
Unraveling Ravel: The *Prélude* from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Richard Jean Richards

Musicians wanting to understand Ravel's *Prélude* from *Le Tombeau de Couperin* are dealing with a harmonically complex, purposefully veiled musical structure. Even though only three related themes are used, the work is highly crafted and quite complex. While the formal analysis is fairly straightforward, the complexity is in the harmonic palette, which is chromatic with many extended chords.

Macro analysis—using letters to identify chords and relationships—is ideal here to make harmonic goals more apparent and to clarify complex key relationships.¹ Macro aids a musician's comprehension of the *Prélude* by revealing many smaller circles of fifths patterns on the surface; an interesting, small area of quintal harmony; and one important, large circle of keys pattern below the surface. This large, hidden circle sweep underlies much of the composition and helps give unity to the entire work. Both the small circle patterns and the large sweep bring goal-oriented direction to the work.

Macro analysis can also clearly show areas where circle motions are not predominant and where thematic or other linear organizational techniques such as sequential transpositions, descending third motions, and stepwise bass lines are predominant.

Style

Ravel's style is often described as Impressionistic but with neoclassic features. He certainly works at the outer edges of tonal harmony. The *Prélude* fits such a description, but with the addition of elements of early twentieth-century style, as exemplified by Stravinsky. The twentieth-century style adds ostinato motives and sometimes extremely harsh dissonances.

Ravel's neoclassicism and craftsmanship are evident in his use of form and in many of the organizational techniques used in the complete *Le Tombeau*. This set of six compositions resembles a Baroque dance suite. The *Prélude* is followed by *II. Fugue*, *III. Forlane*, *IV. Rigaudon*, *V. Menuet*,

1. Macro analysis is found in Benward, Bruce and Marilyn Saker, *Music in Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

and *VI. Toccata*. All of these titles relate indirectly to the loose collections of dance movements called *Ordres* of François Couperin. Ravel used Couperin's quintessentially French style as a model both formally and emotionally. The complete *Le Tombeau* was begun in 1914, six years after Debussy had written in an article for *Le Figaro*: "Why do we not regret the loss of these charming ways in which music was formerly written, so lost that it is now impossible to find the least trace of Couperin's influence?"² *Le Tombeau* incorporates many of those charming ways Debussy mentions.

The six movements of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* were begun in July of 1914 but not completed until June through November of 1917 in Paris. It must be noted that a tombeau is typically a poetic homage to someone, usually of importance, who is deceased. In this case it is not only an homage to Couperin or even the Baroque period but also to comrades Ravel had just lost in World War I. Each composition in the set has a dedication to one of them. Ravel's mother, an important influence throughout his life, died in January of the year the composition was finally completed, so it is likely an homage to her as well.³ The set was published in 1918 by Durand in Paris just after the time of the opulent Paris productions of the Ballet Russe. Both Ravel and Stravinsky provided landmark large scale compositions for the ballet, which helps account for the early twentieth-century influence in *Le Tombeau*. Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe* (first performed 1912) is just after Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrushka* (1911) and just before *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913).⁴

Thematic and Motivic Elements—Formal Analysis

Ravel uses and expands on three motives in the *Prélude*. The first, *theme A*, mm. 1–2 (Example 1), is a repetitive, circling, sixteenth note theme that has a twentieth-century ostinato effect. It alternates between treble and bass clef, moving from tonic in the first measure to subdominant in the second.

Theme A has a fast, difficult, on-the-beat, upper mordent that will challenge even the most accomplished pianists. It later becomes an on-the-beat, lower mordent with exactly the same quick, on-the-beat rhythm. This mordent motion, up one or down one and back, is labeled

2. Debussy, Claude, *Debussy on Music*. Francois Lesure collection. trans., Richard Langham Smith. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 229.

3. Bricard, Nancy, "Foreward" in *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by Maurice Ravel, 2nd ed. (Van Nuys, California: Alfred Publishing, 2003), pp. 1–4.

4. Kelly, Barbara L., "Maurice Ravel," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, (accessed 31 March 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

motive a—whether it moves upward or downward. It appears in various transformations in all three themes.

Example 1. *Theme A*, mm. 1–2, with *motive a* marked both as a mordent and as sixteenth notes.

The second theme, *theme B*, mm. 5–6 (Example 2), begins with *motive a*, now expanded to three stepwise sixteenth notes. At first, in mm. 5–6, *motive a* is followed by a small run.

Example 2. *Theme B*, mm. 5–6, showing *motive a* now in stepwise sixteenths.

Later on, in mm. 14–15 (Example 3), *motive a* is in the same stepwise sixteenths in the first half of each measure, but in the second half of mm. 14–15, the range of *motive a* is expanded to an open fifth. This changed unit in mm. 14–15 sounds like something entirely new but actually it is not. Measures 14–15 include as well a descending eighth note bass line, labeled *motive b*. Despite these changes and additions, mm. 14–15 are still clearly an expansion of *theme B* in mm. 5–6. While *theme A* at the start of the composition is organized more by harmonic means, *theme B* is more linear and bass line organized.

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Example 3. *Theme B*, mm. 14–17, showing *motive a* followed by an expansion of *motive a* to the range of a fifth and showing the descending eighth note *motive b*.

The third theme, *theme C*, mm. 22–27 (Example 4), appears in the treble in longer note values with a running accompaniment pattern in sixteenth notes in the bass. Its organization is more complicated than earlier themes in that it often appears as a three-part phrase group. The first part of the phrase group is itself a smaller, two-measure motive, labeled *motive c*. *Motive c* includes a dotted quarter, three ascending triadic eighths, and two stepwise ascending dotted quarters. It contains a reference to *motive a*, the initial mordent motive, on each of the dotted quarters.

The second part of the three-part phrase group of *theme C* is either an exact repetition of the first phrase part, which is *motive c*, or a sequence of it, depending on which occurrence is being examined. The third and final two-measure phrase part acts as a conclusion.⁵ It is usually all dotted quarters using *motive a*, often all on the same pitch. *Theme C* with its three parts is the most linearly organized of the three themes.

Ravel uses this linear, three-part repetition and conclusion pattern as an important organizational element throughout the composition. It appears with *theme C* at mm. 41–46 (two sets), mm. 53–59 (two sets) and

5. Mark McFarland refers to similar sequential motion which Richard Cohn terms transpositional combination (TC): McFarland, Mark, "Transpositional Combination and Aggregate Formation in Debussy," *Spectrum*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Spring 2006 (Society for Music Theory, 2005), pp. 188–192.

again at mm. 71–76. It is also used with *theme B* at mm. 14–21 (two sets with stepwise bass line). Such linear organization is an important organizational component particularly when circle motions are not present.

Theme C

Part 1 Motive c

Part 2

Part 3

Example 4. *Theme C*, mm. 22–27, six-measure, three-part phrase group utilizing two-measure *motive c* with internal *motive a*.

These three themes—*A*, *B*, and *C*—and these three motives—*motive a* (mordent), *motive b* (descending bass eighths), and *motive c* (longer note values with three-part phrase)—make up the bulk of the *Prélude*. Nearly every measure contains one or more of these themes and motives.

Formal Structure

Formal structures of preludes in the Baroque period tended to be free and relatively monothematic. The later dances in a suite were more formally organized and often binary, but preludes were more through-composed, in one unit. Ravel uses a first and second ending for the first section of his *Prélude*. This suggests a Baroque binary form, which is somewhat unusual for a prelude. The location of the two climaxes, one just before the first and second endings and the other just before the concluding material, corroborates the possibility of two large sections, that is, binary form. The first section also modulates to the relative major, from E aeolian to G major, which is very common in Baroque binary forms. So there is little question that Ravel has used a binary form in this prelude rather than a free monothematic form.

Breaking the composition down into individual sections has been done using both thematic and harmonic criteria. The large sections of the form could be seen as \parallel : A B : \parallel C C B A \parallel . The final return of A is very brief, presenting only four measures of *theme A*. The B section is clearly indicated by the presentation of a new version of *theme B* at m. 14 in a new key. Section C is marked by a return to *theme A* at m. 37 and a cadence into a new key. The two large binary parts are made up of “A B climax,” followed by “C C B climax.” Here too, the repetition of the first section, “A B climax” with a first and second ending, supports the analytic division into two large binary parts. Another interesting feature is that the letters alone are a palindrome—A, B, C, C, B, A.

Taking the formal layout further, one could see a parallel to the early binary sonata form that emerged from the Baroque, along the lines of the sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. Scarlatti tended to write his sonatas in large, binary sections with multiple themes. In Scarlatti sonatas there is often more tonal complexity in the second half, although that can be said of binary forms in general. Ravel in the *Prélude* has done very much the same thing as Scarlatti, using binary form with multiple themes. Ravel’s second half has much less circle motion and many more minor key changes than the first half. This makes for a somewhat loose but interesting parallel structure to early binary sonata forms.

Diagram 1—Formal Analysis

In Diagram 1, the first line shows the first and second large parts of the binary form. The second line uses capital letters to show the six large sections and climaxes listed in the paragraphs above. The third uses small letters to show small internal sections. The fourth lists internal and cadential circle progressions where appropriate. Just below that, the fifth line lists measure numbers. The bottom line, the sixth line, indicates keys which will be discussed in more detail in the harmonic analysis.

triad sounds most convincing. This is a way to simplify the sonority in order to help determine the root of the chord and to hear the flow of chords. The process is especially good because it relies on aural rather than visual cues.

Finally, listening to the complete vertical structures again to see how they sound in relation to each other can be useful. At times an area will have an overriding sonority or flow that dictates chord roots that are not apparent individually. Once more, the primary concern must be what the ear hears, not what the eye sees, or what seems convenient or likely from the written score.

Circle Progressions in the *Prélude*

Circle progressions are used at important points or to set up cadences into new sections in the *Prélude*. As might be expected, circle progressions are less frequent than typically found in a classical composition by Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven. When circle progressions are used at cadences, they often employ a minor dominant rather than a major one. Other techniques such as the use of descending bass lines or descending thirds tied off by circle progressions are often employed. Those circles occurring at the end of sections are labeled cadential circles. Those occurring within a section are labeled internal circles.

Theme A, mm. 1–2 (Example 5), at the very outset of the composition contains an example of an internal circle progression from an E-minor chord to an A-minor chord.

Example 5. Internal circle, mm. 1–2, macro slur from E-minor chord to A-minor chord. In macro notation, slurs indicate circle motion, either downward by a fifth or upward by a fourth.

An example of a particularly beautiful cadential circle progression is found in mm. 29–30 (Example 6), just after the first climax point where a series of open fifths in the bass at the start circle through four circle motions, down a perfect fifth each time. They conclude in an open seventh followed by a ninth chord, still a fifth apart.

b e a D G

Example 6. Cadential circle reinforced with open fifths, mm. 28–30.

In the more harmonically static, quiet area at mm. 34–39 (Example 7), open fifths and circle progressions contribute to the sense of repose. This area suggests quintal harmony. For example in m. 34, the first three tones are G, D, A, followed on beat two by E and B. In m. 38 they are F, C, G, D, A followed by E. The undulating repetitions of *theme A* combine with the suggestion of quintal harmony to enhance the calmness and stability found here.

G¹³ in 5ths G¹³ G¹³

C¹³ in 5ths F¹³ in 5ths C¹³

Example 7. Quintal harmony with open fifths and circle progressions, mm. 34–39.

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The return once again of *theme A*, mm. 48–50 (Example 8), contains internal circles from dominant to tonic (B-minor chord to E-minor chord).

Example 8 shows a piano score for measures 48, 49, and 50. The music is in G major. Measures 48 and 49 feature a continuous eighth-note pattern in the right hand, with the left hand playing a simple harmonic accompaniment. Measure 50 begins with a *pp* dynamic and features a more complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand. A bracket below the bass line spans from measure 48 to measure 50, with 'b¹¹' under measure 48 and 'e¹¹' under measure 50, indicating an internal circle from the dominant (B¹¹) to the tonic (E¹¹).

Example 8. Return of *theme A* and internal circle progressions, mm. 48–50.

At mm. 64–65 and again at mm. 69–70 (Example 9), Ravel uses nearly the same pattern of cadential circles reinforced with open fifths that he used after the first main climax in mm. 29–30 (Example 6). In this instance the first two vertical open fifths are in a descending third relationship rather than circle. The following vertical open fifths tie off the series with a cadential circle, giving more closure to the area. The reappearance of this cadential pattern is logical for unity, but the location is surprising since it is isolated and follows a different theme. Here the pattern follows two statements of *theme B*, but before, the pattern followed the climax of *theme C*. Further, since it has a strong cadential drive, it might be logical for Ravel to use it to reinforce closure near the end of the composition. He does not do so. It is interesting that he does not use one of his strongest cadential passages at all in the ending sections of this work.

Example 9 shows a piano score for measures 64 and 65. The music is in G major. Measure 64 features a series of vertical open fifths in the right hand, with the left hand playing a simple harmonic accompaniment. Measure 65 features a more complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand. A bracket below the bass line spans from measure 64 to measure 65, with 'b' under measure 64 and 'D' under measure 65, indicating a cadential circle from B to D. The notes 'G' and 'A⁷' are also indicated under the bass line in measure 64.

Example 9. Measures 64–65 and 69–70. Same cadential pattern as Example 6, mm. 29–30, except different location and containing two descending thirds at start.

69 70

F () D^b () b^b () E^b7 () A^b ()

Example 9, continued.

Macro analysis reveals that the three-part phrase of *theme C*, mm. 71–77 (Example 10), is reinforced harmonically to propel the music forward. A series of circle pairs, each one successively higher, is used to heighten the drive toward the final climax near the end of the composition.

71 72

mp *cresc.*

f[#]m: [i] f[#] () B⁹ () V⁹/VII () g[#] () C[#] () v/V () V ()

73 74

bm: [i] b () E⁹ () V⁹/III () c[#] () F[#] () v/V () V ()

75 76

em: [i] e () A () V/VII () D () b () C () f[#] () V/III () v () VI () ii⁶₅ ()

Example 10. Measures 71–76, series of circle pairs used to reinforce drive to final climax.

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The last cadences are strong for full closure. The cadence into the final section on *theme A*, mm. 85–86 (Example 11), is a perfect authentic cadence. But following that is a repeated plagal cadence, from mm. 87–88 and again from mm. 89–90. All of these cadences are to the tonic key of E aeolian.

The musical score for Example 11 is presented in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a piano (pp) dynamic marking. The key signature is one sharp (F#), indicating E aeolian.

- System 1 (Measures 85-86):** Labeled "Overall Section" with a box containing A^1 and a^1 . Measure 85 features a melodic line in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. Measure 86 shows a cadence with notes b (bass), e^{11} (treble), b (bass), e^{11} (treble), and b (bass). This is identified as a "PA Cadence (V - i)".
- System 2 (Measures 87-88):** Measure 87 shows a plagal cadence with notes a^{13} (treble) and iv^{13} (bass), labeled "Plagal Cadence (iv - i)". Measure 88 shows a PA cadence with notes e^{11} (treble), b (bass), e^{11} (treble), and b (bass), labeled "PA Cadence (v - i)".
- System 3 (Measures 89-90):** Measure 89 shows a plagal cadence with notes a^{13} (treble) and iv^{13} (bass), labeled "Plagal Cadence (iv - i)". Measure 90 shows a PA cadence with notes e^{11} (treble) and i^{11} (bass).

Example 11. Measures 85–90, perfect authentic cadence into the final section at mm. 85–86, with plagal cadences at mm. 87–88 and 89–90.

Harmonic Features

There are several harmonic features, revealed by macro analysis, that are of particular theoretical interest in this complex work. These include the large, hidden circle sweep of keys, the quiet quintal area, and a number of smaller circle progressions.

Most important is the strong underlying key sweep revealed by the harmonic reduction in Diagram 2, which follows. Once the harmonic analysis is complete, with keys designated, a very large circle motion can be traced. Starting at m. 24 it sweeps by fifths through the keys of G lydian, C major, F mixolydian, B-flat lydian, E-flat major, and later, at m. 68, to A-flat major. The first few modulations at the start before the sweep are excursions to the related keys of A minor, G major, and C lydian. All of this opening area, mm. 1–18, keeps the sound of E aeolian and can actually be successfully analyzed in E aeolian. Another series of quick modulations, mm. 56–68, in a harmonically unstable area between E-flat major and A-flat major, interrupts the final A-flat major key of the sweep but the sweep remains. A smaller series of two circle progressions, f#–b–e, closes the composition.⁶

Diagram 2—Harmonic Reduction

Diagram 2 shows key relationships. The top line shows the formal sections in capital letters with two climax points. The next line shows a summary of the key relationships. Below that are the measure numbers.

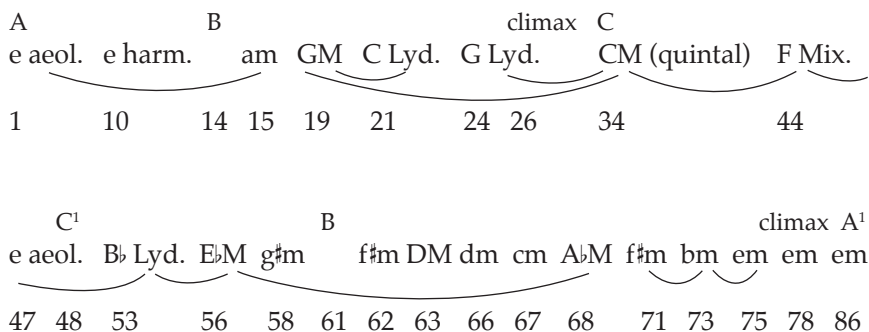


Diagram 2

6. Warren Gooch observes a similar underlying harmonic structure in the *Menuet* of Ravel's *Sonatine*. It involves keys related by equal distances around a central axis key. Warren Gooch, "Tonal Axis in Ravel's *Sonatine*: A Macro-Analytical Discussion," *Musical Insights*, Vol. 1 (Madison, Wisconsin: Macro Analysis Creative Research Organization, 1997), pp. 51–56.

Another interesting harmonic feature, but extra to the circle sweep, is the quintal area in mm. 34–40. Here Ravel's elegant use of quintal harmony creates a moment of stability and peace between two larger, more active sections. The use of quintal harmony further underlines the importance of the perfect fifth interval in this composition.

A less apparent harmonic feature is Ravel's highly crafted use of traditional, small, surface circle patterns in a composition in the Impressionistic style where fewer circle progressions were typically used. As seen in the examples, these circle patterns occur throughout the work, especially at cadence points. The main theme is a good concluding example. Although *theme A* contains a circle motion itself, moving down a fifth in the second and fourth measures, it is the transposition of the entire unit in the second half that shows Ravel's careful craftsmanship. In the opening two measures, mm. 1–2 (Example 5), the initial motive moves from e^{11} to a^{11} . In E aeolian this move is a circle progression to the subdominant, from i^{11} to iv^{11} . In the second half, at mm. 48–50 (Example 8), it is transposed to the dominant and moves from b^{11} to e^9 , another circle progression but this time to the tonic, v^{11} to i^9 . Ravel, by having the original motive move initially to the subdominant rather than the typical dominant, sets up a strong circle progression to the tonic when the entire unit is transposed to the dominant. What was an open progression to the subdominant at the beginning becomes, when transposed, a closed move to the tonic in the second half. This is another neoclassic element in that it was used by many earlier composers.

The overall harmonic architecture is one of harmonically stable beginning and ending areas versus unstable, more ambiguous inner areas. For example, many more stable internal circle progressions and stepwise bass lines occur in the first part of the binary form, mm. 1–26, and at the end of the composition, mm. 71–97, than elsewhere. There are fewer in the middle sections of the composition. Both mm. 1–26, at the start, and mm. 71–97, at the end, show tighter harmonic organization and are somewhat less harmonically complex. The middle sections, including mm. 27–70, are much more harmonically unstable with rapid key changes. In areas where circle motions are not used to give structure to the work sequential transpositions, descending third motions, and stepwise bass lines are used along with three-part phrase structures.

Conclusion

Macro analysis, by showing large key motions and relationships, reveals an amazingly strong underlying structure in the *Prélude to Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Macro further illuminates internal structures that contribute to the sense of unity in this work—internal structures that a performer may well intuit but can best explore through formal analysis.

Musicians striving for fully developed interpretations of complex works such as the *Prélude* can be well served by analyzing them in detail. Interpretations can only benefit from such work, most logically done with macro and so very revealing.

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