteau, in a famous portrait). Ravel's setting turns the scene into a kind of musical box, as fantastically engineered as the Porte Binet, and as mechanically realistic and realistically mechanical as the animistic toys he so loved.

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<sup>84</sup> C.S. Lewis, 'On three ways of writing for children', p. 67.

# Chapter Four

## Magic words:

### Language and storytelling

Millimètre, centimètre, décimètre,  
décamètre, hectomètre, kilomètre, myriamètre,  
Faut t'y mettre, quelle fête !  
Des millions, des billions, des trillions, et des frac-cillions !

*L'Enfant et les sortilèges*

#### 4.1 Introduction

Maurice Ravel's perception of language was defined by his *métier*. As a lover of literature he had taste and discernment; as a close friend of poets, novelists and critics he understood the technical processes of literary composition; and as a writer and poet himself he had the imagination and vision to appreciate and create subtle shifts of meaning and imagery.

Most importantly, Ravel understood words as a musician. With his composer's acuity, he appreciated not only their appearance on the printed page but their sound and resonance in the ear. He could recognise the swing of a perfectly balanced phrase, the slight changes of inflection that affect sense and emphasis and the rhythm and melody inherent in spoken language. He had a decided taste for onomatopoeia and seemed to delight in the dextrous juggling of rhymes and rhythms. His storyteller's awareness of the sounds and rhythms of words is made plain in the *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, which is so-called not because of any programmatic content, but simply because the phrase is a particularly melodious one.<sup>1</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Ravel was repeatedly drawn to the literary fairytale, a genre steeped in oral tradition. Most people are told fairytales before they learn to read: we thus encounter them first as an auditory, not a visual experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuckenschmidt, *Ravel: Variations sur l'homme et l'œuvre*, p. 49. Roy Howat suggests that the title sounds like 'a truncated alexandrine, starting, typically for Ravel, in mid-phrase'. ('Ravel and the piano', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 75.)

Whether the tale-teller improvises the narrative or reads from a published version, it is the sound of the words that matters. Bruno Bettelheim has suggested that children should not be told fairytales from illustrated books because one of the most important elements in the telling of the tales is the freedom they grant to the imagination.<sup>2</sup> Everybody has a different idea of what a terrible ogre, Jack's beanstalk or a gingerbread house would look like. Fairytales, Bettelheim argued, should stimulate the imagination and encourage the listener to create their own imaginings, rather than bind them to the imagery of others. The flexibility and mutability of individual imaginings also ensure the continuity of the fairytale tradition; tales can be recreated and understood across eras and nationalities. Music is a perfect vehicle for conveying fairytales: it binds the hearer to no specific images but frees us to create our own pictures from the sounds that fleetingly surround us.

Ravel wrote that his intention in *Ma mère l'Oye* was to depict 'the poetry of childhood'. A literal interpretation of this phrase could suggest the simple evocation of the poetry that one hears in one's childhood – and, particularly, in this context, the poetry of fairytales. In the fairytale-inspired *Trois chansons* for mixed choir and the little song *Noël des jouets* (for which Ravel wrote his own texts), and in his collaboration with Colette on *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, Ravel made particularly expressive use of the traditions of fairytale communication. Even the wordless *Ma mère l'Oye* conveys a strong sense of the narrative voice, suggested, perhaps, by Ravel's rôle as favourite storyteller to Mimi and Jean Godebski. Through his creation and manipulation of language, and through colourful physical and musical gesture, Ravel deliberately aligned his music with the traditions of the fairytale and its telling.

## 4.2 Storytelling in music: voice, word and gesture

Subtitled *L'Enfant et les sortilèges a fantaisie lyrique*, Ravel wrote of its 'predominant concern for melody [...] The vocal line must dominate. The orchestra, though not renouncing virtuosity, is nevertheless of secondary importance'.<sup>3</sup> His description hints at an awareness of the naturally expressive storytelling voice. Marie-Pierre Lassus has observed that, 'If the music of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* is vocal first

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<sup>2</sup> Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>3</sup> Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, p. 32.

and foremost, that is because song is synonymous with enchantment...<sup>4</sup> Equally, it is not coincidental that the melodies of the fairytale-based *Ma mère l'Oye* are, perhaps, *mélodies manquées*. Songs and singers are woven through many fairytales and are hinted at in spells and chants. Rapunzel in her tower sings, Ondine-like, as she combs her long hair; the Big Bad Wolf calls 'Little pig, little pig, let me come in!' and the pig melodiously replies, 'Not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin'. Fairytale characters identify themselves with phrases whose very sounds paint a resonant portrait: witness the Giant who chants 'Fee fi fo fum...' or that same Big Bad Wolf, who threatens 'I'll *huff* and I'll *puff* and I'll *blow* your house down'. This inherent onomatopoeia is a quality that endears fairytales to children: although they may be too young to imagine just what a great beanstalk or a big bad wolf would look like, they still respond instinctively to the assonances and the rhythms of the narrative, and wait expectantly for the 'happily ever after'.

Storytelling, like piano duet playing, is an essentially shared experience; it is often a bonding process for parents (or adults) and children. Ravel himself had a substitute-parent status for Mimi and Jean Godebski: as an adult Mimi asserted his importance in their lives when she wrote that his death felt like losing her parents for the second time.<sup>5</sup> *Ma mère l'Oye* is therefore both a celebration of Ravel's friendship with the Godebski children and a musical representation of the act and the art of storytelling, just as it depicts the stories themselves.

This sense of communication is particularly apparent in 'Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête' ['The conversations of the Beauty and the Beast']. Not for nothing did Ravel choose the waltz, the most conversational and intimate of dances, to depict this scene. In 'La Belle et la Bête' we may hear the very voice of the storyteller, at once expressive and dramatic, but also essentially separate from his tale. Although Ravel's Beast growls and stamps, he never breaks out of the gentle, rocking waltz-rhythm of the opening passage. There is no terror in this Beast; it is easy to imagine Ravel taking on a falsetto voice to play the Beauty's response to the Beast's grumbles, or down on all fours and snapping playfully at the legs and hands of his listeners. Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, one

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<sup>4</sup> Marie-Pierre Lassus, 'Ravel, l'Enchanteur: Structure poétique et structure musicale dans *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*', *Analyse musicale* 26 (1992), p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Mimi Godebska Blacque-Belair, 'Quelques souvenirs intimes de Ravel', *La Revue musicale* 19:187 (Special issue dedicated to Ravel, December 1938), p. 191.

of Ravel's closest friends from the 1920s until his death, wrote vividly of his ability to act out a part in telling a story:

I see him still, arching his back, his index finger raised mysteriously beside his nose, changing his looks and, like a child, believing in his metamorphosis, amusing himself by adopting a deep, cavernous voice...<sup>6</sup>

Children love to frighten themselves with fairytales, especially from within the comfort and safety of home and family. In 'Petit Poucet', the listener senses a fear like that of 'La Belle et la Bête', experienced truly but vicariously by the children who are listening to the story. Ravel chose the darkly dramatic key of C minor for 'Petit Poucet', but softened it by the wandering quavers' refusal ever to settle in the tonic, the modal melodies and the undermining of the plagal cadence in bars 72-3 by the chromatic movement in the tenor voice. The scene seems to be set in the evening, before night falls and it begins to rain, and before the children hear (or think they hear) the howl of wolves in the rising wind. There is no sense of panic here: bewilderment, fear and loneliness, yes, but not the blind terror that will overcome them later in the tale, nor the desperation that will lead them to seek shelter in the house of an ogre.

Yet the fear of Petit Poucet and his brothers is real and Ravel understands it. The quaver movement is endlessly moving but directionless; primarily stepwise movement and phrases generally falling through a fifth increase both the sense of the children's smallness – they take only little steps – and a general feeling of hopelessness. The birdcalls in bars 51-54 give a particularly desperate sense of expectation to the extension of the characteristic rising three-note motif (bars 55-59): following the birds, the children see a ray of sunlight, a possible path – but the birds vanish, the trees close in and in bar 60 the children find themselves precisely where they were in bar 4 (Ex. 4.1). Despite the final *tierce de picardie*, there is no resolution here: the reiteration of the opening four bars proves that they have wandered in a great circle.

Robert Schumann seems to depict the telling of similarly frightening tales to children in his 'Fürchtenmachen' ('Being frightened'), from *Kinderscenen*. However, in 'Fürchtenmachen', as W. Wright Roberts observed, 'no fear is left unquelled, no pain unsoothed'.<sup>7</sup> The movement is characterised by its rhythmic resolution, regular phrase

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<sup>6</sup> Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous* (Geneva: Milieu du monde, 1945), p. 189.

<sup>7</sup> W. Wright Roberts, 'Child Studies in Music', p. 12.

structure and confident modulations to E minor and C major. The final perfect cadence is anticipated as early as bar 4 with the I-V cadence in the tonic G major that recurs throughout the piece. No equivalent expectation is established in ‘Petit Poucet’, and hence there is no sense of resolution or allaying of fears in its conclusion.

**Example 4.1** ‘Petit Poucet’, bars 51-61

The musical score for 'Petit Poucet', bars 51-61, is presented in three systems. The first system (bars 51-53) shows a treble staff with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and a bass staff with a piano (*p*) dynamic, marked *en dehors et expressif*. The second system (bars 54-57) continues with piano (*pp*) dynamics in both staves. The third system (bars 58-61) features a mezzo-forte (*pp*) dynamic in the bass staff and an *expressif* marking in the treble staff. The piece concludes with a *la m.g. expressive* marking in the bass staff.

In the birdcalls of ‘Petit Poucet’ we may also sense Ravel implicitly acting out his stories. The birds have a mechanical precision and coolness quite different from the expressive song of the ‘Oiseaux tristes’ or the joyous cacophony of the dawn chorus in *Daphnis et Chloé*. They sound like nothing so much as a wind-up toy, rather like the mechanical chaffinch Ravel treasured (still on view in Montfort l’Amaury and singing with extraordinary sweetness and animation). Jankélévitch quotes Ravel saying of this clockwork bird ‘I can feel his heart beating!’<sup>8</sup> Engineer’s son that he was, Ravel

<sup>8</sup> Jankélévitch, *Ravel*, p. 7.

delighted in the secret mechanisms of such toys, but it was the appearance of life that he really loved, the delicately blurred boundary between the real and the imagined, the essence of the mechanical wonders at the 1889 and 1900 Expositions Universelles. If he did not exactly believe, he was at least able to suspend disbelief. The birds of ‘Petit Poucet’, then, are like the caged chaffinch of Montfort l’Amaury: precisely regulated, meticulously constructed, stuffed and posed – but with beating hearts.

The conclusion of ‘Le jardin féérique’ is perhaps the best example of this multilayered, complex sense of perspective, in which story, storyteller and storytelling are simultaneously portrayed. The pealing fourths, fanfare-like tonic chords and shimmering glissandi are a musical ‘happily ever after’ – the castle bells ringing, the trumpets blaring and fireworks bursting in celebration of a royal marriage. Yet, while chiming in fairytale celebration, the bells also suggest a gentle but firm return to the real world. As we may observe in Example 4.2, the tolling fourths sound as the striking of a clock (emphasised by Ravel’s stipulation of 2<sup>nd</sup> finger for each chime) – perhaps the clock in the nursery that signals the end of storytelling and time for bed.

**Example 4.2** ‘Le Jardin féérique’, bars 50-55

The musical score for 'Le Jardin féérique', bars 50-55, is presented in two systems. The first system covers bars 50-52, and the second system covers bars 53-55. The music is in 3/4 time and features a piano with a glissando in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The right hand part consists of a series of glissandi, each starting with a chord and moving up the scale. The left hand part consists of a series of chords, each struck with the second finger. The score is marked with 'ff' (fortissimo) and includes a 'glissando' instruction. The bars are numbered 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, and 55.

Storytelling is a performative act, in which the whole body is engaged: facial expression and physical gesture provide colour and emphasis to characters, descriptions and events. When we tell stories to children, we naturally adopt our most expressive voices, utilising a much broader range of pitches and inflections than in normal spoken language. Similarly, we instinctively respond to and bring out the natural rhythms and cadences of the text. ‘Once upon a time’, for example, and its French equivalent ‘Il était une fois...’, are amongst the most naturally musical phrases in spoken language, with their lulling rhythms and gentle descending inflections. The traditional conclusion to fairytales – ‘...and they all lived happily ever after’ – also has a powerful effect when spoken, its inherent *allargando* heightening its sonorous finality: there is no phrase more suggestive of the perfect cadence. Thus, in fairytales, the sounds of words and phrases are frequently intertwined with their meanings, and the rhythms and cadences of the voice bring characters and events to life.

In ‘Petit Poucet’ the sense of storytelling is so strong that the wandering melody seems to hint directly at vocal cadences and melodic patterns. The opening melodic phrase broadly traces the natural inflections of the first line of the excerpt from the story Ravel chose to accompany it (‘Il croyait aisement trouvé son chemin’ [‘He thought that he would be able to find his way easily’]): an initial rising inflection is followed by a gradual descent across the course of the phrase (offset, in the melodic line, by rising steps). Similarly, the climactic melody at bars 33-38 hints at the inflections of the final phrase of the text (‘les oiseaux étaient venus qui avaient tout mangé’ [‘the birds had come and eaten them all’]). Here too, an overall melodic descent is mirrored by an equivalent descent in vocal pitch across the phrase, as Example 4.3 demonstrates. The initial rising inflection of the first three words and the rising accent on *tout* followed by a descent to *mangé* is reflected not only in the melodic line, but in the rhythm: those final two words conclude not just the sentence but the paragraph and would naturally be pronounced with deliberation, a gesture highlighted by the final two crotchets of Ravel’s phrase (the textual underlay is not intended here as an exact or singable representation, but merely as a guide to spoken inflections).



**Example 4.3** ‘Petit Poucet’, bars 33-38 (melody only)

...les oiseaux étaient venus qui avaient tout mangé

Just as the movements of face and body can bring characters and scenes to life, the musical setting of particular words and phrases can have as dramatic an aural impact. As Example 4.4 demonstrates, in *Noël des jouets* one simple musical gesture (repeated semiquaver dyads), transmuted across each verse, accompanies in turn the descriptions of rabbit drummers, growling dogs and glittering angel wings: the storyteller illustrating characters with movements of the same expressive hand.

**Example 4.4** *Noël des jouets* (accompaniment only; semiquaver dyads shown in boxes)

**a. ‘Rabbit drummers’, bars 11-14**

*pp* innocemment

**b. ‘The black dog, Belzébuth’, bars 25-28**

*pp* *p* *pp* *p*

**c. ‘The beautiful, unbreakable angels’, bars 51-52**

*ppp*

*L'Enfant et les sortilèges* is not a recounted tale like those of *Ma mère l'Oye* and the *Trois chansons*: it is communicated to and experienced by the audience directly and in the present tense. There is no narrator; the Child and the *sortilèges* tell their own story. Creating a fairytale that was at once opera and ballet, Ravel wrote arias that were dances, demanding physical gesture from his performers, as Example 4.5 demonstrates. The paired demisemiquavers and plucked string chords in the accompanying figuration of Example 4.5a indicate the jerky movements Ravel demands of his Frog. The languid triplets and carefully marked dynamic shaping of the first bars of Example 4.5b clearly tell the Cat to stretch, while the playfully bitonal clarinet arpeggios in the third bar can only be described as 'catlike'.

**Example 4.5** *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*

**a. The Frog, Rehearsal Figure 130+1**

Je ne con-nais pas la ca-ca- cage Je con- nais la mou- che qu'on me jette, Ploc! Et le chif- fon rouge, Ploc!

elle saute elle saute

**b. The Cat, Fig. 95+5**

Le Chat joue, et roule une balle de laine.

**Allegro**

*mf*

Here illustrative gestures, suggested in expressive instrumental narratives, are made reality in the requisite physical movements of the performers.

These interactions are encapsulated in Ravel's 1906 song cycle *Histoires naturelles* where we find again Ravel the storyteller, communicating the prose-poems of Jules Renard with expressive simplicity. Ravel set his texts with such naturalness of expression that his friends claimed to hear in the vocal line the characteristic inflections of his own voice.<sup>9</sup> The conversational narrative of the *Histoires naturelles* is animated by the colourful characterisations of the piano part: the peacock's regal dotted rhythms, the swan's shimmering arpeggios, and the breathless stillness of 'Le martin-pêcheur'. More dramatic, however, is Ravel's use in these songs of illustrative physical gesture to enhance the narrative power of his stories: the movements of the creatures are frequently mirrored in the hands and body of the pianist. The double-handed glissando that signals the opening of the peacock's tail is a pianistic gesture whose value is as much theatrical as musical. It is a storyteller's movement, with arms and hands mimicking the magnificently unfurling tail. The pendulum-ticking thirds of 'Le Grillon' and its pause on the line 'il se repose' (where the pianist's hands literally rest on the keyboard), and the harsh, pecking repeated notes of 'La pintade' are other examples of dramatic physical gestures. After a performance of the *Histoires naturelles* (May 2007), a listener who had never heard the songs before commented to the pianist (myself), 'I could tell what was going on just by watching you play!' Pianist and singer thus merge into the figure of the storyteller (and it is worth recalling that Ravel himself was the pianist at the songs' première), recounting the tale with both words and actions.

### 4.3 Ravel, prosodist and poet

The poets Tristan Klingsor and Léon-Paul Fargue were members of Ravel's inner circle; he was also acquainted with the writers Henri de Régnier and Jacques de Zogheb (the latter had a house in Montfort l'Amaury and saw Ravel almost every day during his last years).<sup>10</sup> Ravel's personal library contains a large amount of classic and contemporary French literature, including many novels and collections of poetry with inscriptions from their authors. Much of his music has literary connections, from the Aloysius Bertrand-inspired *Gaspard de la nuit* to the epigraphs by de Régnier that head *Jeux d'eau* and the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. Ravel's love of language can also be seen in his dedication to writing songs (*mélodies*), a genre inextricably wedded to

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<sup>9</sup> Vuillermoz, 'L'Œuvre de Maurice Ravel', p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous*, p. 250.

poetry and with which his creative output began and ended. It is not surprising therefore that Ravel should have made his own brief excursions into the realm of poetry.

The literary qualities of Ravel's poems, letters and critical writings have often been overlooked by scholars. While Ravel was not given to long sentences or flowery constructions – indeed, his literary skill often shows in deliberate avoidance of them – his writing exudes a sparkle and incisiveness that accord entirely with his personality. In Ravel's articles, reviews and particularly his letters, his characteristic frankness is matched by sly asides, plays on words and occasional word-pictures of startling beauty and clarity. In 1905, from the yacht *Aimée*, Ravel wrote to Maurice Delage describing a field of windmills in Holland: '...on every side, one sees nothing but turning sails. You finish by feeling yourself an automaton, overlooking this mechanical landscape'.<sup>11</sup> A week later he described the great factories on the Rhine:

Comment vous dire l'impression de ces châteaux de fonte, de ces cathédrales incandescentes, de la merveilleuse symphonie des courroies, des sifflets, des formidables coups de marteaux qui vous enveloppe? Partout, un ciel rouge, sombre et ardent. Là-dessus, un orage a éclaté.<sup>12</sup>

How can I convey to you the impressions of these castles of iron, of these incandescent cathedrals, of the marvellous symphony of conveyer belts, whistles and great hammer blows that surround you? Everywhere, a red sky, dark and blazing. Above, a storm broke.

This picturesquely evocative language is not so far removed from that of fairytales. It is easy to imagine Ravel, on returning to Paris, setting a young Mimi Godebska on his knee and telling her tales of a wicked enchanter who lived in his iron castle beneath a 'dark and blazing sky'.

The poetry of *Noël des jouets* and the *Trois chansons* distil and crystallise elements of Ravel's prose style: his natural concision is illuminated by his dexterous juggling with the rhythms and resonances of the language, sparkling descriptions formed of unusual combinations of words and phrases, and meticulously conceived forms that mirror and reinforce content and atmosphere.

*Noël des jouets* depicts a nativity scene of small toys – a 'varnished flock of sheep'

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to Maurice Delage, 29 June 1905, in 'Vingt-cinq lettres de Maurice Ravel à Maurice et Nelly Delage', ed. Jean Roy, *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* 2 (1986), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Maurice Delage, 5 July 1905, in 'Vingt-cinq lettres de Maurice Ravel à Maurice et Nelly Delage', p. 20.

on wheels, ‘rabbit drummers’, and an enamel Virgin Mary who watches over a Child made of painted sugar. The ‘black dog Belzébuth’ is lurking around the stable, but the ‘beautiful unbreakable angels’ suspended by brass wire threads keep the peace as the mechanical animals lift up their voices and cry ‘Noël! Noël!’. As Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes observe, there is ‘a certain angularity and stiffness’ in the text of *Noël des jouets*.<sup>13</sup> Its meticulous rhyme scheme (ABBA in each stanza) governs lines that seem to lack a natural sense of metre and flow: the reader receives a jolt midway through the very first line by the shift from rapid trochaic semiquavers to languid dactyls (Ex. 4.6).

Le troupeau verni des moutons  
 Roule en tumulte vers la crèche  
 Les lapins tambours, brefs et rêches,  
 Couvrent leurs aigres mirlitons

The varnished flock of sheep  
 Rolls tumultuously towards the crèche  
 The rabbit drummers, small and rough  
 Cover their shrill reed pipes

**Example 4.6** *Noël des jouets*, bars 3-4

*p* *très doux*

Le trou-peau ver - ni des mou-tons

In many poems this lack of rhythmic fluidity would detract from the overall effect; here it seems to enhance it. The halting awkwardness of Ravel’s words ensures we never forget that, although they may move and sing, his toys are made of enamel and painted sugar after all.<sup>14</sup>

While the poetry of *Noël des jouets* thus achieves a deliberately stilted effect, there are nevertheless intricate patterns and subtle emphases in its verses. Ravel’s syllabic arrangement follows his rhyme scheme: in the first, third and fifth stanzas, the first and last lines (the A rhymes) have eight syllables and the second and third lines (the B

<sup>13</sup> Johnson and Stokes, *A French Song Companion*, p. 452. See Appendix for full texts and translations of *Noël des jouets* and the *Trois chansons*.

<sup>14</sup> Ravel’s approach to text-setting here foreshadows elements of *Sur l’herbe*, of which he wrote to Jean Aubry that ‘a bit of preciousness asserted itself, which was indicated both in the text and in the music’. (Quoted in Orenstein, ‘Some Unpublished Music and Letters by Maurice Ravel’, p. 296.)

rhymes) nine. In the second and fourth stanzas this arrangement is inverted, so the lines run 9/8/8/9. While Ravel freely shifts feet and emphasis across the lines of the poem, within lines he tends to pair anapæsts with iambs (which stress the last syllable: di di *da* / di *da*), and dactyls with trochees (stress on the first syllable: *da* di di / *da* di). He thus ensures that despite the shifting between two- and three-syllable feet, within each line the emphasis remains on the first or last syllable of each group. These agile feet become an important expressive device: in the second verse, for example, the dactyls have a lulling effect that matches the image of Mary watching over her sugar Child. In the last two lines of the third verse, meanwhile, the sudden shift from amphibrachs (stress on the second of three syllables – di *da* di) to a dactyl followed by blunt trochees is a dramatic effect that emphasises the Child’s danger.

Car, près de là, sous un sapin  
 Furtif, emmitoufflé dans l’ombre  
 [Du *bois*, Bel-] [*zé-buth*, le] [chien *som-bre*]  
     amphibrach          amphibrach          amphibrach  
 [*Guet-te* l’En-] [*fant* de] [*su-cre*] [*peint*]  
     dactyl                  trochee          trochee          trochee

[Italicised syllables indicate stresses; emphases follow Ravel’s setting]

Ravel heightens the impact of the metric shift here, as hemiolas in the left hand of the piano part and the duplet trochees pull against the berceuse-like  $\frac{6}{8}$  metre. The first line of the next verse employs the same dactyl plus trochee combination (*Mais* le beaux *an-ges in-cas-sab-les*). This line too employs duplet crotchets, a small gesture that reflects Ravel’s awareness and deliberate reflection of his metrical shifts (Ex. 4.7). Here, though, the return of the gentle descending piano figurations from the opening bars has a reassuring effect that serves to calm the agitation of the preceding line.

Like *Noël des jouets*, Ravel’s *Trois chansons* all employ regularly rhyming verse forms, although each adopts a different rhyme scheme and metric pattern. Here, though, there is no ‘mechanical’ awkwardness in Ravel’s texts. The lines of each poem flow naturally and musically, never misplacing an accent or syllabic shift. Each of the *Trois chansons* emphasises its regular structure by the exact (or almost exact) repetition of melodies in each stanza. These rigidly strophic settings are unique in all of Ravel’s vocal writing.

Example 4.7 Noël des jouets, bars 29-40

bois Bel - zé - buth, le chien som - bre.

32 *mf* Guet - te l'En - fant de su - cre peint

35 *pp* *rall.*

38 *p* *très calme* Mais les beaux an - ges in - cas - sa - bles

*a tempo* *pp*

The first of the songs, 'Nicolette', is bound by a particularly inflexible rhyme scheme, AABABA, with the repetition of Nicolette's name forming the B rhyme in three of the four verses (the B rhyme in the first verse is also *-ette* – 'pâquerette / guillerette'). The first four lines of each verse consist of seven syllables and the final

two of twelve and nine respectively, and the whole is organised in trochaic feet (*Nicolette à la ves-prée / s'al-lait pro-me-ner au pré*). The rigidity of the poem's structure is made more apparent by its melodic content. The only song of the set to maintain an independent voice (the other two are told in dialogue alone), its narrative has a childlike directness and simplicity. The voice of this child is, perhaps, old before its time: Peter Kaminsky notes that the repetitive falling fifths have the sing-song character of a tale told once too often.<sup>15</sup> In the final verse, the fifths are compressed into tritones that emphasise the 'wrongness' of the conclusion (Ex. 4.8). This sense of distortion is strengthened by the rhythmic displacement of tenor and alto in bars 45-46.

**Example 4.8 'Nicolette', bars 40-47**

S ...che - nu, ven - tru.

A ...che - nu, ven - tru.

T Ren - con - tra sei - gneur che - nu, Tors, laid, pu - ant et ven - tru.

B Ren - con - tra sei - gneur che - nu, Tors, laid, pu - ant et ven - tru.

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Hin

Hin

Hé là! ma Ni - co - let - te, veux - tu pas tous ces é - cus?

<sup>15</sup> Peter Kaminsky, 'Vocal music and the lures of exoticism and irony', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, p. 186.



‘Trois beaux oiseaux du Paradis’ comprises six four-line stanzas. In each stanza the second line is the refrain ‘Mon [or *ton*] ami z-il est à la guerre’. Four of the stanzas use ‘i’ rhymes on the other three lines; the remaining two offer slightly different rhyming patterns but are connected by the repetition of the phrase ‘couleur de neige’ on the third line. Syllabically the verses are arranged as follows (again, the emphases accord with the placement of strong beats in Ravel’s setting):

[Trois beaux oi-] [seaux du] [pa-ra-dis]  
 [Mon a-mi] [z-il est à] [la guer-re]  
 [Trois beaux oi-] [seaux du] [pa-ra-dis]  
 [Ont pas-sé] [par ic-i]

Here, succeeding lines alternate between first-syllable stresses (the dactyls/trochees in lines 1 and 3) and last-syllable stresses (lines 2 and 4), in an arrangement that seems to formalise the freer patterns of *Noël des jouets* (the final syllable of *guerre* is the barely-articulated schwa, so the stress on *guer-* sounds effectively as the final syllable).

‘Ronde’ uses the most flexible rhyme scheme of the three songs (necessitated by its vast and complicated lists of beasts), but each of its fourteen-line stanzas conforms to an identical syllabic pattern and there is a multiplicity of internal rhymes and assonances. Here too Ravel alternates dactyls and trochees. Each verse opens with trochaic feet (*N’al-lez pas au bois d’Or-mon-de*), but as the creatures are reeled off, trochees give way to dactyls (*Des faun-es, des fol-lets, des la-mi-es*). As each verse moves to its climax, the dactyls take over completely (*Des en-chan-teurs et des ma-ges, des stry-ges, des syl-phes, des moi-nes bour-rus, des cy-clop-es...*). The last line of each verse returns us to trochaic stresses (*N’al-lez pas au bois d’Or-mon-de*). Musically, the opposition of trochees and dactyls is made explicit by the duplet and triplet quavers (heard against each other in bars 16-20 and 43-48; see Ex. 4.9).<sup>16</sup> Ravel’s poetic and musical juggling of stress and syllable here echoes the sense of conflict between the stolid elders and the young people in search of adventure: the triplets/dactyls can never quite break away from the relentless reality of the duplets/trochees.

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<sup>16</sup> Tristan Klingsor notes that the first two lines of poetry (‘N’allez pas au bois d’Ormonde / Jeunes filles, n’allez pas au bois’) shift from seven syllables to nine, facilitating the change of metre in bar four ( $\frac{2}{4}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) and thus establishing early the alternation of twos and threes, duplets and triplets, dactyls and trochees. (Tristan Klingsor, ‘Maurice Ravel et le vers libre’, *La Revue musicale* 19:187 (Special issue dedicated to Ravel, December 1938), p. 123.)

Example 4.9 'Ronde', bars 15-28

*cre - - -*

S  
Des chèv-re-pieds, des gno-mes, des dé-mons, Des loups-ga-rous, des el-fes, des myr-mi-dons, Des en-chan-teurs et des

A  
Des chèv-re-pieds, des gno-mes, des dé-mons, Des loups-ga-rous, des el-fes, des myr-mi-dons, Des en-chan-teurs et des

T  
la la la la la la la la la la la la

B  
la la la la la la la la la la la la

20 *scen - - - do - -*

S  
ma-ges, des stry-ges, des syl- phes, des moi-nes-bour-rus, des cy-clo-pes, des djinns, go-be-lins, kor-ri-

A  
ma-ges, des stry-ges, des syl- phes, des moi-nes bour-rus, des cy-clo-pes, des djinns, go-be-lins, kor-ri-

T  
la la la la Tra la la la Tra la la ta la ta la ta la

B  
la la la la Tra la la la Tra la la la

24 *f*

S  
gans, né-cro-mans, ko-bolds, Ah!

A  
gans, né-cro-mans, ko-bolds, N'al-lez pas au bois d'Or-mon-de, N'al-lez pas au bois d'Or-mon-de,

T  
ta la ta la ta la la la la la la la la la la la la la la

B  
ta la ta la ta la la la la la la la la la la la la la la

In an article published in the journal *Musica* in March 1911, Ravel expressed his views on the connections between verse forms and song settings:

It seems to me that for truly poignant and emotional situations, free verse is preferable to regular verse. The latter, however, can produce very beautiful things, on condition that the composer is willing to disappear entirely behind the poet and agrees to follow his rhythms step by step, cadence by cadence, without ever displacing an accent or even an inflection. In a word, if the musician wishes to set regular verse, his music will simply underline the poem and sustain it, but will be unable to interpret it or add anything to it. I believe that if one is specifically dealing with emotion and fantasy, it is preferable to adopt free verse.<sup>17</sup>

Given that about half of Ravel's songs are settings of regular verse and that his music never does 'disappear entirely' behind the poetry, one should perhaps take these comments with a grain of salt. Yet a famous passage from Jules Renard's *Journal* regarding the *Histoires naturelles* (which use an unrhymed prose text) quotes Ravel expressing a similar viewpoint: 'I did not intend to add anything, only to interpret them [...] I have tried to say in music what you say with words [...] I think and feel in music, and should like to think and feel the same things as you'.<sup>18</sup>

The last line of the quotation above is of particular interest, because in both *Noël des jouets* and the *Trois chansons* (texts which deal 'specifically' with fantasy) Ravel uses regular rhyming verse forms. *Noël des jouets* is through-composed, and this quality, combined with its shifts of feet and emphasis, obscures the formality of its poetic structure – a characteristic demanded, in any case, by the song's cast of inanimate characters. The case of the *Trois chansons* is rather more complex. Ravel certainly follows his own guidelines for text-setting in these three songs: he never displaces an accent or inflection and he adheres meticulously to the rhythms and patterns dictated by the flow of the text. Is Ravel thus repudiating his statement that free verse is preferable in dealing with fantasy? Perhaps not. The formal constructions and implacable metric and rhythmic demands of the *Trois chansons* serve to emphasise the distortion of their fairytale narratives (Nicolette elopes with the repulsive lord; the birds bring not the absent lover but word of his death; the magical creatures have been banished from the woods of Ormonde).

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<sup>17</sup> Maurice Ravel, 'What should be set to music? Good poetry or bad, free verse or prose?', published in *Musica*, March 1911, reprinted in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 338.

<sup>18</sup> In Orenstein, *Ravel, man and musician*, p. 52.

Ravel certainly disproves his own contention that the music can add nothing to the text in such cases. The music of ‘Nicolette’ provides a particularly witty commentary on the text, enhancing, mocking and finally retreating behind its tongue-in-cheek *tierce de Picardie*. In ‘Trois beaux oiseaux du Paradis’ it is the wordless chorus beneath the soloists that gives the song its emotional power. The sudden swells and *subito pp*, the empty sound of the descending octaves in soprano and tenor at the beginning of the third and fifth quatrains, and the chromatically descending tenor in bars 41-44 with its minor second clashes and implicit suggestions of death (Ex. 4.10): all these colour this ‘folk lament’ with the qualities of Ravel’s ‘truly poignant and emotional situation’.

**Example 4.10 ‘Trois beaux oiseaux du paradis, bars 41-44**

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Bass solo, Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The lyrics are: "Un jo - li coeur tout cram - oi - si, (Ton a - mi z'il - est à la guer - re)". The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *p*, and *A*. The time signature changes from 3/4 to 4/4 and back to 3/4. The bass solo part has a melodic line with a slur over the first two measures. The tenor part has a descending chromatic line starting with a slur. The bass part has a simple accompaniment with a slur over the first two measures.

**4.4 Poetic characterisation and onomatopoeia**

In his 1938 homage ‘Ravel poète’, the critic and musicologist René Dumesnil discussed the intrinsically musical nature of Ravel’s poetry. He wrote that:

Ravel knew how to see and to release the essential [...] and to express it he always found the right word, not only by its precise meaning, but still more by its sonority.<sup>19</sup>

Arthur Hoérée made a similar point in his 1925 study of Ravel’s vocal music, when he suggested that Ravel’s original poetic syntax derived from ‘the clear and precise *métier* of the musician’.<sup>20</sup> Onomatopoeia is a crucial expressive device in Ravel’s poetry. Consider the following lines depicting the vigilant angels of *Noël des jouets*: ‘Et leur vol de clinquant vermeil / Qui cliquette en bruits symétriques... [‘And their

<sup>19</sup> René Dumesnil, ‘Maurice Ravel poète’, *La Revue musicale* 19:187 (Special number dedicated to Ravel, December 1938), p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Hoérée, ‘La mélodie et l’œuvre lyrique’, *La Revue musicale* 6:6 (Special number dedicated to Ravel, April 1925), p. 51.

glittering vermillion flight / Jangling in symmetrical sounds...’]. Ravel combines here an evocative description with very individual onomatopoeia: the hard c and t consonants and light i and ε vowels of ‘Qui cliquette’ really do sound ‘jangly’. Similarly, in the final line of the poem, the words used to describe the ‘thin bleats’ of the animals – ‘dont la voix *grêle bête*’ – sound like the bleats themselves (Ex. 4.11). One is tempted to sing the final ‘Noël! Noël!’ with a sheep-like stutter – ‘No-ë-ë-ë-ë-!’

**Example 4.11** *Noël des jouets*, bars 60-68

[en accélérant jusqu'au *ff*]

*mf* *f*

Dont la voix grêle - le bête - - -

*mf*

63 *portando* *ff* **Allegro**

- le: 'No - ë!!' No - ë!! No -

**Allegro** *ff*

*Ped. jusqu'à la fin*

66

ë!!

*fff*

In ‘Ronde’, Ravel’s delight in the sounds and rhythms of his words is particularly apparent. Ravel asked his friends for help in collecting his lists of fantastic beasts, but their ordering, assonances and cadences are his alone. Lines such as the tongue-twisting ‘Diables, diablots, diabolins’ and the galloping triplets of ‘Hamadryades, dryades, naïades, ménades, thyades’ are as satisfying and colourful to recite as to sing. Here too Ravel used the expressive sonorities of the French language to sketch his characters and scenes. In ‘Ronde’, for example, the lines ‘Des satyresses, des ogresses et des babaïagas / Des centaresses et des diablasses, goules sortant du sabbat...’ are full of hissing menace, the slower ‘ess’ sounds of the first words viciously snapped off in the final sharp ‘sortant’ and ‘sabbat’ (Ex. 4.12).

**Example 4.12 ‘Ronde’, bars 37-42 (bass only)**

Des sat - y - res - ses, des o - gres - ses, Et des ba - ba - ia - gas,

40 Des cen - tau - res - ses et des dia - bles - ses, Gou - les sor - tant du sab - bat,

In the rigidly strophic ‘Nicolette’, the sounds of the words are an essential element in the creation of individual characters. Ravel’s description of Nicolette’s wolf is particularly vivid: ‘Rencontra vieux loup grognant / Tout hérissé, l’œil brillant...’ *Grognant* [growling], has a naturally onomatopoeic quality and the ‘o’ [ɑ̃] and ‘ou’ [u] vowels in the couplet and the five rolled ‘r’s give the wolf his character as effectively as the description of his ‘bristling’ fur and his ‘glowing’ eyes. Similarly, there is an earthy repulsiveness in what Dumesnil called the ‘Rabelaisian’ assonances used to describe the lord<sup>21</sup> – ‘tors, laid, puant et ventru’ [‘twisted, ugly, smelly and pot-bellied’]. Throughout the song, Ravel exaggerates his *dramatis personæ* to the point of caricature through his choice of rhyming sounds: the wolf adopts the deep, rounded ‘o’ [ɑ̃] vowel, the beautiful but two-dimensional page rhymes on the light ‘ee’ [i] vowel, while the words of the lord accentuate the sharp French u [y], a sound redolent of disgust. Like the big bad wolf who will ‘huff and puff and *blow* your house down’, Ravel’s *loup grognant*

<sup>21</sup> Dumesnil, ‘Maurice Ravel poète’, p. 126.

and *seigneur chénu* are the creations of a storyteller reciting a fairytale with engaging dramatic effect.

Perhaps the only other French composer to have placed such importance on the sounds of the language was Clément Janequin (c. 1485-1559), whose tradition Ravel's *Trois chansons* clearly follow.<sup>22</sup> Janequin's onomatopoeic *chansons* (of which *La guerre*, *La chasse* and *Le chant des oiseaux* are amongst the best-known examples) imitate birdsong, horns, drums and trumpets, dogs and all sorts of other natural and manmade sounds. This is done principally through the combination and repetition of meaningless syllables ('Von pa ti pa toc pa ti pa toc...'). Echoes of Janequin are particularly apparent in 'Nicolette', where the tenors and altos sing 'Ta ka ta ka ta ka ta ka...' in imitation of the sounds of Nicolette's clogs as she flees from the wolf (Ex. 4.13). Scott Messing notes that in this passage Ravel also mirrors Janequin's use of rapidly repeated pitches.<sup>23</sup>

**Example 4.13 'Nicolette', bars 22-23**

The musical score for 'Nicolette', bars 22-23, is presented in four staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: 'A per - te d'ha - lei - ne, s'en - fuit Ni - co - lette, A \_\_\_\_'. The second staff is a vocal line with the syllable 'Ta ka ta ka' repeated. The third staff is a piano accompaniment with the syllable 'Ta ka ta ka' repeated. The bottom staff is a bass line with lyrics: 'A per - te d'ha - lei - ne, s'en - fuit Ni - co - lette, A \_\_\_\_'. The score is marked 'Vivo' and 'f' (forte). The time signature is 3/4.

<sup>22</sup> Janequin's *chansons* had been regularly performed in Paris since the 1840s; *La bataille de Marignan*, *Les cris de Paris* and *Le chant des oiseaux* were particularly popular. The Chanteurs de Saint-Gervais were the most notable performers of this repertoire around the turn of the century, including *La bataille de Marignan* at their 1900 Exposition Universelle concert (Katharine Ellis, *Interpreting the musical past: Early music in nineteenth-century France* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), pp. 106, 157-58). Nine years later, the Orchestre de la Société des concerts du Conservatoire included Janequin songs in their concert of 28 March 1909 (recorded in the diary of Marguerite de Saint-Marceaux, *Journal, 1894-1927*, ed. Myriam Chimènes (Paris: Fayard, 2007), p. 540.).

<sup>23</sup> Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* (Rochester: Rochester UP, 1988/1996), p. 54.

Janequin's onomatopoeia, however, is used almost exclusively in the creation of soundscapes. By contrast, Ravel adopted a multilayered approach to his poetry and its setting. In the *Trois chansons*, Ravel created complex imagery not only through picturesque language and his colourful musical setting, but through the manipulation of the sounds of his expressive words themselves.<sup>24</sup>

Ten years after the *Trois chansons*, Ravel and his librettist Colette again employed verbal assonances as a key element in the creation of the many characters of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, as Marie-Pierre Lassus has explored.<sup>25</sup> Lassus demonstrated that many of the *sortilèges* were given depth of character through the emphasis and opposition of 'hard' and 'soft' vowel and consonant sounds. The consonants p/t/k and the clenched-teeth fricatives of 'je' [ʒ], and s, together with the 'a' [chat] and nasal Õ [bon] vowels are 'hard' sounds. They characterise the Child's opening monologue, the Clock, the Arithmetic scene, the Fire and the Teapot: the Child sings 'J'ai pas envie de faire ma page' (Figure 2 of the orchestral score); and the Teapot's scene opens with the line 'Black and costaud, black and chic...' (Figure 29).<sup>26</sup>

The Princess, the Cats, the Dragonfly and the Squirrel make more use of 'soft' sounds: the consonants b/d/g, the fricative z [rose], the light i [libre] and E [aime], and the slow ø [jeu] œ [cœur] and o [rose] vowels. The contrast between these two linguistic affects can be seen if we compare the Fire's words with the Dragonfly's:

[The Fire]  
Je réchauffe les bons  
Je brûle les méchants  
Petit barbare, barbare imprudent  
Tu as insulté à tous les dieux bienveillant  
Qui tendent entre le malheur et toi  
 Le fragile barrière!

<sup>24</sup> The musical and onomatopoeic resonances in Ravel's poetry may also owe a debt of inspiration to Stéphane Mallarmé. As a young man Ravel read Mallarmé and set his poem *Sainte* in 1896. In 1913 he composed his *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* ('Soupir', 'Placet futile' and 'Surgi de la croupe et du bonde'), so Mallarmé's language would have been relatively fresh in his mind when he came to write his texts for the *Trois chansons* some eighteen months later. Heath Lees' recent study *Mallarmé and Wagner: Music and poetic language* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) explores the musical and onomatopoeic qualities of Mallarmé's poetry in detail.

<sup>25</sup> Marie-Pierre Lassus, 'Ravel, l'Enchanteur', pp. 40-7. This is the only other study that analyses the opera's libretto from the perspective of its aural and dramatic effect

<sup>26</sup> Lassus, 'Ravel, l'Enchanteur', pp. 43-4.



...  
Gare au feu dansant!  
Gare, gare, gare, gare à toi!

[The Dragonfly]  
Où es tu?  
Je te cherche  
Le filet  
Il t'a prise  
O toi chère  
Longue et frère  
Tes turquoises  
Tes topazes  
L'air qui t'aime  
Les regrette  
Moins que moi...

In addition to the 'hard' a and Õ vowels and ʒ, s and f fricatives in the Fire's aria, the proliferation of rolled r sounds (the quadruple helpings in the repeated 'barbare' is particularly striking) gives a threatening percussive edge to her words. Lassus also observes that Ravel's choice of the 'a' vowel for the Fire's coloratura passages – 'the most intense sound in the language' – has an immediate dramatic effect in 'overpowering the will of the Child'.<sup>27</sup> The Dragonfly's aria, by contrast, is filled with the softer i, ε and z sounds. The drawn-out, gentle effect of the ε vowel that follows her *ch* [ʃ] fricatives (chère) is very different to the combination of *ch* with the Fire's nasal vowels (méchant/meʃã). Similarly, the 'hard' f sound of the Fire's 'réchauffe' is softened by its succeeding vowels in the Dragonfly's filet and frère. The 'sweet' extended vowels and soft consonants are also evident in the Squirrel's 'mes beaux yeux' and the Child's 'toi, le cœur de la rose'.<sup>28</sup>

In her article, Lassus focussed principally on the words of the opera, without examining how these distinctive affects were recognised and conveyed in its musical score. Ravel's settings of the texts in fact clearly demonstrate his awareness of these subtleties of sound and language. In the Dragonfly's aria, the soft ʃ syllables often fall on the first beat of the bar and are subtly emphasised: *ch*erche, at Fig. 107+3, is accented; *p*rise (107+7) is reinforced by brief glissandi in the harp and the contrabass (in harmonics), while on the word *ch*ère (107+9) bass clarinet, bassoons and horn enter

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<sup>27</sup> Lassus, 'Ravel, l'Enchanteur', p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Lassus, 'Ravel, l'Enchanteur', p. 45.

with sustained chords. Similarly, in the waltz of the Bat, the Child's line 'sans mère!', in which the 'soft' ε (Fig. 115+6) contrasts with preceding 'hard' phrases of the Bat ('Rends-la moi!'), is accompanied by bowed strings that stand out from the pizzicato accompaniment in the preceding bars.

Throughout the opera, Ravel frequently uses winds and pizzicato strings to reinforce the attack of 'hard' sounds (in the Fire's aria, for example), while 'soft' sounds are given added sweetness by *arco* strings. At the start of the opera, the Child's opening monologue is accompanied by a pair of oboes. Maman's first lines mirror the sounds of the Child: his 'J'ai pas envie de faire ma page' ['Don't want to do my lesson'] and her 'Bébé a été sage?' ['Has Baby been good?'] share the same hard 'a' and incisive 'e' vowels, together with the consonant sounds f, t and ʒ. These opening lines are accompanied by winds (clarinets and bassoons). However, when Maman sings the 'softer' words 'Regrettes-tu ta paresse?' ['Do you regret your laziness?'; Fig. 4], she is accompanied by gentle string chords (Ex. 4.14). Chapter Six will return to this question of timbral colouration and dramatic effect.

**Example 4.14** *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, Fig. 3+2

MAMAN

*p*  
Bé-bé a é-té sage? Il a fi-ni sa page? Oh, tu n'as rien fait! Tu

Clarinetes, bassoons ['Hard' sounds] Rit. a Tempo  
*Suivez* *p* *mf*

**4**

as é-clous-sé d'en-cre le ta-pis! Re-gret-tes tu ta paresse?

Rit. 2 vlms, 1 vla, 1 vc ['Soft' sounds]  
*p espress*

## 4.5 ‘The Enchantress and the Illusionist’<sup>29</sup>

The penultimate scene in the first half of *L’Enfant et les sortilèges* is described in the libretto and on the score as a ‘Ronde’. With a tape measure for a belt,  $\pi$  for a hat, and armed with a ruler, a Little Old Man [Le Petit Vieillard] dashes around the stage shouting out absurd sums, much to the bewilderment of the Child. The Man (Arithmetic personified) is accompanied by a chorus of Numbers, who, as the ‘Ronde’ becomes ‘folle’, madly repeat the phrases ‘quatre et quat’ (pronounced kat-e-kat) and ‘cinq et sept’ (Ex. 4.15).

### Example 4.15 *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, Fig. 91

LES CHIFFRES  
*crié*

Cinq et sept, cinq et sept, cinq et sept

Quatre et quat', quatre et quat', quatre et quat', quatre et

Later, at the opera’s climactic moment, the animals’ overlapping cries of ‘Unissons-nous!’ again use the sharply hissed ‘s’ to create an atmosphere of danger, cutting through the textures of the full orchestra with striking percussive and dramatic effect.

The repeated consonant and vowel sounds here are almost identical to the ‘ta ka ta ka ta ka’ of ‘Nicolette’ and the ‘satyresses’ and ‘ogresses’ of Ravel’s earlier ‘Ronde’. The Petit Vieillard’s ‘Millimètre, centimètre, décimètre, décamètre, hectomètre, kilomètre, myriamètre, faut t’y mettre, quelle fête!’ similarly recalls the whirling rhythms and dancing assonances of Ravel’s ‘hamadryades, dryades, naïades, ménades...’, just as the Janequin-like onomatopoeia of ‘Deux robinets coulent [kulƏ], coulent, coulent, coulent...’ [Two taps flow, flow, flow, flow...] is reminiscent of the ‘loup grognant’ and ‘seigneur chénu’ of ‘Nicolette’.

<sup>29</sup> A phrase coined by Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, p. 93.

The use of language here, together with the characterisation of the various *sortilèges* through the onomatopoeic vowel and consonant sounds discussed above, is so similar to the *Trois chansons* that it raises questions about the creation of the libretto of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. Was the libretto the work of Colette alone? Did Ravel make small modifications or large-scale changes on his own initiative? Or – the most interesting option – was the final text the result of a true collaborative process?

Ravel and Colette had first encountered each other in the salons of Paris in the early years of the twentieth century. Colette was then writing music criticism for *Gil blas* and was acquainted with many musicians, notably Claude Debussy (who also reviewed for *Gil blas*)<sup>30</sup>, Gabriel Fauré, Vincent d'Indy, Déodat de Séverac and the critic Émile Vuillermoz, a good friend of Ravel.<sup>31</sup> Moving in similar circles, Ravel and Colette would have frequently encountered each other at plays, concerts and salons.

Colette drafted the libretto of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* in 1916 on the commission of Jacques Rouché, then artistic director of the Opéra Garnier. Her enthusiastic response when Jacques Rouché suggested Ravel's name as a possible collaborator also demonstrates her knowledge of and respect for his music.<sup>32</sup> Ravel did not receive the completed libretto, however, until the spring of 1918, and he did not start serious work on the music until 1920.<sup>33</sup> The opera occupied Ravel off and on for the next five years. Only the arrival of Raoul Gunsbourg (director of the Théâtre de Monte Carlo) in late 1924 compelled him to complete the work: Gunsbourg offered Ravel a contract for the première, to take place in April 1925.

Between the drafting of the libretto and the première of the completed opera, we have only two extant exchanges of correspondence between Ravel and Colette. In early February 1919 Ravel wrote to Jacques Rouché, asking for Colette's address and explaining that he had lost his address book.<sup>34</sup> The letter implies that he previously had her address and that there was therefore some degree of contact. There followed an exchange of letters (cited below) that reveals both Ravel's degree of involvement with

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Langham Smith, 'Colette as critic', *Music and Musicians* 25 (1977), p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> Colette, *Mes apprentissages*, in *Œuvres*, vol. III (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 993, 1023, 1070.

<sup>32</sup> Colette, 'Un salon en 1900', in *Journal à rebours*, *Œuvres*, vol. IV, p. 167.

<sup>33</sup> Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician*, p. 78. A copy of the libretto was sent to Ravel in 1916 but he was then serving on the Western Front near Verdun and it never reached him. For a complete discussion of the circumstances surrounding the creation of the libretto of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, see my article 'Enchantments and Illusions: Recasting the creation of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*'.

<sup>34</sup> Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, p. 171.

the libretto – he had evidently given it considerable thought by that stage – and suggests the friendship and respect in which he and Colette held each other. The letters are written in a spirit of comradeship and collaboration; both artists are plainly excited about the project and the lack of formality suggests more than a passing acquaintance. Although these letters are addressed to ‘Cher Monsieur’ and ‘Chère Madame’, by the time of the première Ravel was writing ‘Chère amie’ to Colette, a term he did not use lightly.<sup>35</sup> Choosing the correct appellation was of great importance to him; his pupil Manuel Rosenthal recalled him agonising over the wording of a simple letter of introduction to a Belgian conductor:

Firstly, how to begin? ‘Mon cher ami?’ But no, he’s not really a friend. That’s not it... and not ‘Monsieur Defauw’ either, nor ‘Cher Monsieur...’<sup>36</sup>

If the meticulously correct Ravel wrote ‘Chère Madame’ to Colette in 1919, and sent ‘all his friendship and gratitude’ to his ‘Chère amie’ six years later, it seems highly unlikely that there been no contact between them in the intervening period. The absence of correspondence therefore cannot be admitted as proof of absence of collaboration or communication (as Richard Langham Smith has pointed out, we would know a lot more about the writing of *Carmen* had Georges Bizet and his librettist Halévy not lived in the same house<sup>37</sup>). In an interview in 1924, Ravel said ‘I am now *working with Colette* on a very original piece, a kind of lyric fantasy...’ [italics mine].<sup>38</sup> Perhaps Ravel was being diplomatic; certainly Colette’s name would have done nothing to harm the advance publicity for his opera. Nevertheless, his statement may be taken as revealing – and perhaps more literally true than is frequently assumed.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ravel wrote to Colette on 15 March 1925:

Chère amie,  
When are you getting here? Despite the disastrous state of the parts – it’s my fault... tsk... tsk... –, we have managed to sort out the score, thanks to an excellent orchestra and a really extraordinary conductor [Victor de Sabata]. We rehearse tonight à l’italienne [sitzprobe]. The première is fixed for the 21<sup>st</sup> (next Saturday). The orchestra, the chorus, the soloists, the ushers – I had almost forgotten Gunsbourg – are enthusiastic: it’s a good omen. Come quickly: your suite awaits you at the Hôtel de Paris, where the food is carefully prepared and indigestible. And if, before leaving, you have a few moments, send Durand a second verse for that celebrated aria ‘Toi, le cœur de la rose...’, which awaits only you to be launched by our editors.  
See you soon. All the friendship and gratitude of your  
Maurice Ravel.

(In Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, pp. 232-33.)

<sup>36</sup> Marcel Marnet (ed.), *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), p. 121.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Langham Smith, ‘Bizet’s *Carmen*: Towards a performance Urtext’, keynote address given at conference on French Music: Performance and Analysis (Laie, Hawaii: Brigham Young University, November 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 433.

<sup>39</sup> In subsequent years Colette developed a close connection with Ravel’s home village of Montfort l’Amaury (where he lived from 1921 until his death in 1937) and maintained contact with Ravel himself. In the late 1920s she became a close friend of Ravel’s own dear friend Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, who

The opera-ballet that eventually appeared on the stage of the Théâtre de Monte Carlo in 1925 was not precisely the *féerie-ballet* or *Divertissement pour ma fille* of Colette's original conception. We know from the much-quoted exchange of early 1919 that some changes were made to the libretto after Ravel had begun work:

[Ravel to Colette, 27 February 1919]

In truth, I am already working on [our opera]: I'm taking notes – without writing any – I'm even thinking of some modifications... Don't be afraid, they're not cuts – on the contrary. For example, couldn't the squirrel's tale be developed? Imagine all that a squirrel could say of the forest, and how that could be expressed in music!

Another thing: what would you think of the cup and the teapot, in old Wedgwood – black – singing a ragtime? I confess that the idea of having a ragtime sung by two Negroes at the Académie Nationale de la Musique fills me with delight. ... Perhaps you will object that you don't usually write Negro slang. I, who know not a word of English, would do the same as you – I'd work it out.

[Colette to Ravel, 5 March 1919]

But certainly a ragtime! But of course Negroes in Wedgwood! May a terrific gust from the music hall stir up the dust of the Opéra! Go for it!

[...]

Do you know that cinema orchestras are playing your charming 'Contes de Ma mère l'Oye' while they show Westerns? If I were a composer and Ravel, I believe that I would derive much pleasure from learning that.

And the squirrel will say all that you wish. Does the 'cat' duo, exclusively miaowed, please you? We'll have acrobats. Isn't the Arithmetic business a polka?

I wish you good health, and I shake your hand impatiently.<sup>40</sup>

The one page of surviving draft of the opera's libretto is the original version of the scene of the Cup and Teapot, given by Colette to Hélène Jourdan-Morhange.<sup>41</sup> In it the Cup, as the Teapot explains, can exclaim only 'Fouchtra!', 'because she is made of Limoges porcelain. It means "Shame!"' Nor is this Teapot the black American boxer-figure that would eventually emerge, but an 'english théière de votre gram'ma', who scatters his French not with pugilistic 'franglais' but with phrases like 'cup-of-tea'. His

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lived with her partner (later husband), the sculptor Luc-Albert Moreau, in the village of Les Mesnuls, just four kilometres from Montfort l'Amaury. Ravel would regularly walk over to visit them, and met Colette there on at least one occasion (movingly described by Colette in her essay 'Un salon en 1900'). Around 1929, Colette also rented a house in Les Mesnuls; her husband Maurice Goudekot then bought a house, La Gerbière, in Montfort itself (it was sold in 1930) (Joanna Richardson, *Colette* (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 134, 136). Her Montfort acquaintances included Jacques de Zogheb, one of Ravel's close friends (Colette, *Lettres à Moune et à Toutounet*, Bernard Villaret, ed. (Paris: Des Femmes, 1985), pp. 33-34). Colette seems to have gone house-hunting in Montfort again in 1932, but did not purchase anything (*Lettres à Moune*, p. 51). In 1939, however, she bought another property, this time in Méré, the twin village of Montfort l'Amaury (the two are contiguous and share a railway station). This was to be her last country residence; requisitioned by the army on the outbreak of war, it was sold in 1941 (Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette* (New York: Knopf, 1999), pp. 430, 449).

<sup>40</sup> Arbie Orenstein, 'L'Enfant et les sortilèges: correspondance inédite de Ravel et Colette', *Revue de musicologie* 52:2 (1966), pp. 216-17.

<sup>41</sup> Reproduced in Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous*, Plate IX.

final characterisation probably owed much to Ravel's suggestion of a ragtime Teapot in 'Wedgwood noir', although it seems to have taken Colette some time to come up with the definitive version: in a letter to Ida Godebska on 13 October 1924 Ravel wrote 'Always in the midst of work... I am at the "Wedgwood tea-pot and Chinese cup" on lines that Colette has just sent me'.<sup>42</sup>

The metamorphosis of the Cup from Auvergnac to 'chinoise' is harder to trace. The text seems to have something of Ravel in its resonantly Sitwellian nonsense, while the sentiment 'puis'kong-kong-pran-pa, Ça-oh-râ toujours l'air chinoâ!' (a pseudo-Chinese rendering of the French words, 'Puis qu'on comprend pas, ça aura toujours l'air chinois!' ['since we don't understand, it will always sound Chinese!']) seems entirely appropriate for a man who would proudly display the objects in his own *salon chinois*, provoking guests into reverent admiration before exclaiming delightedly 'mais c'est du faux!' ['but it's fake!'].<sup>43</sup> Manuel Rosenthal also cites the touches of soldier's slang in the Cup's lines ('Kek t'as [qu'est ce que tu as] foutu d'mon kaoua?') as typical of Ravel, who delighted in the expressive possibilities of argot (much of it acquired during his war service).<sup>44</sup>

In his memoirs Rosenthal recalled that Jacques Rouché arranged with Colette that Ravel should be granted freedom to alter and refine the opera's libretto according to his musical ideas.<sup>45</sup> Colette's 'Allez-y!' implies that she was quite comfortable with this. Marcel Marnat has suggested (in conversation with the author) that much of the opera's final libretto came from Ravel's pen. Marnat cites as evidence the unusual lack of sketches or drafts for the opera by Colette and the characteristically Ravelian language (including the army slang and execrable English).

Ravel himself certainly created the lyrics (if they can be called such) of the 'Cat's Duet' (the libretto specifies only 'Duo Miaoulé'). Not content to repeat a miaou or two in the manner of Rossini, he spent hours 'conversing' with his family of Siamese cats and summoned Héléne Jourdan-Morhange to imitate them on her violin; Jourdan-Morhange

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<sup>42</sup> Orenstein, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges: correspondance inédite*, p. 218.

<sup>43</sup> Héléne Jourdan-Morhange, 'Maurice Ravel à Montfort l'Amaury', p. 164.

<sup>44</sup> Ravel's letters contain occasional references to 'Pantruche' (Paris) and 'le morticole' (for *médecin*, doctor) and one of the last sentences he ever spoke substituted *cabèche* for *tête* (head). ('La correspondance de Maurice Ravel à Lucien Garban (1919-1934)', ed. Arbie Orenstein, *Cahiers Ravel 9* (2006), pp. 31, 50, and Marnat (ed.) *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal*, p. 135.)

<sup>45</sup> Marnat (ed.), *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal*, p. 165.

recalled that the enthusiasm of their imitations brought Ravel's cats into the room in some distress!<sup>46</sup> Ravel's comprehensive feline vocabulary ('môrnão', 'mi-inhou', 'méinhou', 'mérâhon'...) is testimony both to his love of musical experimentation and to his awareness of the subtleties of both the feline and the human voice.

It was Ravel, too, who chose to treat his singers as instruments. In the scene of the Shepherds and Shepherdesses in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, he introduces 'zzz' sounds in the basses and altos that are sustained for the length of the episode. Meanwhile, the second tenors and sopranos double fragments of the upper voices' text at the interval of a major seventh, adopting the nasal 'annn' sounds. Here the voices are used to depict the buzz and slightly tuneless drone of the musette. A final and perhaps most conclusively Ravelian touch is the Frog's 'Kékékékécékéça?' [ie 'Qu'est ce que c'est que ça?'; 'What's that?']. It directly echoes a letter Ravel wrote to Ida Godebska in 1908: 'Monday I received a card from... Bourbonne-les-Bains! Then, nothing. Kécèkécèkécéà?'<sup>47</sup>

In her essay 'Un salon en 1900' (later included in her *Journal à rebours* of 1941), Colette described the creation of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*:

Vint le jour où M. Rouché me demanda un livret de féerie-ballet pour l'Opéra. Je ne m'explique pas encore comment je lui donnai, moi qui travaille avec lenteur et peine, *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* en moins de huit jours... Il aima mon petit poème, et suggéra des compositeurs dont j'accueillis les noms aussi poliment que je pus.

« Mais, dit Rouché après un silence, si je vous proposais Ravel ? »

Je sortis bruyamment de ma politesse, et l'expression de mon espoir ne ménagea plus rien.

« Il ne faut pas nous dissimuler, ajouta Rouché, que cela peut être long, en admettant que Ravel accepte... »

Il accepta. Ça fut long. Il emporta mon livret, et nous n'entendîmes plus parler de Ravel, ni de *L'Enfant*... Où travaillait Ravel ? Travaillait-il ? Je n'étais point au fait de ce qu'exigeait de lui la création d'une œuvre, de la lente frénésie qui le possédait et le tenait isolé, insoucieux des jours et des heures. La guerre prit Ravel, fit sur son nom un silence hermétique, et je perdis l'habitude de penser à *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*. Cinq ans passèrent. L'œuvre achevée et son auteur sortirent du silence, échappèrent à l'œil nyctalope et bleu des chats du Siam, confidents de Ravel. Mais celui-ci ne me traita pas en personne privilégiée, ne consentit pour moi à aucun commentaire, aucune audition prématurée. Il parut seulement se soucier du « duo miaulé » entre les deux Chats, et me

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<sup>46</sup> Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, 'Mon ami Ravel', *La Revue musicale* 19:187 (Special issue dedicated to Ravel, December 1938), p. 197.

<sup>47</sup> Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, p. 98. Orenstein traces this onomatopoeic touch to the libretto of Ravel's unfinished opera *La Cloche engloutie*; Henry Prunières noted that a much earlier equivalent can be found in Aristophanes' *The Frogs* (Henry Prunières, 'L'Enfant et les sortilèges à l'Opéra de Monte Carlo', *La Revue musicale* (1 April 1925), p. 108).



demanda gravement si je ne voyais pas d'inconvénient à ce qu'il remplaçât « mouâ » pas « mouain », ou bien l'inverse.<sup>48</sup>

The day came when Jacques Rouché asked me for a libretto for a 'fairy-ballet' for the Opéra [Garnier]. I still cannot explain how I, who work slowly and painfully, was able to give him *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* in less than eight days... He liked my little poem, and suggested several composers whose names I accepted as politely as I could.

'But', said Rouché after a silence, 'if I suggested Ravel to you?'

I was startled out of my politeness and the expression of my enthusiasm left nothing to be desired.

'We must not kid ourselves', said Rouché, 'it could take a long time, even assuming Ravel accepts...'

He accepted. It took a long time. He disappeared with my libretto and we heard nothing more of Ravel, nor of *L'Enfant*... Where did Ravel work? Was he working? I was not then familiar with what the creation of a new work demanded of him, the slow frenzy that possessed him and held him isolate, careless of the days and hours. The war took Ravel, consigning his name to impervious silence, and I fell out of the habit of thinking of *L'Enfant*. Five years passed. The completed work and its author emerged from silence, escaping from the blue, nyctalopic gaze of his confidants, his Siamese cats. But Ravel did not treat me with any privilege, explaining nothing nor granting me an early hearing. He seemed to concern himself only with the duo of the two Cats, demanding gravely if I minded if he replaced 'mouâ' with 'mouain', or perhaps it was the other way around...

Colette's version of the creation of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* should not, perhaps, be considered the most faithful picture of events. The death of a person can often prompt a revising or reshaping of history, and this record was written shortly after Ravel's death and twenty years after the events Colette described. Besides her much-elided account of how the libretto first reached Ravel, their letters from 1919 reveal a much more thoroughgoing exchange of ideas than the varying vowels of the Cats' duet. The replacement of 'mouâ' with 'mouain' is surely more symbolic than literal, a poetic way of saying, 'Ravel made several changes to the text'.

There may also have been sound practical reasons for minimising the perceived degree of collaboration. By admitting joint authorship of the libretto in 1939, Colette may have compromised her author's rights to the opera. Perhaps most importantly, however, Colette was above all else a writer of fiction. Even the most autobiographical of her works habitually reshape or disguise events, characters and emotions for reasons of narrative continuity and dramatic interest. The passage just quoted from *Journal à rebours*, as it stands, is a particularly beautiful piece of writing. The compelling poetic logic of the mirrored phrases 'Ça peut être long... Ça fut long' is matched by the image of the composer held isolate in his 'lente frénésie', 'careless of days and hours'. As

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<sup>48</sup> Colette, 'Un salon en 1900', pp. 166-167.

Ravel would surely have appreciated, for Colette to admit that in fact they had communicated and collaborated on the libretto of *L'Enfant* would have been something of a poetic anticlimax.

In *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel* Deborah Mawer argues that 'Ravel may have found working with such a high-powered, sexually extrovert and adventurous woman as Colette off-putting'.<sup>49</sup> This assumed disparity of character, personality or philosophy, along with any resultant extrapolations about the collaboration, is a relatively recent conception, unperceived by early critics:

What, Claudine has become a poet?! But she remains the child she always was [...] To treat this original and delicate subject, M. Ravel was the best of choices – one could say the only one possible. The Ravel-Colette collaboration seems to have been ordained by the order of things, and in listening to the work it is impossible to conceive any other possible musical setting than Ravel's...<sup>50</sup>

Was not Ravel the musician whose heart could best understand Colette's heart? Was it not he who could follow her most gracefully into the kingdom of dreams?<sup>51</sup>

Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, who knew and understood both Ravel and Colette extremely well, acknowledged their vastly different characters and personalities in *Ravel et nous*.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, she went on to explore their shared qualities: the precision and care they brought to their respective disciplines, and, more insightfully, a similar 'reticence of soul' ['pudeur d'âme'], easily discernible in Ravel and masked, in Colette, by the colourful spontaneity that characterised her public persona.<sup>53</sup> When Roland-Manuel memorably called the pair 'the Enchantress and the Illusionist'<sup>54</sup>, he too was recognising the presence of shared qualities and principles, differently inflected and realised.

These reflections, together with the comments of the early reviewers, lead us to a crucial point that Mawer's very contemporary reflection overlooks: successful artistic

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<sup>49</sup> Deborah Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 71.

<sup>50</sup> Raymond Balliman, 'L'Enfant et les sortilèges' [review], *Lyrice*, Feb. 1926, p. 693, in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges: Dossier d'œuvre* (Paris: Bm-O).

<sup>51</sup> Carol-Bernard, 'L'Enfant et les sortilèges' [review], *L'Époque* (19 May 1939), in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges: Dossier d'œuvre*.

<sup>52</sup> Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous*, p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous*, pp. 127-8. Ravel may have been reticent, but he was by no means prudish (as Mawer implies); he had a dry and earthy sense of humour, and probably found Colette's flamboyance entertaining.

<sup>54</sup> Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London, 1947), p. 93.

collaborations are dependent not on congruent personalities but on shared artistic perceptions and practices (consider Messrs. Gilbert and Sullivan). Regardless of the authorship of particular lines, phrases and scenes, the use of language in the libretto and score of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* repeatedly illustrates the artistic affinity between composer and librettist: both perceived language in terms of sounds, rhythms and resonances. Margaret Crosland drew correspondences between the two artists in her perceptive chapter in *Colette: The Woman, the Writer*:

They were perceptive artists who both possessed an ironic sense of humour, and in their respective mediums, they were each capable of virtuoso achievement. They both loved the mysterious elegance of cats, but at a much deeper level they related the world of animals to the world of humans. Colette in fact once wrote in “Paradis terrestre” (*En pays connu*) that her image of paradise or fairyland could not exist without animals.<sup>55</sup>

In his 1938 homage, André Mirambel wrote that:

Ravel had the qualities of a prosodist, not only in his choice of subjects [...] but also in his handling of musical language, which he constructed in the manner of a [written or spoken] phrase; one could say that Ravel elevated musical language to the heights of musical prose.<sup>56</sup>

Were the sense of this passage inverted, it could apply equally to Colette’s writing. She had a profound understanding of and sympathy for the French language and her sentences were always assembled with as much care as a musical phrase. Her lifelong love of music, her musical literacy and her friendships with musicians and composers undoubtedly contributed to the development of a prose style notable for its fluidity and its satisfying and expressive rhythms and assonances.

Both Ravel and Colette regarded themselves in their art not as inspired geniuses but as craftspeople; Jourdan-Morhange tellingly called them both *artisans*.<sup>57</sup> They both had a strong sense of drama and they both loved the theatre and the music hall. They both thought deeply about structure; they both manipulated form and content in precise and complex ways to generate precise and complex emotional affects. Like Ravel, Colette

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<sup>55</sup> Margaret Crosland ‘Colette and Ravel: The Enchantress and the Illusionist’ in *Colette: The Woman, the Writer*, eds. Erica Mendelson Eisinger and Mari Ward McCarty (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1981), p. 123.

<sup>56</sup> André Mirambel. ‘L’inspiration grecque dans l’œuvre de Ravel’, *La Revue musicale* 19:187 (Special issue dedicated to Ravel, December 1938), p. 116.

<sup>57</sup> Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous*, p. 127. The word *artisan* has particular resonance and significance in French, signalling not merely skill and precision but a profound love of and connection with a traditional craft.

could make her point with exquisite elegance combined with simplicity and straightforwardness; like him her work juxtaposed insight and tenderness with a satirical eye and a sparkling wit.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both Ravel and Colette were storytellers. Composer and librettist shared a love of fantasy and fairytale, and they were equally aware and appreciative of the rhythmic and melodic subtleties inherent in spoken words. It is through this shared and sympathetic understanding that we should view a work of which Raymond Balliman wrote, ‘the union of poetry and music is such that it is impossible to separate the collaborators’.<sup>58</sup>

## 4.6 Conclusion

Less than two years after the première of *Ma mère l'Oye*, Ravel was commissioned by Jacques Rouché (then director of the Théâtre des Arts) to transform his piano duets into a ballet score. Ravel wrote his own scenario for the ballet, the first version of which is contained in a letter to Rouché. The scenario specifies that, after seeing the Princess laid in her bed, the Good Fairy:

...whistles through her fingers. At this signal, the little Negro [Négrillon] appears, struggling beneath the weight of an enormous volume [...] On the cover, the title appears in golden letters: ‘Tales of Mother Goose’. The book is placed upright at the back of the stage. Four little Negroes open the cover. Open, the book covers the entire back of the stage. On the first page is inscribed the title of the second tale: ‘The conversations of the Beauty and the Beast’.<sup>59</sup>

As the ballet progresses, each new scene is heralded by the turning of an enormous page. Deborah Mawer notes that this original concept underwent some modifications: the 1912 programme specifies that the Good Fairy ‘goes to kiss the sleeping princess on the forehead and gives her *Les Contes de Ma mère l'Oye* for her dreams’<sup>60</sup> (this alteration was no doubt necessitated by practical considerations). A third alternative appears in the solo piano reduction of the complete ballet, in which the scenario is overlaid on the music. This version, in a spirit of compromise, has the ‘Négrillons’ unfurl banners bearing the names of the tales. Although this version of the scenario omits the key motif of the book itself, a letter from Ravel to the designer Drésa in

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<sup>58</sup> Balliman, ‘*L’Enfant et les sortilèges*’ [review], p. 693.

<sup>59</sup> Maurice Ravel, *Lettres à Jacques Rouché* (Paris: Bm-O, LAS Ravel (Maurice) 1-13, early 1912).

<sup>60</sup> Mawer, *The Ballets of Maurice Ravel*, p. 50.

January 1912 mentions the banner ‘on which is inscribed the *text* of the tales’ (italics mine).<sup>61</sup> All three scenarios therefore maintain the connection between the individual scenes, the stories from which they are taken, and the literary tradition of the fairytale to which those stories belong. Ravel’s initial conception is particularly significant: the book, when open, dominates the entire stage, an image whose implications are unmistakable.

The image of the book of fairytales returns in *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, in its dramatic central episode. The ‘beautiful princess of the *contes de fées*’ rises up out of the floor to reproach the Child for tearing up the book in which she lives. As a consequence of the destruction she must disappear forever, and the Child is powerless to help her. Had he not destroyed the book, she sings, ‘You could have been my Prince of the Rosy Crest’. Here once more we find the motif of the book of fairytales – the words themselves – and the consequences of destroying them are severe.

Hélène Jourdan-Morhange wrote that Ravel proved himself a poet not only in his own writing but in his unerring choices of texts. She noted that he was attracted by writers – Clément Marot, Evariste Parry, Franc-Nohain, Mallarmé, Jules Renard, Léon-Paul Fargue – whom few other composers set, their poetry seemingly unsuited to being ‘clothed with music’.<sup>62</sup> Equally, the poets to whom Debussy and Fauré, the other great *mélodistes* of his era, were drawn – Charles Baudelaire, Paul Bourget, Théodore de Banville, Théophile Gautier, Victor Hugo and Paul Verlaine – had little attraction for Ravel. Of those illustrious names his catalogue lists only the two short Verlaine settings (in addition to the incomplete youthful setting of *Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit*). Yet, as Jourdan-Morhange writes, Ravel was not repelled by the difficulty of setting the ‘unmusical’ poems of his chosen writers:

...on the contrary. Filled with wonder by a sonnet, a lament or any other sort of poetry, he would express its beauty, its harmony, without ever becoming its slave, and it is this mixture of respect for the poem combined with his own musical personality that gives to his songs that very special flavour of freedom based upon a foundation of necessary restraint.<sup>63</sup>

Ravel’s sympathetic affinity with his native language is immediately apparent in both his own poetry and his meticulous and inspired settings of the poetry of others.

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<sup>61</sup> In Orenstein (ed.), *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, p. 121.

<sup>62</sup> Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous*, p. 134.

<sup>63</sup> Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel et nous*, p. 134.

However, it is in his works most closely connected with fantasy and fairytale that Ravel made most expressive use of the resonances and rhythms of his words. Regular and natural rhythmic patterns, expressive inflections, and illustrative rhymes and assonances are defining elements of the fairytale narrative, particularly when read aloud. Ravel's emphasis on the sounds of the language in *Noël des jouets*, the *Trois chansons* and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* suggests a deft homage to the traditions of fairytales and story-telling.

In his insightful 1938 analysis, René Dumesnil surmised:

To write in verse, to count the feet and align the rhymes, is not truly to be a poet. However, to seek and to divine the euphonic accord of words and ideas, of harmony and verbal sonorities, the metre within the structure, the true internal music that imparts a profound resonance to the verse which will find its echo in the ear of the reader, to use to the best of one's knowledge the power to suggest particular images: *that* is what it is to be a poet. In this art, Ravel acquired the techniques as he learnt his musician's trade.<sup>64</sup>

Dumesnil acknowledges here that 'Ravel poète' and 'Ravel musicien' were one and the same. Beyond the colourful imagery conveyed through the sense of his texts, Ravel loved the musical and dramatic possibilities inherent within the sounds of the language itself. His love and understanding of language informed his approach to musical composition, just as his awareness of musical sound and resonance defined his understanding and creation of poetry.

This awareness of the musicality inherent in language, poetry and storytelling is typified in the expressive dyads of *Noël des jouets*, the conversational tone and expressive gestures of the *Histoires naturelles*, the melodic translation of the storytelling voice in *Ma mère l'Oye*, the sing-song narratives of 'Nicolette' and the seamless and euphonic melding of words and music in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. Experienced like the spoken tale in time and space, Ravel's fairytales simultaneously depict the events of the *conte* and the rituals of its telling.

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<sup>64</sup> Dumesnil, 'Maurice Ravel poète', pp. 124-5.