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Piano Concerto in G by Maurice Ravel

The performance preparation process in the context of various influences on the performer

The following recording is part of the project: Maurice Ravel, Concerto in G for piano and orchestra, Iveta Calite piano, Daniel Blendulf conductor, KMH Symphony orchestra at KMH Stora Salen in April 2016
Abstract

In this study, I do a research on my own ways and the influences that helped me to prepare Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G interpretation and performance. Is it an intuition, inspiration from a recording or something I have learned in a master-class. I went through Ravels’ piano music to see the development of the interpretation that blossomed into the Concerto. I looked at the preparation process that I did on my own, then together with the second pianist and at the end with the conductor. I have described my feelings after the performance as well as looked into different recordings of famous artists.

The various influences are hard to measure since the artistic process is always under a constant change and development but looking closer to the sources of inspiration made me realize that everything I have experienced in connection to Ravel’s music has influenced my understanding and interpretation of the Concerto, most of all the master-classes with J.Hlinka, P.Roberts and M.Sturfält.

Keywords: Maurice Ravel, Piano Concerto in G, performance, orchestra, interpretation, learning process
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Introduction

I have always been fascinated by history and the great people in it, their heritage for next generations as well as musicians’ “family-trees” that pass on and keep the tradition alive. It all becomes so real when you are listening to a live concert with great artists and afterwards going for a piano lesson, hearing stories from your teacher about the artists you had heard in the concert. Stories that are real because they have been friends or studied with the same teacher. Finally you realize that the world is so small and we are all connected with each other in ways that we haven’t even thought of.

We can learn a lot from our mentors, through master-classes, by listening to the recordings or reading books but can the style and feeling for “correct” interpretation be sensed? Could it also be a sort of intuition? Where can one draw the line between intuition and actual knowledge?

80 years have passed since Ravel’s death. In comparison to Bach or Beethoven, it is quite a short period of time which lets us grow closer to his art and the way he had wanted it to sound. We even have recordings where we can hear Ravel playing his own music. It is one of the keys to his music... but is it the only one?

Personal background of the author

Born in Riga in 1988, I started to play piano when I was 8 years old. Before that I was having success in singing and dreamt of becoming a singer. After hearing some piano playing, I announced that I wanted to become a pianist so after some preparation time I entered a music school. My childhood was very busy since I had to find time for both schools as well as participating in competitions and festivals. Thanks to my teacher Agnese Krastenberga, I had a wide range of programs and musical experiences that served me greatly in later years. When I was 15 years old, I decided to continue my musical education on a professional level, I was admitted to Jazepa Medina Music high school in Riga where I eventually encountered a fantastic piano teacher Ella Strazdina who introduced me to more advanced music of Debussy (I had played some easier pieces by Debussy when I was a child), which inspired me so much with its colours and technical capacity. This was also a turning point, as I see it now, for the whole of my future.

While preparing for a competition in Paris during my studies in Riga, my teacher suddenly passed away and the changes I had to encounter after that were dramatic for both my personality and pianism. After the trip to France I had decided that I would love to study there in my future. The city and the culture inspired me so much that studying in Paris had become my dream and a bit of an obsession. I was trying to find the slightest reason and availability to go there and learn more about the French music and the
culture. During the rest of my high school years, I played Ravel’s music that had become a big part of my pianistic life. In 2009 my dream came true and I was accepted to Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris Alfred Cortot, right after the graduation of high school in Riga. I thought I would study so much of French music and become an expert in it. How wrong I was!

During my 3 years of studies with the renowned pianist Jean Marc Luisada, that still is one of the biggest and most important influences of my life, I worked only on one piece by Debussy. Paris time was a total change of my life and perception of life as a human and musician, also the rich cultural life had a huge impact on me. I had to rebuild my technique and change my musical language, work a lot with the freedom of the body. A total renovation so many musicians are afraid of. Why only one piece by Debussy? In order to get to the 20th century music, one must learn how to understand the basics of the musical styles before that. So my time was foremost spent in the company of Bach, Beethoven and Chopin.

While in my last year in Paris in 2012, I decided to study somewhere closer to home. So I came to Sweden. At first everything seemed illogical to me, I could not accept the low level of criticism of the musicians and the performances, it seemed incompatible – wanting to become a performance artist and not being able to criticize your own/other people playing. But with the time I adapted to the system and so far it has given me great advantages and fantastic experience. My professor Stefan Bojsten has been a big help in raising my self-esteem, he has been a great resource of musical ideas and technical solutions. And only here, in Stockholm, I could get back to my old and faithful love – French music. Preludes and Estampes by Debussy, Miroirs and Piano Concerto in G by Ravel – a dream come true!

Aim

The aim of this research is to understand and define how various factors, such as recordings, bibliographical sources and master classes influence my performance of the Concerto in G by Maurice Ravel.

During the process of preparation I will see how different experiences affect my interpretation. I will try to go through the whole process from first listening to the piece on the recording, learning the facts about it and then practicing it. At the later stage of the work I will go deeper into analyzing how my own self practice, then the work with the second piano and finally the rehearsals with the orchestra influenced the process and the result. I will try to define the main things that changed throughout these experiences – how the concerto was shaped into its final version.
Method

First of all I will use rare recordings of the Concerto, such as ones by Glenn Gould and more common ones – Helene Grimaud and Martha Argerich. The impressions from the recording were one of the first things that shaped the concerto in my head even before I had seen the sheet music.

I will go through Ravel’s biography, main influences and particularly his piano music that shows us a clear image on his development as a composer. I think it is a very important source to better understand his later works – one of which is the Concerto in G together with the Concerto for the left hand. In a way it is a culmination of his piano music that he wrote at the end of his life and is one of the milestones of his musical compositions both harmonically as well as form-wise.

After listening to the recordings and reading different sources about the Concerto and Ravel himself, and most of all, after going through the written music and learning the piece, the next step is Master classes. It is one of the most important sources of shaping my interpretation of the Concerto.

Even though the musical heritage and background are important I will be concentrating more closely on working with my own reflections and recordings from different master-classes I was able to work in and perform the concerto. This will be an important insight to the working process since master-class concept is totally different from a working process with your teacher. It is a fresh and non-personal view upon my work. The process doesn’t involve the knowledge of my or teachers background and sometimes can be extremely helpful to make a great jump in your interpretation.

Some of the most important influences definitely had come through the way of a master-class. One of those was a lesson with a renowned Norwegian/Czech piano professor Jiri Hlinka and the other with the French music specialist, pianist and writer Paul Roberts and Swedish pianist Martin Sturfält. The Master-class concept is very appealing to me since before the lesson itself, one has to invest much time and work for the musical piece to be on a good performance level. So the “sweaty work” has been done and the most exciting part of the work yet to come. In a master-class no one knows about your background, amount of the time you have spent to learn the piece or your personal dissatisfactions. In that moment only music itself exists as well as your doubts about the interpretation. The teacher has the power to inspire you or make you feel frustrated. However, and it happens very often, teacher finds the key for a success, finds solutions for your problems and sometimes you realize that you have heard those things before, from your own teacher. It just means that we might be too occupied with ourselves and not hear the keywords, the answers. Through my wide experience of lessons with different teachers, I have understood the importance of recording the lessons and trying to write down the most
useful tips because sometimes there is so much information that memory can fail afterwards and one can forget important things.

In some parts of my work I will also cite some parts of Marguerite Long’s book on Ravel, with whom she worked during several years and to whom the Concerto was dedicated. In her book she describes the working process as well as gives us very important information on the piece, reveals her personal feelings on the music and the time spent with the composer. Her memoires are a useful source for the interpretation of Ravels music, it describes Ravels intentions in the concerto and the musical background of the movements. This resource is important for me because of my own personal views upon classical music in general and my high standard to meet the requirements of the époque and the style. During my study years in Paris, I have learned the ways of playing music by different composers but first and foremost I have grown to appraise the tradition and style. The ability and knowledge of the style for a performer is crucial.

Recordings

I listened to a lot of different recordings, among which one of the most interesting ones were Glenn Gould/Leonard Bernstein, Helene Grimaud/Vladimir Jurowski and Martha Argerich/Claudio Abbado.

One day I was listening to a latvian classical radio and heard a program where several pianists were comparing different recordings of Ravels G major concerto. They chose some of the most well-known interpretations and one that was a surprise also to the piano professionals.

Glenn Gould

This was where the listeners were introduced to a rare recording of Glenn Gould performing Ravel G major concerto with Leonard Bernstein and the Boston Symphony orchestra. I was very surprised on how well and not too Glenn-like the performance was. It was one of the best recordings of the 3rd movement I have heard – very crispy, joyful and colourful performance. Unfortunately I couldn’t find the recording in Naxos archives anymore to compare my impression for when I heard it before my own performance and after I had worked and performed it with the orchestra. I hope one day it will be recovered again!

Helene Grimaud

Helene Grimaud – a top french pianist of our time. Her recording is also one of my favourites in many ways, foremost for the liberty she takes to express herself that for my taste was a bit too much in the second movement. I
thought it was a too romantic. Perhaps not on the same level as Martha Argerich’s performance – this is a good choice to listen to.

**Martha Argerich**

The top recording of this concerto definitely is Martha Argerich with the Orchestra Sinfonica di Roma della RAI and Claudio Abbado, conductor, recording of 1969. Very rhythmical and sparkling performance that probably will not be surpassed by any other pianist. Martha was very young at this time and one can feel her flawless technique and brilliant sense of the rhythm and colours. Mesmerizing! It was a true joy to listen to even though with the time my taste changed and maybe the recording wasn’t my favourite anymore, it still stays on my top 3 list.

The last but not the least is my top favourite 2nd movement performance that I didn’t mention in the beginning is Leonard Bernstein playing and conducting Boston Symphony orchestra at the same time. The most vulnerable and slowest second movement I have heard. This is perhaps due to Bernstein’s fantastic musicality and understanding of the music from a conductors and pianists’ point of view. A true pearl.

**Biography**

**Maurice Ravel**

(1875 – 1937)

"The only love affair I have ever had was with music"  

Joseph-Maurice Ravel was born in Cibour, France to a Basque mother and Swiss father. Since his childhood he had very close connection to his parents, especially his mother. His music would be widely influenced by Basque and Spanish harmonies and rhythms.

At the age of 14, Ravel enters Conservatoire de Paris and in later years studies with Gabriel Faure who will remain one of his greatest teachers and supporters. After being expelled from Conservatoire several times, Ravel

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1 *Remark to Jacques de Zogheb, no date*
decides to abandon the formal education. The road to the hearts of audience is tough and very often the critics on his music are not pleasant, compared to Debussy, who had already established himself at that time. But it seems that Ravel stays indifferent to all the critics and valued only his own, perfectionist opinion.

Ravel together with his lifelong friend Ricardo Viñes were part of an informal avant-garde group of writers, artists and musicians called Les Apaches (The Hooligans). They were stimulating the intellectual and artistic work of each other. One of Ravel’s most influential piano works “Miroirs” is dedicated to the members of the group.

Ravel was also highly influenced by music from around the world including American Jazz, Asian music and traditional folk songs from across Europe.

During the First World War Ravel was not allowed to enlist because of his age and weak health and instead became an ambulance driver. The war made a huge impact on his mental state. In 1917 he lost his mother which was a huge tragedy. It amplified Ravel’s psychological despair and further exhausted his health.  

In 1932 Ravel was involved in an automobile accident that severely undermined his already existing health condition – ataxia and aphasia. His output dropped dramatically. In 1937 he had a neuro-operation that he hoped would restore much of his health, but the operation was a failure and he died soon afterwards.

**Piano music**

Ravel considered himself in many ways a classicist. He relied on traditional forms and structures as ways of presenting his new and innovative harmonies. He often masked the sections of his structure with transitions that would disguise the beginnings of the motif.

Ravel’s piano music opens a new horizon to the piano technique, as well as new concept of music – it is an opposition to romanticism. He admired Liszt and Ravel’s technical approach to exploring the musical ideas is greatly influenced by Lisztian technique.

One can follow Ravel’s development in musical taste looking through his piano pieces from the early Menuets to both of his piano concertos. His musical writing is very clear as are his indications in the score. He was against an interpretation, he just wanted his music to be played as it is written, which is likely impossible since we are all different and have different ideas on the music as well as different technical and musical capacity. His own recordings come to my mind – one of the ones I listened to was a recording of the first two movements of Sonatine. Even though he

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2 Ivanchenko, p. 34  
3 Grove, p.868
wrote all the tempo changes and ritenutos clearly in the score, one can hear him rushing at some parts. Was it an intention or just a lack of pianism, no one knows. But the musical language is clear and his phrasing and the ties between the phrases is something to pay attention to. It brings another perspective to the perception of the melodic lines. One phrase ends in an unfinished way and strives into the next phrase reminding me of a thinking process where one thought leads to another without even noticing the transition.

One of the earliest and most significant works for piano is *Jeux d’eau* – a masterpiece written in 1901, it is one of the most colourful compositions in Impressionistic music.

“*Jeux d’eau* is generally considered to have inaugurated a new era in the evolution of the technical resources of the instrument.” (Myers, 24.)

Another masterpiece of his piano music is the cycle “*Miroirs*” that consists of 5 pieces – very different in character and technical demands. One of the most famous pieces among them is *Alborada del gracioso* which he also transcribed for the orchestra. These pieces are probably one of the most challenging cycles in his music besides “*Gaspard de la nuit*”. Around the same time with *Miroirs* he composed *Sonatine* in three movements in a very contrasting style which by the nature of its texture and simple structure resembles the musical traditions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France and Europe.\(^3\)

One of the most significant piano works is the cycle “*Gaspard de la nuit*” (1908). The work was inspired by the poetry of French post-symbolist Aloysius Bertrand. The work consists of three programmatic movements – *Ondine, Le Gibet* and *Scarbo*. It is a very mystical work and *Scarbo* is probably one of his most technically demanding compositions.

One of Ravel’s tendencies in music were dances – in 1911 he composes *Valses nobles et sentimentales* as an homage to Franz Schubert. It is a set of seven waltzes with a pinch of jazzy harmonies.

During 1914-1917 he wrote another great cycle with a contrasting musical language to his native impressionistic ideals – *Le tombeau de Couperin*. It is a set of 6 pieces, each of them dedicated to one of his friends, deceased in the war.

In 1928 Ravel toured the United Stated and Canada performing recitals in many cities. There he met American composer George Gershwin who mentioned to Ravel that he would have liked to study with the French composer if possible to which Ravel replied “Why should you be a second-rate Ravel when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?”\(^4\)

His two piano concertos in many ways reflect the style of Gershwin however they are very different from each other. The left hand concerto was

\(^3\) Ivanchenko, p.34  
\(^4\) Schwartz, *George Gershwin: His Life and Music*, p. 125-126
a commission from Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein who lost his right arm during the First World War. Following compositional traditions of Liszt – whose music was highly admired and studied by Ravel – he created a one-movement work mostly based on monothematic material that explores a wide spectrum of Jazz harmonies. The Piano Concerto for the Left Hand is one of Ravel’s most emotional and dramatic compositions.\(^5\)

**Piano Concerto in G**

“I don’t ask for my music to be interpreted, only to be played”\(^6\)

*M. Ravel*

Ravel started thinking about it in 1928 after his return from America; his work on the concerto was interrupted due to a commissioned work of the Concerto for the left hand by the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, finishing it in 1930, Ravel completed his G major concerto soon after that in 1931, with the first performance in 1932 by Marguerite Long.

\(^5\) Ivanchenko, p.37

\(^6\) Long, p.21 “Je ne demande pas que l’on m’interprète mais seulement qu’on me joue.”
Ravel saw this concerto as being in the spirit of Mozart and Saint-Saëns, light and brilliant, and in contrast to those heavier classical concerti [e.g. Brahms] which he felt were written "against" rather than "for" the piano. In some aspects my concerto was not without relation to my violin sonata; it brings some elements borrowed from jazz, but in moderation. : "La musique d'un concerto, à mon avis, doit être légère et brillante et ne pas viser à la profondeur ou aux effets dramatiques.. A certains points de vue, mon Concerto n’est pas sans présenter quelques rapports avec ma Sonate de violon; il apporte quelques éléments empruntés au jazz, mais cela avec modération", (Interview with M. D. Calvocoressi, Daily Telegraph, 11 July 1931, reproduced in French in Orenstein, [1989] p.363-365).

The concerto is in classical 3 movement form. The first – Allegramente, second – Adagio assai and third – Presto.

The first movement (Allegrameante) starts with an opening thematic material is an allusion to the Basque instrument txistu. This three-holed instrument related to the recorder or flute is played with the left hand alone, and a drum is hung on the left arm of the player – a txistulari – allowing the right hand to play the drum with a drumstick. Often, the txistulari is accompanied by another drum. 7 (Julio Caro Baroja, The Basques, translated by Kristin Addis (Reno, Nevada: Center for Basque Studies, 2009), pgs. 346-347).

It is a joyful, sparkling movement with a contrasting second theme, all through the movement with a feeling of castagnetas and Ravelian harmonies.

The second movement is famous for its beautiful never-ending melody first in piano solo part and then in the English horn part. It is an astonishing monument of composition technique and musical depth, with a flawless movement.

"Some critics have professed to find the contrast of the adagio assai and the two movements which bound it incongruous...it is as legitimate a contrast as the precisely similar example in the larghetto of Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet, which Ravel took as his model. The adagio is really a lied whose calm contemplation brings it unusually close to Fauré’s musings. The composer confessed...when [Marguerite Long] praised the free development of the leisurely melody, he had written it ‘two bars at a time, with frequent recourse to Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet.” (Roland-Manuel, pg. 102)

The third movement Presto is a toccata type movement, short in length, full of joy and excitement. It is a show-off for both the orchestra and soloist, with elements of jazz and such a contrast after the big sonata-form in the first movement and beautiful second movement.

Master-classes

One of the biggest inspirations with this concerto were numerous masterclasses I participated. Besides the work with my teacher in Sweden – Stefan Bojsten and my teacher in France – Jean-Marc Luisada, I also took part in a masterclass with Jiri Hlinka in Pitea, Sweden, Paul Roberts in Albignac, France and Martin Sturfalt in Stockholm, Sweden.

Jiri Hlinka

Jiri Hlinka is a legendary piano teacher in Norway and it was a very interesting and extremely inspiring meeting with him. Even though he said that he prefers working with romantic repertoire, his teaching on Ravel (I played both the concerto and Miroirs) was one of the best I’ve had. He was very precise in his indications and brought out the best qualities of my playing. I cannot say now what was the turning point but it definitely upgraded my approach on reading the music. Not reading note by note but seeing the phrases and longer lines. Paying even more attention to the harmonic structures and how they collide with each other. We also worked on body weight and hand weight since these are very important ingredients of piano technique. I had a tendency to work a lot with my fingers and play more articulated than sometimes needed. He asked for more in-depth playing, covering the full ability of piano sound and capacity of each individual instrument.

Paul Roberts

Another big influence on my Ravel was Paul Roberts music/piano course in Albignac, South of France. Paul Roberts himself is a kind of a guru in Debussy and Ravel. His books on these composers are a close companion to my understanding of the composers’ personalities and their writing. This master-class had not only a great impact on my immediate interpretation but also on my understanding of Ravel and his music. Even though I played other pieces than the concerto, it was a fantastic introduction to the magical world of Ravels. We can think on so many different levels about music in general and Roberts definitely reached most of them! Some that I wouldn’t have even thought of on my own. He somehow drew a picture of the music that you could look in to and see how much more there is to see and find. He talked a lot about the sound and the meaning of the motives. The general lines and the expression that it contains as well as the colours of the music. Very vivid introduction as were his own performances on French music. After his course I worked even more intense on the production of the sound,
the concept of the piece as well as keeping a steady tempo as if it would be my own heartbeats. A very simple thing to say but hard to do. We also worked on expanding the piano technique by finding new ways or learning the existing ones to create special sound, also using the middle pedal which is something pianists could work more with.

**Martin Sturfält**

The first time I met Martin Sturfält was in the same master course with Paul Roberts. I played solo Ravel pieces for Paul and the first movement of the concerto for Martin. Also Paul was present and had some ideas on it. As I remember the lesson, Martin was viewing the first movement more from a piano soloists side as a performer. That was a very good lesson! One thing is to work with the professors that have active concert life but another thing is to work with a pianist who is mostly playing concerts. It spices up things. I definitely had a very good push in the character of the movement and also got some technical advices, such as playing closer to the keys, as simple as that. Also this was my first proper play-through with a great pianist playing the orchestra part which actually did sound like an orchestra.

Master-class with Martin in Konstakademien in Stockholm also opened another way for me to interpret the second movement of the concerto. I had a very intimate and maybe even too intimate approach. We worked more on actually producing the sound you want on a higher level of dynamics and making it understandable to the audience because sometimes there is a tendency to disregard the fact that one will play with 50 more people at the same time. So you have to bring out the important things and practise doing that while you are in a classroom on your own.
Interpretation of the *Piano Concerto in G*

1st movement

Ravel’s musical writing is very clear and quite detailed in nuances. The recent revelation for me was a quote from a master-class by Yvonne Lefebure ⁸ - The slurs don't mean legato but musical phrase⁹

Of course musical slur doesn't always exclude legato slur, it can be both depending on the phrase.

The first movement starts with a “shot in the air” made by a clapper (whip)¹⁰ which makes an effect of something sudden, unexpected, an image of an opening scene of a circus show comes to my mind. The theme in G major is played by a piccolo flute meanwhile piano has an accompanying role, bitonal arpeggios of d# minor in the left hand and G major in the right hand. It gives an impression of lightness and brilliance, extremely joyful combination of both the instrument that plays the theme and piano register that is used for the arpeggios. In the last two bars of the theme (14 in total) there are parallel minor and major chords in the left hand that leads in to a glissandi for 9 bars with a gradual crescendo until the last glissando (over all the keyboard) ends in a G major chord in full orchestra and from where the theme is heard again but this time in the trumpet.

Regarding glissandi - I do not play them as it is written in the score – right hand, left h., right h. etc.

Example I, M.Ravel Concerto in G major, 1st mvt, mm.16-19.

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⁸ Yvonne Lefebure was a famous french pianist and teacher. She studied all Ravel’s works with the composer himself  
⁹ Lefebure in a master-class on Ravels’ *Jeux d’eau* but possibly meant for all Ravel’s piano music (source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L06_enYnmBE)  
¹⁰ A percussion instrument that consists of two long solid pieces that are clapped together
I do play all the glissandis with only right hand. I use left hand to play the bottom and top notes so to emphasize the depth and width of the gliss. There are pianists who do it as it is written in the music - Y.Wang, P.L. Aimard, but there are some pianists that play it with only right hand - M.Argerich, H.Grimaud, A.B Michelangeli.

I chose to play the beginning until the second theme light and easy with no extra pressure or expressiveness (suggested by various teachers due to the fact that the piano part in this particular place is a part of the orchestra “color”). Since there is no main theme in the piano part in the beginning, for me it seems like the concerto actually starts from the second theme even if it is not theoretically correct. While practising the beginning, I always kept in mind the idea that this is just some kind of festive, colourful show-off and that I need to blend with the orchestra. I also experimented with the balance since sometimes it might sound a bit heavy together with the other piano (I practised with the second piano before the rehearsals with the orchestra). The second theme is in f# minor and slightly slower (Meno vivo). Ravel uses “Spanish colours” by adding an accent on the third beat and a written-out embellishment.

Example II, M.Ravel Concerto in G major, 1st mvt, mm. 45-50.

The theme should be played quite simple but with large sound, not too metronomically precise but still in tempo. I used to allow a lot of liberty to myself in these bars but was reminded by my French teacher that this should be strictly in tempo, not too romantic (both Ravel and Debussy were anti-romantic in their writing). I should use the power of colours and phrasing instead of playing romantic rubato. I must confess that my previous version was triggered by Helene Grimaud’s interpretation of the concerto which is very beautiful and sensual.

After the first two bars of the second theme, is a slight outburst of legato-like singing phrase that falls back into the Spanish mood for 2 bars more
and then rises again but this time from an C# and evaporates into arpeggios of the f# minor while the orchestra plays the theme.

Example III, M.Ravel Concerto in G major, 1st mvt, mm.51-54.

After follows an expressive melody in the right hand and eight-note element in the left hand which is interrupting the fluid movement of the melody in the right hand. It reminds me of castagnetas.

Example IV, M.Ravel Concerto in G major, 1st mvt, mm.55-59.

These expressive bars were a bit of a struggle, it was difficult to differentiate the long melodic line with the interrupted element of the left hand. First of all I practised separate hands, tried to exaggerate the legato, playing extremely singing-like tone, also lowering my wrist and making sure my shoulders were not tensed as well as having a very relaxed elbow. Whereas the left hand had an exact, fixed position in order to play very precise and castagnet-like eight-notes. After I had practised separate hands, then together, still something was missing. For such an espressivo melody, it was impossible to follow Ravels mark "senza pedale". With my Swedish teacher we found the best solution that worked quite well for me - use of a half pedal for each note in the right hand, except when the left hand plays the motive as well as the places where both hands play together. It made all the difference! The theme in the right hand was not so “dry” anymore, it was more expressive and solid in the tone.
The first movement is also known for its cadenza with the trills. The beginning of the cadenza takes over the melody previously played by horns. The whole cadenza is like a beautiful duet between the 2 voices – the marked melody of the left hands arpeggios and the beautiful trill melody of the right hand. I started my work by practising mainly left hand- to get it as fluid as possible and bringing out the top notes melody, paying extra attention to phrasing it accordingly – Ravel marks an accent on the first note and no accent on the next – half note.

Example V, M.Ravel Concerto in G major, 1st mvt Cadenza

Also with the arpeggios one needs to think about the depth of the sound, wave like feeling.
The trills were the most difficult part – first I practised them singful, sometimes purely mechanical, slow and fast, shifting the tempos during the exercise. I also tried different fingerings until I found the ones that suits best for me. Sometimes I was shifting the fingering while playing the same trill. Also some pianists do extra chromatic scales in between the trills in the second half of the cadenza but I was doing it the way it was written.

Example VI, M.Ravel Concerto in G major, 1st mvt Cadenza
I had realized that only after I had played in the first movement, gotten used to the music so I decided that the change would just make me more nervous on stage even though the chromatic scale version did sound more fluid.

The whole ending of the first movement is very percussive-like jazzy fuss. I practised a lot on the hand position, I needed my hand to be very solid and keep the position of the chords in order for it to sound more percussive and bringing out the rhythmical intentions of Ravel. Here I had a tendency to rush – so I used the help of the metronome. Also having the upperbody more straight and watching my playing from above helped very well for the stability. Since the whole percussive passage starts in pianissimo, person has a natural tendency to lean forward as if the sound would change. I would rather suggest more precise movement of the hand and completely still body, it makes a huge difference in the sound and the control of the hands.

2nd movement

“I told Ravel one day how anxious I was, after all the fantasy and brilliant orchestration of the first part, to be able to maintain the cantabile of the melody of the piano alone during such a long slow flowing phrase... 'That flowing phrase!' Ravel cried. 'How I worked over it bar by bar! It nearly killed me!'

“Je dis un jour à Ravel combien j'étais anxieuse, chaque fois, devant la difficulté d'exposer au piano seul, après toute la fantaisie et le brio orchestral de la première partie, cette longue, très longue mélodie, de chanter et de tenir dans un mouvement aussi lent cette grande phrase qui coule...” “Qui coule, cria-t-il, mais je l’ai faite mesure par mesure et j’ai failli en crever!”

(M. Long Au piano avec Ravel, p.60-61)

Like Ravels’, also my work on the 2nd movement was very detailed, slow and scrupulous. The memorisation process has never been so demanding and at times also confusing. This movement is famous for its never-ending long phrase and random E major scales in the second half of the movement. Almost no patterns to remember except the harmonic chord structure in the left hand. I would say that this is definitely the piece of music you have to memorize so well to be able to play it without mistakes woken up in the middle of the night. If you can play something in good quality right after waking up, then you have learned it properly. I didn’t really practice during the night time but whenever I had a spare minute in my daily schedule, I was singing and playing through the music in my head. Sometimes early morning practice helped as well – playing through the music before breakfast and morning coffee, the best time to judge your ability. Whenever an error occurred, I checked it out using the score. It was a lot of mental practice, feeling of muscular movement of the hands and how hands feel in certain positions. I also practised the ability to start playing from every
single bar of the movement. That helped a lot because I didn’t feel lost and knew exactly what’s coming next and in case if something happens – I could jump to any other bar. The worst kind of scenario that, thankfully, didn’t happen!

One of the things I practised the most was the equality of the touch, especially in the second half of the movement – the scales where every note had to be voiced. Here we could talk about the French pearl technique “le jeu perle” which represents a clarity and equality of playing every note, equality of each finger, clear and talk-alike (pronouncing every syllable) playing. This sort of French technique school has grown out of the early instrument playing up to Saint-Saens and Marguerite Long piano schools and is nowadays not so popular anymore due to the globalisation of the different piano schools.

It was also a slow process of several days, first practising half speed espressivo without phrasing just to get the equality, then practising it with phrasing and then bringing the tempo up. I also used my French teachers suggested exercise that helps to control the sound and the weight of the fingers. I!used half speed to have a better control over my fingers and get my muscles used to the movement and the sound nuances that I wanted. This is the basics of all instrument practice – slower tempo and patience. If you can play a phrase in a slower tempo perfectly well, you will be able to do it in a fast tempo as well by bringing up the tempo gradually.

After practising the right hand separately, I added the left hand that seems to be in 6/8 but not emphasising the rhythm too much since Ravel did actually write it in ¾.

The left hand has the harmonic lead in this movement.

Example VII, M.Ravel Concerto in G major, 2nd mvt

The last process was phrasing my scales in the second half of the movement around the cor anglais solo. Breathing together but still having my own line that just embellishes the solo part. I actually rehearsed the whole second half with the cor anglais player. It is rather like a beautiful love duet that complements each other and we needed to feel the phrases together. Playing it through a few times together helped immensely to prepare for the rehearsals with the orchestra.
However the trickiest part of this movement is the beginning of it (see example) – the great piano solo. Even the famous Marguerite Long – who premiered the concerto, was struggling with the long lines, subtle phrasing. It is written like a slow valse in ¾ and the left hand figure feels like 6/8 as I mentioned before. So it is basically a combination of 2 tempis. A very long and fluid right hands melody and valse-like accompaniment. It should not follow each other accent-wise to avoid the melody being abrupt. One should rather pay attention to balance both hands so well that a listener cannot really follow if it is in 6/8 or ¾. It is a difficult task for a pianist after such a joyous and rhythmical first movement.

According to Ravel – his music should not be interpreted, just played. But how is that possible in this movement? With each interpret the melody shapes itself differently and that is just natural.

Example VIII, M. Ravel Concerto in G, 2nd mvt, second half of the mvt

My key of self-confidence before the 2nd movement was thinking about slowing down my heartbeat and singing through the first couple of bars in my head before touching the keys. The second movement also demands a very subtle pedalling since the harmonic structure is so sensitive. It is not at all impressionistic, rather classically structured both musically and form-wise. I used a lot of half pedals and pedal vibratos (shifting the top layer of the depth of the pedal quite fast).

One of the ways I practised - and this I had learned both in Riga and in Paris - was to sing one voice and play the other voices on the piano, so I was playing the left hand and singing the melody, so it became more natural for me to phrase it afterwards when I played it with both hands. It was a regular, everyday practise. By repeating it so many times I found more ways of phrasing the melody and then just had to stick with the most natural one for me. Although the ideas changed during the time, one must decide on the interpretation at some point. Rather not too late before the concert.
A sense of freedom in the interpretation is good but the musician has to be sure on every single things he does with music otherwise it is sending misleading energy to the audience and it doesn’t pay off always. One has to be flexible within the interpretation. I was always told where to lead the melody but I have to also understand it myself. Good knowledge in harmony and composers indications are a perfect tool to do that. Of course a little sense of the style or maybe musical intuition can help as well but then again if we will never accentuate the tonic (the final chord) after a cadenza in piece that is written during the classical period (unless there is an accent), how do we know what to do in Ravel’s music? Here comes his notation and the *ligature*, as well as the dynamics that helps us to decide. The indications in the 20th century music are so much clearer and more understandable.

Using appropriate fingering was of a must since some of our fingers are naturally heavier than others, or have less strength. I had a very good fingering from my French teacher but I changed some of the parts in Sweden since it was a bit more adapted to my own hand. Good fingering also helps the quality of legato which is crucial in this movement.

### 3rd movement

The third movement in a way for me was the trickiest one even though the first and second movements are far more demanding for a pianist than the third one, yet somehow it made me stressed. First of all it is purely virtuosic and bright music and I have always thought that this was not one of my strongest sides- playing joyful, bright and easy-going music. I always felt better with more meaningful music if I may say so. So this was a challenge, definitely. One of the indications I remember receiving was from my french teacher – this movement has to be played more like *perpetum mobile*.

Example IX, M.Ravel Concerto in G, 3rd mvt

![Example IX, M.Ravel Concerto in G, 3rd mvt](image)

My main goal here was just to be able to play it through in a tempo with a crispy character, as simple as it may sound. Also I started my work on this movement much later than on the first ones, it might have added some extra
fear. My best friend of this movement was a metronome. A machine that many musicians find so scary. Here, I couldn’t have done anything without it because I have a natural tendency to rush a little which might also come from my body posture while I play. I have a bit tensed shoulders and jaw. As soon I started working on my body tension problems – the rush in my playing stopped.

This movement was mostly a technical practise to me. With a few soloistic, jazzy melodies here and there, I was paying more attention to the speed and tone quality of every fast note. I used the same exercise that I use for any piece of music where I need a perfectly balanced tone sequence in a high speed. I have also talked about it when describing my preparation with the first and second movement of the concerto.

Some pianists might find it easy but I had a little practise to do on the very beginning (Ex.) by bringing out the hidden melody within the sixteen note patterns. Here I used exaggerated heaviness on one of the fingers to “play in” the feeling of the melody where it wasn’t always as natural. (sample here)

The other section that I was practising more than others was the jazzy right hand scales with a jumpy base in the left hand (sample here) This passage repeats itself twice during the movement - both times in different tonalities in this way paying extra attention to the harmony changes.

This is also a passage that is quite often rushed naturally during the performances. It has a very brilliant sound and a little rush just adds sparks to it.

Some fingering questions appeared throughout the practice process, I even had several options to choose from for the same passages, as seen in the examples X and XI.
The third movement in general was much easier to practise with the orchestra recording since there is basically no tempo changes and it goes in one flow. I was memorizing the melodies of the other instruments so I could follow the rest bars by not only counting but actually knowing what happens during my rests. This is also the piece of music that one really needs to "have in the fingers" because it goes by so fast and there is no time to think about anything, hands should know automatically what they should do and keeping the brain cool with a good body posture is the key to mastering this movement.

One of my teachers once said that this movement is somehow not equal to the quality of the first two movements, to which I do agree actually. But not all music needs to be so meaningful and deep. In this case I find the continuation after the heart-warming second movement as a refreshing glass of pomegranate juice on a hot summer day. Sparkling joy of life it is.

Performing this concerto with the orchestra was my dream for many years, also my subconscious work on it has been done for years. The amount of knowledge that slowly had turned into a musical "intuition" made me realize my own capacity to evaluate my performance according to the style margins I had in my mind the basics for which I have indeed learned from my piano professors and master-classes. Those are not abstract things but general ideas that one can apply to most of Ravels music, like following the composers markings very strictly, shaping the melodies by paying attention to the legato lines and the harmonic structures in the base. This is the knowledge one must apply to every composer’s music!

One of the most important conclusions for me was to try to find the characters from a programmatic point of view, by finding a colour or a meaning to every single phrase and motive, often not related to the previous phrases and motives. Sometimes a harmonic phrase would last for more
than a page. I had a tendency to be too into details and seeing a bigger picture helped the music flow more naturally.

Performance preparation

Own work

Before playing Ravel concerto, I had only twice played with an orchestra. Both times it was Mozart concertos. Obviously Ravel has other difficulties and it is considered as a highly musically and technically demanding concerto for the orchestra with extremely virtuoso winds section. The orchestra I played with was KMH symphony orchestra and Daniel Blendulf as a conductor. A student orchestra with a great capacity.

While I was practising on my part in a classroom, I constantly heard others practising the concerto as well, especially trumpet, clarinet and bassoon parts. It somehow raised my stress levels before the orchestra rehearsals because the only thing I was expecting from myself was perfection. Which as we all know is impossible to achieve. But we can always strive for it as long as it doesn’t damage our perception of reality.

Work with the second piano

A very important part of the preparation process for rehearsing with the orchestra was practising with the second piano. Of course the result is a bit different since it is much easier to adapt to one person instead of a whole orchestra but the main ideas, tempis and characters were there and I could even experiment more with how flexible I can be in my interpretation and see how different choices give different results in a stressful moment. While playing solo you have all the responsibility for everything that you do but concerto is a synthesis of so many things.

During this stage with the accompanist I had to adjust some of the unnoticed tempo changes and *ritenutos*. I had to play extremely precise so that the other pianist would clearly feel my pulse and intentions. This was a crucial point before the orchestra rehearsals. When you play as a solo pianist, you are not dependant on anyone except yourself but in this case I had to realize that playing with 50 more people will be a challenge and if I cannot make myself clear to the second pianist, it will never work with the orchestra. So we worked step by step with the trickiest parts to reassure that all my intentional tempo changes or other nuances are very understandable. I also worked more with my body language to help the accompanist to visually see where I breath or do some changes.
The work with the orchestra

During the first rehearsal with the orchestra I was only listening to how the conductor works and how the orchestra sounds, I could hear his ideas on music. Which where, to my benefit, similar to mine – similar choice of tempi as well as some rubatos that do not exist in the score but is a common thing to do.

The second rehearsal was one of the most stressful ones where I had to get to know the energy of the orchestra and the conductor. Decide on the tempi and general ideas, as well as some technical work on being together with the orchestra. After the rehearsal I had clear image on what I should work on more and where I could take my time and not rush. It was a rough play-through at first to see where we are all at. During the 2 free days I was mostly concentrating on being perfectly in tempo and studying the orchestra part more. I was also recording myself to hear from aside. I wouldn’t suggest to do it too close to the concert though because the critical side of me said I wasn’t prepared enough and it didn’t sound as good as I imagined. But these are the things almost all musicians go through, so I had to just calm myself down and decide on what I can do better in a short time and stick to it. I was also a bit tempted to change some phrasings and articulation but that is never a good idea so shortly before the concert and would have just added the stress. The best thing for me to do was – sleep well, eat well and practise without stress and stick to my interpretation. So I practised mostly in middle/fast tempos and worked on my rhythmical side, trying not to rush. Of course I was polishing the tone quality with different exercises in the second movement.

The third rehearsal the day before the concert was probably the most useful one since everyone felt more safe and free. We rehearsed difficult passages in the third movement, especially the bassoon solos since it is very important to not rush and feel the same pulse. The beginning of the first movement seemed somehow difficult for me, the clap and the entrance of the piano. We had to agree on the gesture of the conductor, weather it was a short one or a long one. As inexperienced as many young pianists are, it is really hard to understand the conductors’ gestures sometimes. Some coaching in this subject would be useful for every musician and at that point of my life I realized I really needed some conducting lessons to better understand not only conductors’ gestures but music itself. To see it from another perspective because the piano world is quite limited if we look only at the piano part in a concerto score, even though I had studied the orchestra part on my own.
The last play-through was the dress rehearsal in the morning of the concert day. It was a tough one since I am not used to getting up early on the concert day because good sleep is almost as important as practising and you need to save the energy for the evening. I was very unhappy about the play-through, I thought it was a disaster and I wouldn’t be able to perform in the evening. All of it was of course due to my stress levels and unlimited imagination. I was not practising much during the day. Instead I did some very usual things that kept my mind a little off before the evening such as spending some time with my parents that were visiting me, preparing some food etc.

I started my warm-up around 2 hours before the concert, playing through the concerto in a middle tempo. Then taking the difficult passages separately, first slow and then in the right tempo. I also prepared all the other things in advance – the dress, shoes and the camera to record the performance. When I had done those things, I felt much calmer and could concentrate on the concerto. A short moment before the concert started, the conductor said that I should probably play an encore piece (that I did not prepare in advance), luckily I always have some solo Ravel in my repertoire, so I had to play-through the piece right before going on to the stage. I was so nervous!

**Performance and after-performance**

**Performance**

During the beginning of the performance I was mostly concentrated on having the same pulse as the conductor. The general feeling was not the best during the first movement, perhaps due to the nervousness. I struggled a bit with the sound and balance since the hall was full and it made me listen differently. The balance was not the same anymore.

I was extremely concentrated during the 2nd movement. All my early morning practising was successful and I never felt so sure about it as during the concert. I was extremely aware of every note and pedal change, like in a slow-motion film. The whole movement felt like a very long breath.

The third movement was a bit rushed but as exciting as ever! It was like riding in a carousel. So lively and joyful. I just remember the ending – the happiest last two notes of my life.

**After-performance**

The After -Performance feeling was good. This is a rare case. Even though right after the playing I had troubles remembering anything of the performance, the inner feeling was satisfied. Of course when I listen to the
recording now, it is not the case anymore but I do realize that we grow out of interpretation, we grow as musicians and our capacity is growing with the time and probably now I wouldn’t do some of the things I did back then. However maybe it is not always the interpretation I think about but more of my body posture and inner freedom and peace. Allowing yourself believe that this is it- you cannot do more than you have done and you just need to do it one more time in front of the people! I would have definitely worked more on my attitude on the stage – to become even freer in my expression.

Looking back at the last stage of the rehearsals with the orchestra where I had to go through some psychological processes, the main work with the music was done and I needed to concentrate on my concert performance. While playing through the concerto or different movements I worked a lot with my mental stability and nervousness. I had to imagine I was in a concert and it was the performance and not the rehearsal. Only this was the way to reduce the nervousness before the performance. Also keeping a stable pulse and not rushing the orchestra was on my to-do list while rehearsing. We didn’t have any interpretation issues with the conductor, just a few technical aspects that we discussed – the beating and the main tempo choices.
Conclusion

The work for a performance is usually a long road with many obstacles and many reflections upon yourself and the music you are playing. My aim was to see how different influences could help me to prepare Ravel’s Concerto in G for a performance with the orchestra, how it could help the sense of appropriate *Ravelian* sound and style.

During the process of performance preparation and thesis writing I came to 3 main conclusions:

1) I must admit that the amount of different influences on my musical taste and the sense of style is enormous and one cannot always differentiate the source it comes from. It is somehow a blend of many components – not only formal education but the musical society around us as well as the accessibility to different literature about the subject.

2) The musical heritage from mentors and other teachers during master-classes was the basic knowledge I relied on during the learning process. The lessons inspired me to seek for more information and compare different sources. One advice can work for one person, and be totally useless for the other. I realized the importance of such bibliographic sources as Marguerite Long’s book on Ravel that guided me during the process. In combination with the master-classes I attended, I came to the conclusion that the musical heritage is not always something very specific to certain country, at least not anymore. One doesn’t need a mentor to pass on the knowledge, it might as well be a journey within our own inner processes that is triggered by a trustful bibliographic source.

3) Going through several stages of preparation process the concerto went through some changes. First was my own work on the music that also went through some stages. Learning the piece on my own, working with my teachers and playing in master-classes. Every person I worked with had an impact on my perception of the composition. It never was a complete opposite of my own ideas but rather a horizon widening experience. During this stage I was paying extreme attention to details and the quality of playing.

Even though the concert has been played and a lot of work done, there is never going to be a time when the artistic process stops. This is the most difficult conclusion to accept.
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