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Laughter: In Ravel's time

STEVEN HUEBNER

In memoriam Elizabeth Bartlet

Abstract: Ravel's comic opera *L'Heure espagnole* (1911) has often been criticised for a certain coldness and lack of sentiment. Such characteristics, however, might profitably be seen in light of Ravel's modernity, an art where surface is privileged over depth. Parallels between Ravel's approach and Henri Bergson's nearly contemporaneous theory of laughter developed in *Le Rire* – in itself an articulate explication of the surface/depth binary – provide insight into Ravel's aesthetic. This orientation unfolds in the detached adaptation of two historical models in *L'Heure espagnole*: *secco* recitative from opera buffa and leitmotivic writing from Wagnerian opera.

Emmanuel Chabrier's *L'Education manqué* is only an *opérette*: its great merit is not to aim higher than this. There is nonetheless more real music in this small work than in many large operas . . . How many light works, even among those composed recently, would appear outmoded compared to this one, even though it was written 35 years ago?[1]

Thus did Maurice Ravel praise Chabrier's small comedy about sexual initiation in 1913. Doubtless, the review would have warmed the heart of the older composer had he been alive. For Chabrier had once written that French operatic culture desperately needed comic works that were 'very cheerful but quite musical' ('très gai mais assez musical'), somewhere between 'Cantin's stupidities' (Louis Cantin was the director of the Bouffes Parisiens at the time) and *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* (Meyerbeer's weighty – and not very funny – work for the Opéra Comique).[2] A theatre offering light fare with sophisticated music, or at least a richer vocabulary than that prevailing in the work of Offenbach and others, would bury 'garbage and garbage men . . . a theatre like that would succeed, I'm sure of it: and all clever people [les malins] would want to go there'. One might make a case that Chabrier's *L'Etoile* fitted this bill in 1877, the year of its première.[3] Ravel's remarks about Chabrier surely provide a glimpse into his own aesthetic preoccupations during the composition of *L'Heure espagnole* six years before, another comedy about sexual initiation (setting the text, albeit considerably compressed, of Franc-Nohain's [pseud. Maurice LeGrand] eponymous play premièred at the Odéon in 1904). Even recent light comedies seemed shopworn to Ravel. How might he avoid appearing old-fashioned in a genre with a strong imperative towards formula? How might he write truly modern comedy in the post-Wagnerian/post-*Pelléas et Mélisande* environment?

[1] Review initially published in *Comœdia illustré*, 5 February 1913; reprinted in Maurice Ravel, *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, ed. Arbie Orenstein (Paris, 1989), 308–9.

[2] Letter from Chabrier to Georges Costallat, 10 September 1884, in Emmanuel Chabrier, *Correspondance*, ed. Roger Delage, Frans Durif and Thierry Bodin (Paris, 1994), 250.

[3] But in this case sophistication was not necessarily homologous in all respects with modern operatic dramaturgy, for, although much taken with Wagner's music, Chabrier adhered to conservative musico-dramatic architecture both in *L'Etoile* and later in *Le Roi malgré lui*. Further to this point, see Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford, 1999), 286–300.

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Several way-stations of reception and theory stand between these questions and some suggested answers. Ravel intimates, via *L'Education manqué*, that a light work could contain more 'real music' than many 'large operas'. That is, a farce might demonstrate the seriousness of purpose appropriate to a modern artist just as successfully, or perhaps better than, many works with weightier subject matter. Against the tide of Romantic aesthetics, the implication of Ravel's position is that seriousness need not be attached only to the sublime, ineffable, or transcendent – in short, to aesthetic categories that suggest metaphors of 'depth' – but perhaps also to the consummate mastery of musical materials as an end in itself, mastery that dazzles and astonishes. Comedy would seem especially suited to an anti-epiphanic impetus.[4] When Chabrier characterised the aficionados of musically sophisticated comedy as 'clever' he described reception more than aesthetics. The Ravel of *L'Heure espagnole* (and many of his other works) reminds us that cleverness also inhabits the side of compositional intent.

These issues have circulated more or less conspicuously in critical writing about *L'Heure espagnole* since its première – and often in an unflattering light. Emile Vuillermoz, for example, expressed concern in his review of the first production that a composer of Ravel's stature had deployed his talent in 'an adventure without significance' ('une aventure sans portée').[5] This critique must have carried considerable weight in its day because it came from an ally: Vuillermoz had long moved in similar circles to Ravel and had always supported his music. In the review he argued that sheer admiration caused him distress that Ravel's ambitions had not been higher than to 'revive venerable French cheerfulness' ('ressusciter la vieille gaîté française'). Ravel – the synesthesic wizard and conjurer of the dream in *Daphnis et Chloé* – had stooped to crude jokes with the instruments, gastric emissions from the brass met by groans on the contrabassoon. In this line of thinking, Ravel had incongruously plugged a giant orchestral machine into a rather trivial comedy about lovers hidden in clocks (instead of closets). A hint of such criticism sounds in the much later words of Manuel Rosenthal, another supporter, indeed an acolyte:

> There are too many special effects, it really must be said. Only Ravel could have invented them, but this is almost an inventory, a demonstration. A very opulent demonstration but, all the same, to have gathered together such a large orchestra for such a slight and light affair. Because nothing, neither in the plot nor in the conception of the music, requires such a marshalling of orchestral resources.[6]

When, back in 1911, the less favourably disposed critic Pierre Lalo half-seriously equated *L'Heure espagnole* to the *Ring* he also clearly perceived the score as overblown, an assessment surely encouraged by the small dimensions of the Salle

[4] The expression is Charles Taylor's in 'Visions of the Post-Romantic Age', in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 419–55. For an insightful discussion of the origins of the metaphor of depth in music criticism, see Holly Watkins, 'From the Mine to the Shrine: The Critical Origins of Musical Depth', *19th-Century Music*, 27 (2004), 179–207.

[5] Emile Vuillermoz, Review of *L'Heure espagnole, S.I.M. Revue musicale mensuelle*, 15 June 1911.

[6] Manuel Rosenthal, *Ravel: Souvenirs de Manuel Rosenthal*, ed. Marcel Marnat (Paris, 1995), 28.

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Favart and its pit.[7] For Roger Nichols, a distinguished present-day biographer of the composer, the elaborate and virtuosic orchestration suggests that Ravel was 'a little too clever for his own good'.[8]

In tying this last point to a 'calculating coldness at the heart of the opera', Nichols conjoins another strand of criticism that stretches back to the première. In an often-reproduced evaluation of *L'Heure espagnole*, Pierre Lalo (in the review I have already cited) suggested that: 'His affected, dry, and stiff comic spirit does not have a single moment of casualness [laisser aller] and freedom; he always wears a pinched smile, a composed demeanour, a slightly superior and constrained air that banishes all *gaieté* and destroys all liveliness'. Jean Bernier praised the funny instrumental effects, but added that the score was 'stripped of the fullness, abundance, and energy of a Chabrier'.[9] In his *Le Gaulois* review, the veteran critic Louis de Fourcaud complained that 'the liveliness of the play is too often suffocated beneath the musical mechanism'.[10] Antoine Banès contrasted the vigour of Franc-Nohain's play to Ravel's 'scientific' approach.[11] Gaston Carraud faulted Ravel for having written 'a *bouffonnerie* stripped to the last not of wit but of liveliness and *gaieté*'.[12] What was missing for Carraud was not only a spirit of 'spontaneity and abandon' but also a measure of human warmth. So too, at least implicitly, for Jean Prudhomme who observed that '[the] play is cheerful, irresistibly attractive; the music is of an indescribable sadness'.[13] Much more recently in an exegesis upon *L'Heure espagnole* for *L'Avant-scène*, Christine Souillard has written of an 'unease often associated with coldness' provoked by Ravel's opera.[14] Of course, there have been other critical perspectives on *L'Heure espagnole*, but in a current of understanding that hears a certain hard-heartedness at the core of the work, and comes away from performances – and all the inevitable chuckles generated by the action – tinged with melancholy (and I count myself as part of this current, at least on occasion), there is something about Ravel's music that deflects the frolicking verbal virtuosity of Franc-Nohain's play.

One might put this another way, to suggest that early twentieth-century critics customarily expected music to fulfil a somewhat different role in operatic comedy. This role has to do, I believe, with a heady mixture of energy and exuberance. Before attending to musical realisations, or rather the putative lack, of these emotive states in Ravel's work, it is worth recalling that many theoretical reflections on comedy do emphasise its bright and buoyant aesthetic qualities. Classical theories, for example, articulate its role as a fertility rite, a theatrical entertainment leading to

[7] *Le Temps*, 28 May 1911.
[8] Roger Nichols, '*L'Heure espagnole*', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie, *www.grovemusic.com*, accessed 5 June 2006.
[9] *Le Crapouillot*, 24 December 1921.
[10] Cited in 'Revue de la Presse quotidienne' [anthology of reviews of the first production] in *S.I.M. Revue musicale mensuelle*, 15 June 1911.
[11] *Le Figaro*, 7 December 1921.
[12] *La Liberté*, 28 May 1911.
[13] *Comœdia*, 28 May 1911.
[14] Christine Souillard, 'Commentaire littéraire et musical', *L'Avant-scène: L'Heure espagnole, L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, 127 (1990), 89.

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the marriage of the young and sexually vital couple. Obstacles emerge, virtue is tested – and sometimes forgotten – but a ritual feast at the end celebrates the propagation of the species, an archetypal image in Northrop Frye's mythos of spring.[15] The banquet extends into the hall, for audiences are implicitly invited to join the festivities of the life-affirming comic society. A sanguine ethos also emerges prominently in Suzanne Langer's aesthetics as an extended biological metaphor: the feeling underlying comedy is a 'rhythm' that enables living things to adapt endlessly to obstacles, finding their balance in new and unexpected situations.[16] Vitality lies at the core. Ineluctable future in the guise of Fortune may throw up unexpected barriers, but the comic protagonist triumphs by 'wit, luck, personal power, or even humorous, or ironical, or philosophical acceptance of mischance'.[17] Both Frye and Langer naturally recognise different registers of comedy; along the grid of seasons on Frye's map of the literary imagination some ironic categories of comedy overlap with winter, such as when the humorous society of blockers, scoundrels and impostors actually survives at the end. For example, one might say of *L'Heure espagnole* that, although the comic impostors (the banker Don Inigo and the poet Gonzalve) conform to the spring archetype because they are ultimately embarrassed in their amorous adventures (Don Inigo's name itself is a play on *nigaud*, or silly, simple) the end is somewhat darker because Concepcion promises to continue her adulterous escapades with the muleteer Ramiro (the *eiron* in Frye's typology). This closes a full circle with the beginning of the work, articulated strongly by the reappearance of her cuckolded husband Torquemada, rather than promising a new plateau of experience. One might imagine a comedy with a softer edge (and no sacrifice of the bawdiness that permeates *L'Heure espagnole*) were Concepcion to be reconciled with her husband after her dalliance with Ramiro, who, in turn, might have been brought together with a young lover of his own. Seen against this hypothetical verdant conclusion, the choice of the name Concepcion for the female principal in *L'Heure espagnole* has a markedly ironic edge.[18]

This is not the place for extended theoretical ruminations on comedy, but I raise life-affirming perspectives to throw into relief another theory of comedy that seems particularly germane to Ravel's cleverness and coldness, and ultimately to reflections on *L'Heure espagnole*'s modernity: philosopher Henri Bergson's *Le Rire*, published in 1900 merely four years before Franc-Nohain's play and seven before Ravel composed *L'Heure espagnole*.[19] Although Bergson did not attempt a complete theory of comedy in this treatise (as Langer, Frye and many others point out, some comedy

[15] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), 163–86.
[16] Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York, 1953), 326–50.
[17] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 331.
[18] For a discussion of the sexual comedy in *L'Heure espagnole*, see my 'La Grivoiserie moderne de Ravel', forthcoming in *Aspects de l'opéra français entre Meyerbeer et Honegger*, ed. Vincent Giroud and Jean-Christophe Branger (Lyons: Editions Symétrie).
[19] Although the secondary literature contains many excellent discussions of comedy in individual operas, comic opera and music theatre as a whole have, curiously, been under-theorised. For some possible directions see Wye Jamison Allanbrook, 'Theorizing the Comic Surface', in *Music in the Mirror: Reflections on the History of Music Theory and Literature in the 21st Century* (Lincoln, Nbr., and London, 2002), 195–216.

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hardly generates any laughter at all), his points of reference span a gamut from Molière's plays to the humorous coincidences of daily life. For Bergson, laughter is generally accompanied by an 'absence of feeling', indeed it 'has no greater foe than emotion'.[20] Mirth, joy, delight – common sense might associate these emotions with comedy and laughter, but Bergson implicitly means 'emotion' in a more restricted sense as responses stemming from empathy, the condition whereby events in human life are 'sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed'. By extension, social life requires suppleness and sensitivity, the ability to sense nuance and to shape action to ever-changing circumstances. Laughter arises at just those moments when human beings do not adapt, when they fall prey to inattention, mindless repetition, insensitivity to context, obsessions, feelings of self-importance, or even merely stiff physical gestures. Therefore, the act of laughing has a strong didactic, even utilitarian, component. Slipping on a banana skin abuts Don Quixote. The victim in the former should either have been sufficiently attentive to her path or physically responsive enough to avoid obstacles. A momentary distraction or inability to react to the unpredictable essence of life causes the fall – a condition that Bergson identifies with 'rigidity' in both a real and relatively abstract sense. Don Quixote dreams of acting as a hero of medieval romance and his delusions lead him to a certain kind of ossification: 'to mould things on an idea of one's own, instead of moulding one's ideas on things'.[21] Thus the flux of life becomes sacrificed to unbending obsession. And windmills become giants.

Bergson applies the contrast between rigid behaviour and the 'mobility of life' not only to character but also to plot, for example, any sequence of repetitions (such as the repeated bludgeoning of a policeman in Punch and Judy shows), or any 'arithmetical progression or chain-reaction of comic events that leads from innocuous coincidence to major disaster'.[22] In short, he writes of comedy as extending from the 'artificial mechanization of the human body' to 'any substitution whatsoever of the artificial for the natural'.[23] The premise of comedy as machine leads Bergson systematically to organise his treatise around a series of laws or rules that he enumerates and explicates in a succession of three large categories: the comic element in situations, the comic element in words, and the comic element in character.

Following the critical lead of Alexis Roland-Manuel, Vladimir Jankélévitch wrote in his landmark study of Ravel that '*L'artificialisme* is, together with the setting of the impossible challenge [la gageure], the most striking feature of the Ravelian spirit'.[24] Jankélévitch developed this perspective as it relates to the music, aesthetics and personality of Ravel in a dozen rich pages, and the critical applications of this trope certainly could be extended much further in light of Ravel's wider programme of

[20] Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (repr. Baltimore and London, 1980), 63.
[21] Bergson, *Laughter*, 179.
[22] Bergson, *Laughter*, 106 and 113.
[23] Bergson, *Laughter*, 91.
[24] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Ravel*, rev. edn, ed. Jean-Michel Nectoux (Paris, 1995), 89.

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challenging (German) Romantic aesthetics.[25] 'But doesn't it ever occur to these people that I can be artificial by nature?' Ravel once asked Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, giving voice to the strong Baudelairean side of his artistic temperament.[26] The homology between Bergson's characterisation of comedy as artifice and the privileging of this idea in the writing of the most influential proponents of Ravel's aesthetics seems clear enough – and amenable to a number of his compositions. Related to the idea of artifice, Bergson notes that 'in one sense it might be said that all *character* is comic, provided we mean by character the *ready-made* element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once and for all and capable of working automatically'.[27] As a well-oiled comedy machine, the plot of *L'Heure espagnole* seems difficult to equal: Ramiro keeps making the trip up and down the stairs with the grandfather clocks, either empty or with one of Concepcion's hapless suitors inside. Clocks are envoiced throughout the work by percussion and wind instruments, even by metronome sounds at the beginning. And with characters whose bodies and body parts become assimilated in various ways with the clocks – often with bawdy *doubles entendres* – one might be forgiven for thinking that *L'Heure espagnole* was intentionally conceived to illustrate Bergson's metaphor, although so far, neither personal nor professional links between Bergson and either Ravel or Franc-Nohain appear to have emerged (César Franck was the philosopher's favourite composer).[28]

A related point concerns Bergson's separation of comedy from other genres. *Le Rire* constitutes his most extended discussion of aesthetics (which is to say, he published relatively little in this branch of philosophy) and the book cannot be understood in isolation from his theories of time and intuition.[29] Comic artists exercise their powers of observation only on a level that is 'skin-deep [because] to penetrate too far into the personality, to couple the outer effect with causes that are too deep-seated, would mean to endanger . . . all that was laughable in the effect'.[30] Outside of comedy, artists are more concerned with the 'strains of our inner life's unbroken melody', that is the world beyond utilitarian purpose, fixed categories and measurable quantities.[31] Such perspicacity may be achieved by the true 'detachment'

[25] I develop the construct of Ravel's artificiality at greater length in 'Maurice Ravel: Private Man, Public Works', in *Musical Biography*, ed. Jolanta Pekacz (Aldershot, 2006), 69–87.
[26] Reported by Calvocoressi in *Music and Ballet* (London, 1934; repr. 1978), 51.
[27] Bergson, *Laughter*, 156.
[28] For a synopsis of Franc-Nohain's career, see Keith Clifton, 'Maurice Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole*: Genesis, Sources, Analysis', Ph.D. diss. (Northwestern University, 1998), 30–43. Clifton also supplies a complete and reliable review of the genesis of the project and also discusses and contexualises both the literary and musical texts. His work by and large does not consider the issues that I cover in this essay.
[29] For an introduction to Bergson's thought see A. R. Lacy, *Bergson* (London and New York, 1989). For briefer discussions see Mary-Ann Gillies, 'Bergsonism: '"Time Out of Mind" ', in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, ed. David Bradshaw (Malden, Mass., and Oxford, 2003), 95–115, and Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).
[30] Bergson, *Laughter*, 169.
[31] Bergson, *Laughter*, 158.

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of the great artist, a detachment that could only be complete in the work of an artist never seen in the world, one who would fuse all the arts into a single art by blending forms, colours and sounds intuited from their 'native purity' and uninflected by human classification and purposefulness. In short, Bergson theorises comedy by strongly delineating between 'surface' and 'depth', a binary opposition reminiscent of post-Kantian Romantic aesthetics (despite important points of divergence between Bergson's thought and that of Kant). Broadly speaking, Ravel's oeuvre, from the perspective of both intention and reception, suggests a revalorisation of the surface, crystalline exteriors achieved by the perfection of craft.[32] As with the concept of artifice, this is not a point that can be fully developed here, but I raise it in order to suggest that at a minimum Ravel's repeated lambasting of 'sincerity' as a criterion for value judgement stemmed from his commitment to exterior polish.[33] And even more relevant to the present argument: the strong parallels between *L'Heure espagnole* and Bergson's exemplifications of comedy encourage a critical assessment of Ravel's music in this opera not only as somewhat hard-edged but also against a theoretical model of comedy as 'surface'.

Ravel expressed his own aesthetic intentions shortly before the première of *L'Heure espagnole* in interviews given to the newspapers *L'Intransigeant* and *Comœdia* as well as in a letter to *Le Figaro*.[34] He also produced a longer draft of this letter, or rather, a series of draft pages, autographs of which are now in the Koch Collection at the Beinecke Library of Yale University. (Because portions of the drafts have been quoted in the secondary literature in different and abbreviated forms, I provide a transcription of these documents in an appendix to this essay, preserving all the redundancies among them in order to avoid further confusion.[35]) In the letter (which I take to include the published version as well as the drafts), Ravel identifies Italian opera buffa (presumably eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century examples) instead of French *opérette* as the generic tradition to which *L'Heure espagnole* belongs. He also claims to steer clear of the 'forme traditionelle' of opera buffa and to regenerate a genre that had implicitly fallen out of favour. One of the problems with *opérette* (he names Jacques Offenbach and Claude Terrasse in the *L'Intransigeant* interview) was that its composers relied excessively on '[the] arbitrary and comical accentuation of words' ('l'accentuation arbitraire et cocasse des mots') to generate humour. Ravel proposed 'natural declamation' ('déclamation familière') and correct prosody as a remedy, while shifting the responsibility for inducing laughter to the orchestra.

[32] For a brief discussion see Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 2001), 32–5.

[33] See perhaps most famously his 'Quelques réflexions sur la musique', in Maurice Ravel, *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 47.

[34] Ravel, *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 339–40 and 587 for the interviews (on 17 May 1911 and 11 May respectively) and 118 for the letter (published on 17 May).

[35] The most egregious error is that of Marcel Marnat, who quotes one page of the draft as the actual letter sent to *Le Figaro* in *Ravel* (Paris, 1986), 308.

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This seems too reductive an assessment of the comedy in *L'Heure espagnole*. We might also further probe Ravel's somewhat curious linking of his work to opera buffa. Perhaps he meant to allude in his letter to the spirit of this genre, but in that case it would be difficult (speaking very generally) to delineate a difference with *opérette*. We might, for example, seek the roots of Don Inigo-as-Pantalone in both genres: opera buffa and *opérette* draw profusely on character types whose origins go back to the *commedia dell'arte* (and beyond). Nary a trace of sentiment lubricates the clockwork of *L'Heure espagnole*, and, if anything, it is the French genre that has a *less* pronounced sentimental strain than the Italian, although in this respect there is a world of difference between, say, *Così fan tutte* and *L'Italiana in Algeri*.

But here is one route into the dilemma: given his emphasis on correct declamation, in his reference to Italian opera buffa Ravel actually had in mind the genre's very large patches of *secco* recitative (at least in its eighteenth-century manifestations; *opérette*, it will be recalled, generally contained spoken dialogue). To continue this line of thinking we might observe that he avoided the 'forme traditionelle' in at least two ways. First, he gave relatively short shrift to set pieces (the single extended quintet at the final curtain, occasional lyrical effusions by the poet Gonzalve, and Concepcion's furious monologue 'Oh! la pitoyable aventure!') and, second, he wrote a very different kind of 'recitative' than heard in much older Italian (and French) works – rhythmically more variegated, with a considerably more disjunct and wide-ranging melodic style, and with an active orchestra. The recitative of *L'Heure espagnole* is less conversational *per se* than a *parody* of conversation, at once adhering to the character of quotidian language by erasing most 'mute e's (like Ravel's earlier song cycle *Histoires naturelles*) while also carefully observing prosodic accent and concurrently exaggerating the natural inflections of everyday speech.[36]

To return to my main argument: for all the brilliance of Ravel's updated recitative, the dearth of numbers in *L'Heure espagnole* has a strong bearing on perceptions of its comedic register as one that negotiates only negligibly with feeling. This is because set pieces in opera buffa, particularly ensemble numbers, typically contain a great deal of word repetition energised by rhythmic activity and rapid *parlando* or passage-work. The conclusions to each act in *Falstaff* stand as paradigmatic later examples composed less than twenty-five years before *L'Heure espagnole*. Chatter, sparkle, absurd chaos – any number of lively descriptors springs to mind for numbers extending from the second-act finale of *Le nozze di Figaro* to Verdi's 'Tutto nel mondo è burla'. Irrespective of the particular verbal text at hand, such music radiates an optimistic and life-affirming aura in the spirit suggested by Langer's definition of comic rhythm or Frye's hedonistic banquet in the green world. Seen

[36] It has sometimes been claimed that Ravel was influenced in crafting the declamation of *L'Heure espagnole* by Modest Musorgsky's *Marriage* (Zhenit'ba), a setting of Gogol's eponymous comedy. Although Musorgsky wrote the work in the late 1860s, it was not premièred until 1908 at the Suvorin Theatre School in St Petersburg. And although Ravel refers to Musorgsky's work in his *Figaro* letter drafts, it is important to remember that *Marriage* was not published in a French-Russian vocal score until 1911. Ravel is unlikely to have known the work before this date, that is well after he composed *L'Heure espagnole*.

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against the tradition of opera buffa, such verve is conspicuously absent from *L'Heure espagnole*. Ravel might well have become unbuttoned at the concluding quintet – which he equated in the letter with 'les ensembles du repertoire [bouffe]' – but any sense of frothy optimism, or (for some listeners) even cheerfulness, seems deflated by the obvious satirical intent of a piece that celebrates the perpetuation of adultery. That is, rather than create a corporeal or visceral feeling of comic vitality, Ravel hyperbolises the very conventions that produce this sensibility in other contexts by writing overdone *parlando* on single pitches and extended vocalises. The narrative voice of the ensemble celebrating the sexuality of Ramiro the muleteer gives every impression of not taking itself seriously. To be sure, the repertory of opera buffa overflows with passage-work – but not the sort of ensemble melismas and trills deployed as in Example 1. In the first instance all five characters milk the *vocalise* with affectively exaggerated rubato. Then, in a Bergsonian mechanical enlargement, the characters Concepcion and Gonzalve slip into a trill followed by a leap. They are systematically joined by Torquemada to trill on a diminished harmony resolved with a larger leap, and finally by the remaining two characters Ramiro and Don Inigo for the largest leap of all – like a giant sling-shot pulled back further every time. Taking a broader view of the concluding quintet, much like codas in traditional buffa ensembles Ravel repeats a cadential gambit during the coda of the piece.[37] Or at least he pretends to do this. For his coda plays with the terminal dominant–tonic punctuation in G major by twice delaying the penultimate dominant harmonisation of the second scale degree A with truly capricious tonal excursions: first, a sudden plunge to an F major chord, and then an abrupt tilt even further flatward at the repeat (this moment is shown in Example 1, where the highest pitch A in violin, flute and harp receives a half-diminished sonority in the second bar and then gets deflected to A flat).[38] Real excitement, confusion or celebration seem missing as these tonal digressions serve to throw the vocal exaggerations (those rubato melismas and ensemble trills on diminished harmonies) into high relief – while the orchestra waits patiently for the bizarre flourishes to end.
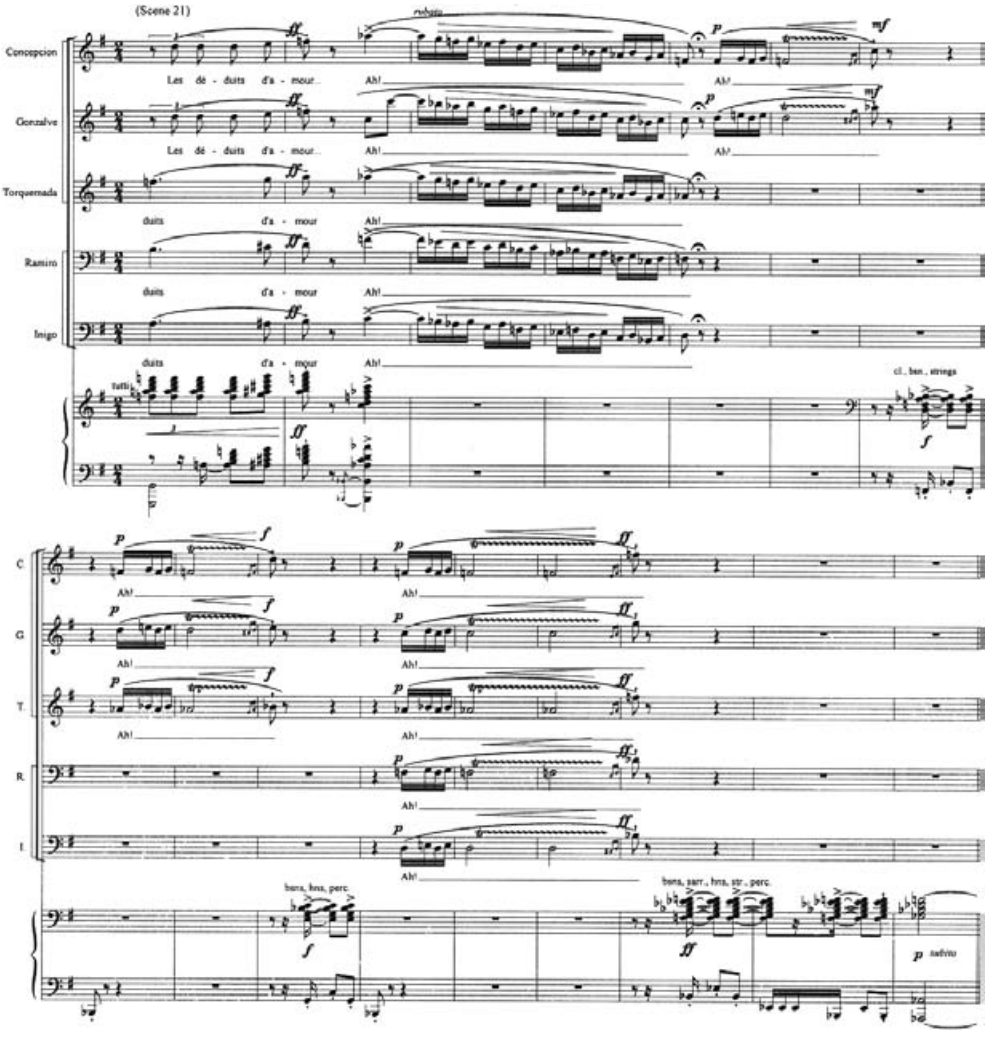
Whereas opera buffa (and *opérette* too – think Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers*) conventionally toys with conventions, topics and tunes of serious opera, Ravel's approach treats opera buffa ('les ensembles du repertoire' in this instance) itself as a historical artefact for the ludic spirit. Such an approach is modern in much the same way that Emanuele Senici has outlined for 'Tutto nel mondo è burla' and its self-conscious parody of the end of *Don Giovanni*, complete with Verdi's distorted text setting and implicit message that 'moderns know better than to count on the ultimate punishment for evil deeds; they have learned that everything is a joke'.[39]

[37] Beginning at Durand vocal score, 109, bar 8; the passage is taken up again at the bottom of 110.

[38] The first interruption occurs at vocal score 109, last bar and is completed at the fourth bar of p. 110. The second interruption (i.e., the one shown in Ex. 1) appears at vocal score 111, third bar. In this case, the 'expected' dominant of the final cadence, that is where the upper-voice A is finally harmonised with a D chord, occurs on page 113, last bar.

[39] Emanuele Senici, 'Verdi's *Falstaff* at Italy's Fin de Siècle', *Musical Quarterly*, 85 (2001), 283.

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Ex. 1: *L'Heure espagnole*, scene 21

Yet even setting aside the highly conventional betrothal of the young couple Nannetta and Fenton or the age-old concluding sylvan celebration, Verdi's sheer comic juggernaut in the fugue seems more grounded in the opera buffa tradition just by virtue of being so unabashedly energetic (though the juggernaut itself is perhaps more typical of curtains to interior acts). Listeners to Ravel's stop-and-start conclusion are treated to vocal excess harnessed for satirical purposes and suspended on tenterhooks as they wait for a Bergsonian spring to be released in a terminal dominant–tonic punctuation. Earlier in *L'Heure espagnole*, Ravel satirises sentimental tenor vocality in some of Gonzalve's music, and, as with the quintet, one conclusion we might draw is that delight or intellectual satisfaction do not equal exuberance, saturnalian abandon or (in an expression that crops up often in the early reviews) 'spontaneity'. To frame this issue more playfully: Ravel shifts the *secco* from the recitative to the register of humour he creates.

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Ravel's paradoxical intent to 'regénérer [or 'faire revivre' in one deleted passage] l'opéra bouffe italien' cogently reflects his modernist attitude. For he seeks simultaneously to ground himself historically, that is to justify his project in light of a past model, and to distance himself from the tradition he names by satirising some of its vocal practices, by idiosyncratic 'recitative', and – most vividly of all – by his proposition of positioning a *French* work in an *Italian* lineage. For all its modernist elements – including a pronounced degree of historical self-consciousness – on a literary level as well as simply for its passages of hedonistic exuberance, *Falstaff* may be credibly explained as organically related to a venerable Italian generic tradition, to history as a continuous process. *L'Heure espagnole* suggests a greater sense of 'thinking with history' after a rupture (in Carl Schorske's memorable phrase), that is, the achievement of modern aims (for example, the production of prosodically accurate musical caricature of the speech in a spoken play) with materials from the past.[40]

In creating long passages analogous to *secco* recitative, one problem Ravel implicitly faced was coherence, particularly in the post-Wagnerian/post-*Pelléas* environment. For many composers, leitmotifs had become the lingua franca of opera. The same might be said of Ravel in this score, as it is certainly among the most thoroughly leitmotivic in the French repertory of this period. In a review of Vincent d'Indy's *Fervaal*, Ravel approvingly cited Ernest Chausson's remark that '[Wagner's] revolution in drama is too far-reaching to have remained isolated, without significance and consequence for the future'.[41] It is unclear in this passage whether Ravel refers specifically to leitmotifs; nonetheless what deserves more critical attention than has been offered in past criticism are the aesthetic implications of applying referential leitmotifs to light musical *comedy*, a rare situation in the repertory. In brief, I want to suggest that Ravel achieved a historical detachment from leitmotivic writing (as it had been conventionally understood) similar to that he established from the genre of opera buffa.

First, a few very well-known precepts. In *Opera and Drama* Wagner built his theoretical groundwork on a premise of an organic imperative in art that had been common coin in German Romantic letters for many years.[42] Form is a product of poetic content, and the design of the whole generated from within rather than mechanically imposed. Wagner casts musical materials against a conceptual matrix of 'ever-becoming' and leitmotivic technique typically generates semantic fields of the once-revealed, presently-revealed, and soon-to-be-revealed. Of course, the semantic specificity of leitmotivic material ranges widely within operas and from opera to opera, with *Tristan und Isolde* at a pole of relative semantic indeterminacy in its motivic materials. In much writing about such matters in the past, abstract semantic implications of leitmotifs also conjoin their affective and conventional topical associations, as well as combine with (or compete with) their function in

[40] Carl Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton, 1998).
[41] Ravel, *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, 307.
[42] For a cogent review, see John Daverio, 'Tristan, Parsifal, and the "New Organicism" ', in *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York, 1993), 183–207.

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'purely musical' processes (as difficult as these are to articulate with the inevitable mediation of words and graphs).[43] Above all, and for better or worse, leitmotivic writing has been celebrated for its ability to 'express subtle nuances and psychological depths more powerfully than any words', to borrow Barry Millington's formulation.[44]

A similar belief that leitmotivic technique imbued music with a new emotional and psychological subtlety runs through the commentaries of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French writers whose views would have been familiar to Ravel. In his famous essay on *Tannhäuser* Baudelaire made the case for the perspicacity of leitmotifs by citing Liszt: 'This systematic emphasis is joined to an art of application that offered highly unusual interest because of the refinement of psychological, poetical, and philosophical insights that it demonstrated'.[45] Baudelaire was, in effect, waxing enthusiastic about how leitmotifs give a sense of greater 'depth' to music drama than to conventional opera. Albert Lavignac later marvelled at how a 'leitmotif calls up a whole throng of ideas'.[46] In *La Revue wagnérienne* Pierre Bonnier gave the metaphor of depth a botanical – and highly picturesque – twist when he depicted the melodic materials in *Die Meistersinger* in the shape of a tree, with an *Ur*-motif that generates all the other motivic matter at the base of the trunk.[47]

Claude Debussy recognised the wide uses to which Wagner put leitmotivic technique, favouring the unfolding of materials in *Tristan* over the *Ring*.[48] His famous remarks after attending a London performance of the latter suggest both his acknowledgement of a psychological role for leitmotifs and impatience with their tautological use as *cartes de visite* where the 'people wearing helmets and animal skins . . . never appear without their cursed ''leitmotif'' . . . this is a redundancy with the most regrettable effect; so what becomes of the psychological role that has devolved to the orchestra [?]'.[49] What Debussy appears to suggest here is that *predictability* undermines affect and psychological resonance. Of course, his *carte-de-visite* critique is too blunt given the ever-changing musical and dramatic contexts in which characters-cum-leitmotifs reappear in the *Ring*, but it was implicitly taken up two years later by Louis Laloy in a survey of modern French music drama, including

[43] For an excellent review of these issues see Carolyn Abbate, 'Wagner, ''On Modulation'', and *Tristan*', *this journal*, 1 (1989), 33–58. For an overview of the mapping of leitmotifs on to form in late nineteenth-century French and Italian 'number' opera, see Steven Huebner, 'Thematic Recall in Late Nineteenth-Century Opera', *Studi Pucciniani*, 3 (2004), 77–104.

[44] Barry Millington, 'The Music', in *The Wagner Compendium*, ed. Barry Millington (London, 1992), 292.

[45] Charles Baudelaire, 'Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* à Paris', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Jacques Crépet (Paris, 1925), 232.

[46] Albert Lavignac, *The Music Drama of Richard Wagner and His Festival Theatre in Bayreuth*, trans. Esther Singleton (New York, 1969 [original French, 1898]), 243.

[47] Pierre Bonnier, 'Le Motif-Organe des Maitres Chanteurs', *La Revue wagnérienne*, 8 December 1885.

[48] For a pithy survey, see Roger Nichols and Richard Langham Smith, *Claude Debussy: Pelléas et Mélisande* (Cambridge, 1989), 78–81.

[49] Claude Debussy, 'Impressions sur la tétralogie à Londres', in *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, rev. edn, ed. François Lesure (Paris, 1987), 180–1.

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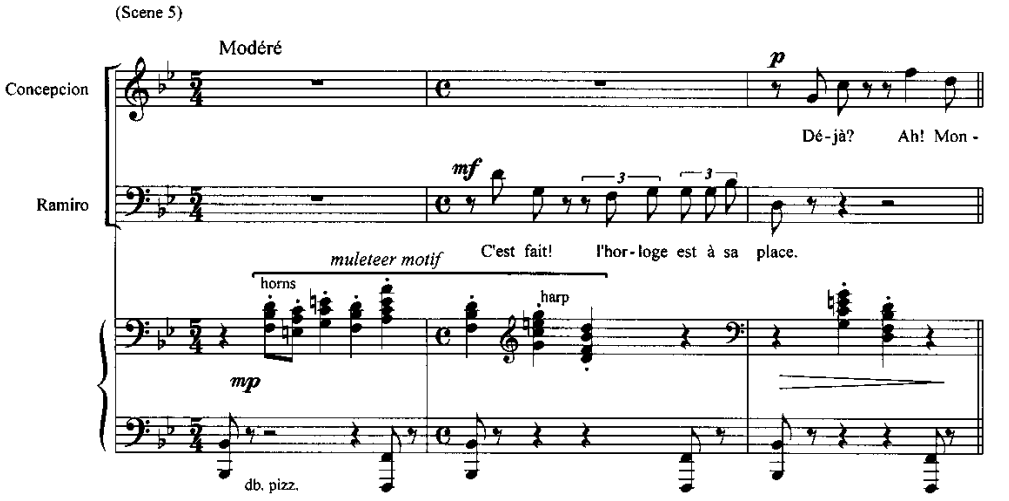
Pelléas et Mélisande.[50] Laloy writes of the orchestra's role, brilliantly realised by leitmotifs in *Pelléas*, of communicating what the characters vaguely intuit but cannot express. Wagner himself had undermined this goal when he used *motifs-étiquettes* too explicitly, rather like 'along the paths of a German forest, the signposts pointing towards *Schöne Aussicht* or a restaurant'. Debussy, says Laloy, had been more discreet by attaching a few recurring motifs only to emotions, rather than to people, objects or actions. Laloy's position is certainly debatable, but for my purposes the important point is that he implicitly appeals to the criterion 'depth' in accounting for the superiority of the *Pelléas* leitmotifs over Wagnerian forebears. Indeed, it would be almost impossible to find a Wagnerian or post-Wagnerian critic (at least a sophisticated one) who would defend tautology as an end in itself, a role for leitmotifs, musical or dramatic, that did not go beyond the provision of legible tags.

But comedy invites a redrawing of critical parameters. This even seems manifest in Wagner's own *Die Meistersinger*, not by a changed approach to leitmotivic technique (Wagner and his exegetes seem just as committed to 'depth' here as in other Wagner operas) but in its inclusion of set pieces allowing the frenetic comic juggernaut. Wagner's much remarked-upon 'return' to set pieces in this opera (the quintet and big ensemble finales) seems driven, at least in some measure, by such a generic imperative. That imperative receives different expression in *L'Heure espagnole* – less Langer, more Bergson. Almost every time the muleteer Ramiro reappears on stage from his travails with the clocks he is accompanied by a comical *carte de visite*, a muscular triadic figure usually on brass and low wind that alternates with delicate harp chords. It is usually underpinned by repeated bass leaps of fourths or fifths redolent of his simple nature, or perhaps of his ponderous gait (see Ex. 2a). Don Inigo, the rich banker, also usually moves in tandem with his motif, a Baroque-like dotted figure that alludes intertexually to 'Le Paon' in *Histoires naturelles* and beyond that to high social standing in eighteenth-century music. Ravel attaches recurring material to the other characters as well, although less systematically. In *L'Heure espagnole*, to redraw critical parameters for comedy is to recognise leitmotivic tautology not as an aesthetic liability but as an asset to the comic spirit, particularly because clocks are a central image. The more predictable and mechanistic, the better – with allowances for elegant variation, as we shall see.
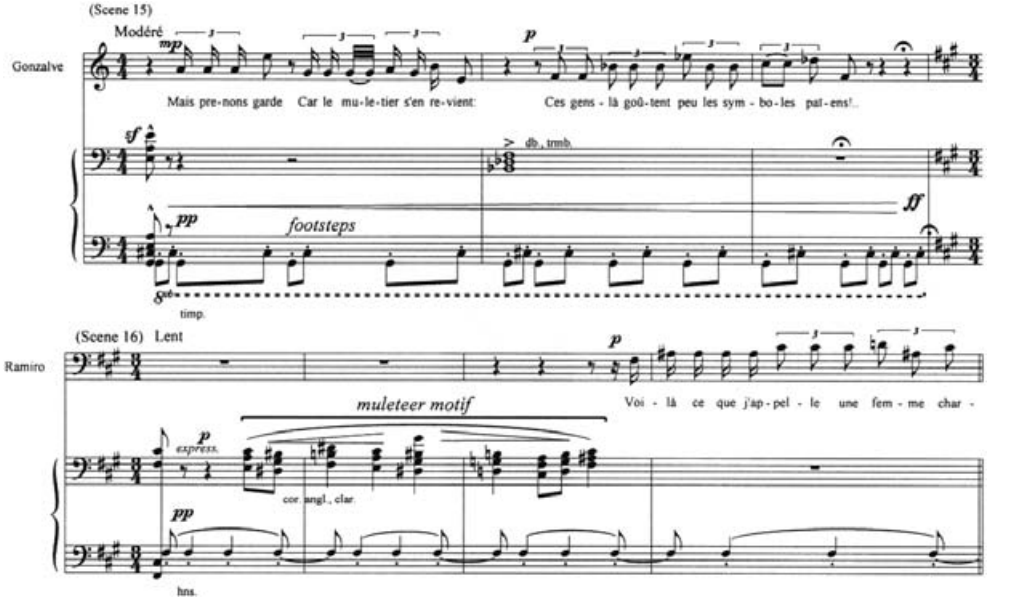
In his *Le Figaro* letter Ravel writes about generating comedy by purely musical means ('l'insolite [unusual effects] de l'harmonie, du rythme, du dessin mélodique ou de l'orchestration') and that he privileges 'l'orchestre moderne' as a rich resource for producing humour. His score exhibits what the letter implies, that is, relative disjunction between the melos of the vocal parts and that of the orchestra. This is another way, then, that Ravel achieves distance from Wagnerian perspectives, which, in theory at least, place great stock in a shared melos between voice and orchestra. *L'Heure espagnole* is similar to *Pelléas* with respect to this kind of textural disjunction, although the character of the vocal lines in the two operas is much

[50] Louis Laloy, 'Le Drame Musical Moderne: Claude Debussy', *Mercure musical*, 1 August 1905.

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Ex. 2a: *L'Heure espagnole*, scene 5



Ex. 2b: *L'Heure espagnole*, scenes 15–16

different. Ravel's contains more rapid shifts of register, difficult to negotiate intervals for comic effect, and consistent shaping of melodic groups to highlight the rhymes that bounce unpredictably off of one another in Franc-Nohain's free verse. The relative sobriety of declamation in *Pelléas* (a prose text) serves an expressive end: to allow the understated orchestra its due, the characters a more dream-like posture, and, overall, the suggestion that 'la vérité' lies somewhere behind or beyond the sonic reality of the voice. According to Debussy, shared melos in a Wagnerian symphonic context subordinated the poetic essence of dramatic characters to symphonic procedure, which in the German Romantic tradition might be seen as

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reaching imponderable depths (or ineffable heights) but which he felt drew attention more to process than substance.[51]

In short, my claim is that textural disjunction in *Pelléas* ostensibly serves 'depth', whereas in *L'Heure espagnole* the instruments join the 'surface' to double the stage action and to 'exaggerate or underline' comic effects, as Ravel puts it in one letter draft. The numerous onomatopoeic gestures generated by the huge orchestra – loud dissonant chords as Ramiro delivers the clocks with a thud or Concepcion bangs on them – have comic value analogous to that of the tautological leitmotifs and, in effect, belong to the same surface 'class' of materials in a binary surface/depth opposition. The clocks themselves seem veritable icons of the flattened perspective. Envoiced and visible, they bridge the gap between the machinery of the big orchestra and the mechanics of the characters and plot because they belong to both realms at once. It is worth recalling here that in Bergson's terms, clocks can *only* represent surface knowledge. In a general and foundational tenet of his philosophy, to represent time spatially is to undermine any profound sense of real *durée* (duration), fundamentally fluid and not amenable to representation because so dependent on experience. Ravel's orchestra does not probe intuition – Wagnerian or Debussyian or Bergsonian – but rather joins the clocks themselves on a flat panel of representation.

The orchestral prelude of *L'Heure espagnole* articulates this sonic representation of surface perspective through an intertextual echo of the beginning of Debussy's orchestral piece *Nuages*. Both passages start with parallel harmonies scored in a similar way (clarinets and bassoons in Debussy; clarinets, followed by oboes, bassoons and horns in Ravel). But here is the rub: Ravel's instructions call for three pendulums – metronomes in practice – to mark time at different rates during the passage. Debussyian symbolist mystery (or Bergson's reflections on the inexpressibility of time, if one prefers) becomes de-sublimated by quiet background ticking. The end result is not an experience of the *au-delà*, but rather, as the clock-maker Torquemada later suggests, surface confusion. For much to the dismay of Concepcion as she awaits her lover, her husband loses track of time precisely because he cannot hierarchise the sounds of the many clocks in his shop ('Les horloges, Monsieur, on n'entend plus leurs coups: / Ce serait à devenir fou!').[52] As the orchestral introduction continues, various additional 'real' clock sounds (chimes, miniature trumpets and the like) join the texture. That the opening gambit of parallel chords functions during the ensuing stage action as a leitmotif that moves freely between representing Torquemada himself and representing the clocks suggests interchangeability of function between people and objects.[53] But the more

[51] On this point see Debussy's discussion with Ernest Guiraud regarding Wagner and opera composition recorded by Maurice Emmanuel, *Pelléas et Mélisande de Debussy* (Paris, 1933), 36.

[52] Durand vocal score, 10.

[53] Examples of the former are when Torquemada informs Ramiro that "Totor est de Torquemada/Le diminutif plein de charme" (vs, 8) or when he returns to the boutique at the end of the opera (93). Examples of the latter use include the moment when Gonzalve first climbs into one of the clocks (34) or when Ramiro remarks on the seductive qualities of the assembled timepieces (73).

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important point is that when this leitmotif sounds later in the opera, it is usually joined by 'real' clock sounds. As I have already suggested, despite all the changes that the Torquemada/clock leitmotif undergoes, leitmotifs, real sounds, onomatopoeic effects and mimetic gestures seem to operate in the same expressive register, assuming the mutually indispensable roles of pulleys, chains and weights to regulate the comedic machine.
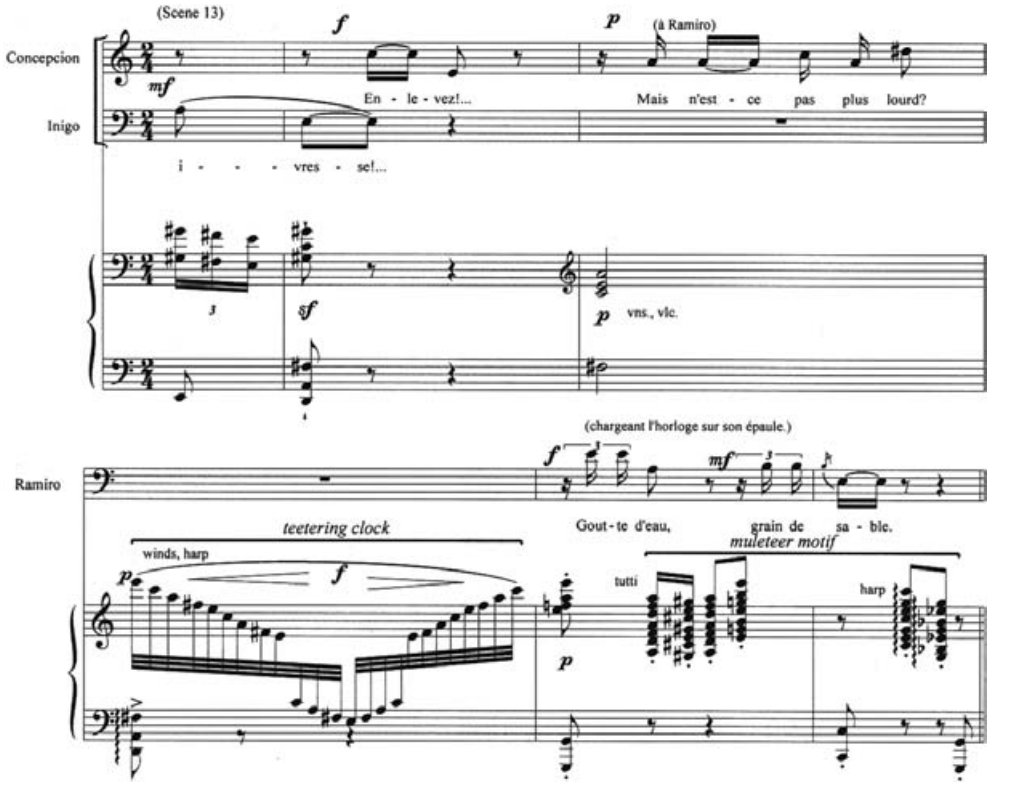
The same might be said of Ramiro's leitmotif. Returning to Example 2, for instance, I have already noted the prominent role of the strongly articulated interval of the fourth in the muleteer Ramiro's motif: in Example 2a from the fifth scene, a rising fourth in the bass gets answered by a fourth descent in the top voice of the harp. In Example 2b, heard much later in the opera, Concepcion's lover Gonzalve appears alone on stage to give voice to the arcane pleasure of being trapped in a clock. When he hears Ramiro hurry back down the stairs, Gonzalve slams the clock door shut. Ramiro, for his part, expresses his awakening interest in Concepcion. Here the bass fourths (now actually augmented fourths) integral to Ramiro's leitmotif are displaced to sound on the timpani *before* the leitmotif itself. And with good reason, for Ramiro's bass now obviously assumes the role of sounding his heavy approaching footsteps. One might even say that his plodding steps become detached from his motif to sound as preparation, and then disappear for the more delicate articulation of the motif itself.

For another example of the imbrication of mimesis with tautological leitmotif, we may look to the earlier scene where Ramiro first hoists the clock onto his shoulders with corpulent Don Inigo inside (see Ex. 3). The passage begins with a Tristan chord on the violins and cellos, an allusion manifestly meant to communicate Don Inigo's desire for Concepcion. In bars 3-4 the bass articulates the familiar dominant–tonic leap in Ramiro's motif while the winds and harp cascade down, and then up, the half-diminished harmony to land squarely on the remainder of Ramiro's motif. Even the burly muleteer seems at the point of dropping the massive piece of furniture with big Don Inigo inside. The wind–harp arpeggiation, complete with hairpin dynamic effect, mimics the teetering of the clock on his shoulders. But Ramiro recovers with aplomb to declare: 'Goute d'eau, grain de sable' ('Drop of water, grain of sand'), with comically predictable harp chords that now evoke the lightness of his imagery.

Various timepieces in *L'Heure espagnole* sometimes even sound independently with the semantic specificity often expected of leitmotifs. Thus the cuckoo clock participates with thinly disguised impertinence throughout the opera, as Ravel plays extensively upon the similarity between the 'cuckoo' and 'cocu', the French word for cuckold. For example, when Concepcion's cuckolded husband introduces himself to the muleteer Ramiro at the beginning as 'Torquemada, c'est moi, Monsieur', the cuckoo (executed by orchestral flute) slyly completes the identification, suggesting that Torquemada should really be singing 'cest moi [le cocu] Monsieur' (Ex. 4).

But might the claim for equal citizenship of sounds, mimetic devices and leitmotifs short-change the considerable amount of leitmotivic *variation* in *L'Heure espagnole*? For whereas onomatopoeia and real sounds are not very amenable to

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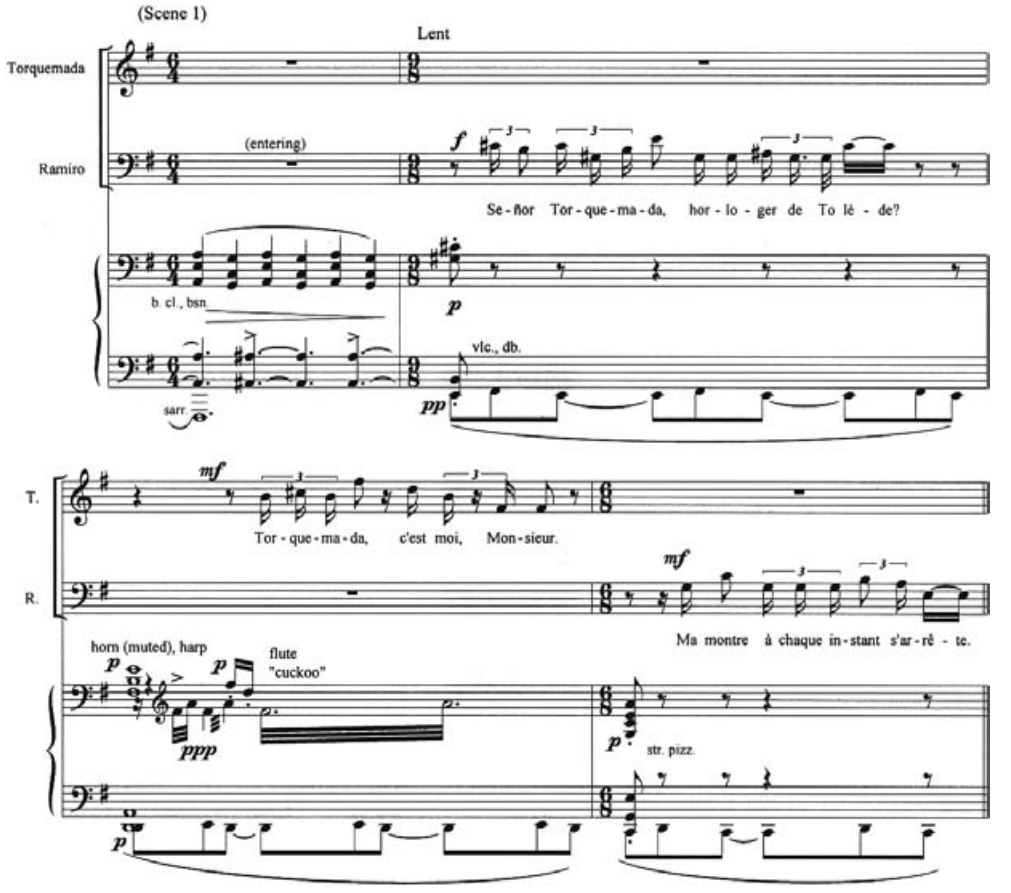


Ex. 3: *L'Heure espagnole*, scene 13

musical development, Ravel colours the principal leitmotifs differently at each occurrence with small melodic changes, different harmonies and new orchestration. One persuasive answer would be that musical development marches in lockstep with Bergson's mechanised laws, magnifying the 'absence of feeling' inherent in comedy. In this way of thinking – and counter-intuitively to how we normally think about development in Romantic and post-Romantic music – leitmotivic variation in *L'Heure espagnole* draws as much attention to comic surface as does (mere) literal repetition. Bergson's numerous laws of inversion may serve as one guide. One of them states that 'a comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the natural expression of an idea into another register' (the word 'effect' is key here).[54] To illustrate: Don Inigo's slow dotted rhythm motif sounds regal at first and receives a particularly academic – and hence officious – turn by participating in a contrapuntal module soon subject to invertible counterpoint.[55] This is Don Inigo as he ought to be and as he actually looks. Thinking that he might be too intimidating for Concepcion (in itself a ridiculous assumption on the basis of how she acts) he climbs into a clock to assume a more jovial, playful, and (he believes) seductive manner in 3/4 metre. Thus the topical transformation from French overture to

[54] Bergson, *Laughter*, 140.
[55] Compare Durand vocal score, 35, bars 1-2 to 36, bars 3-5.

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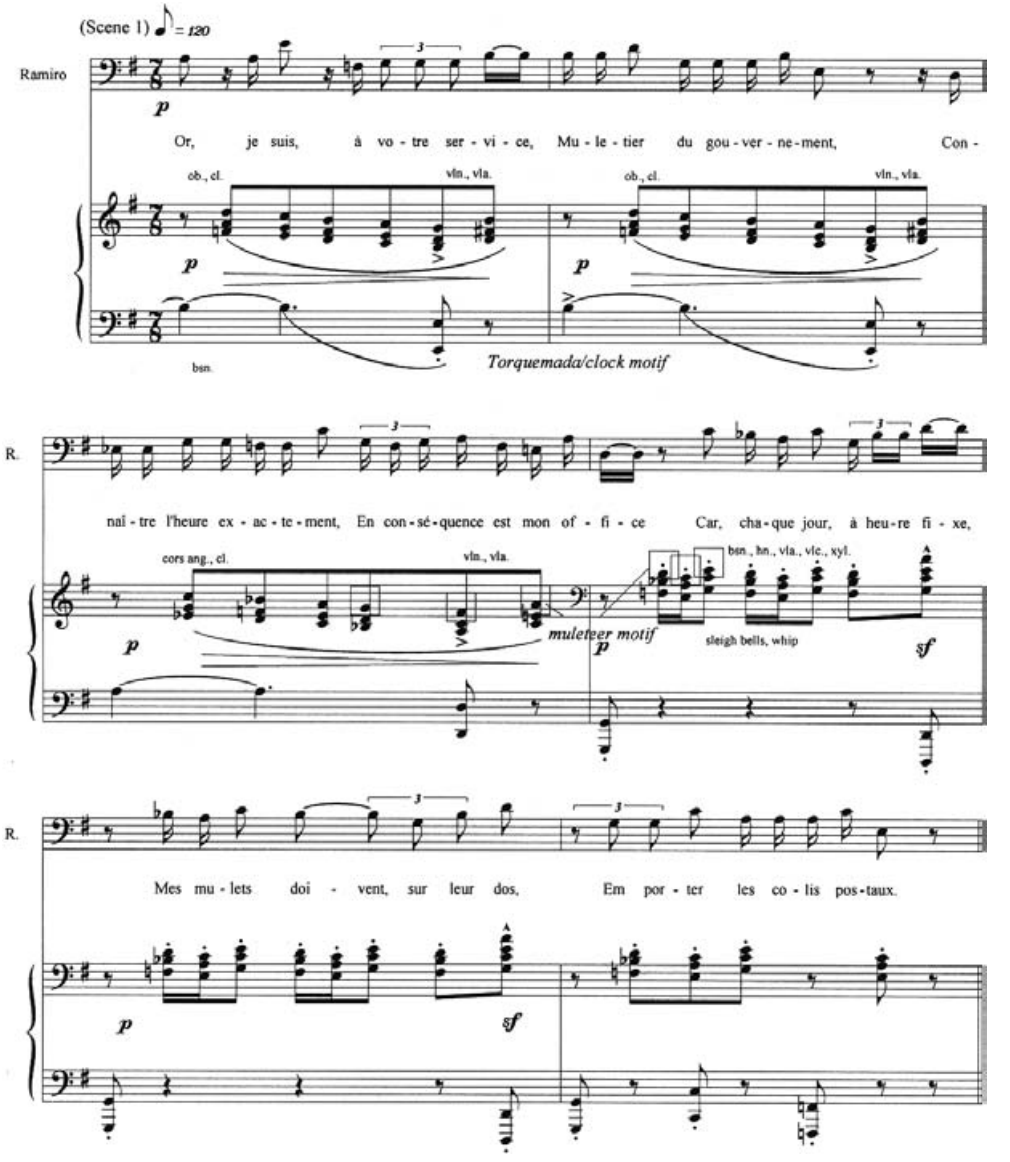


Ex. 4: *L'Heure espagnole*, scene 1

Viennese waltz, but one that is thoroughly inappropriate for the character (and the Spanish setting, one might add).[56] Ramiro's familiar mélange of plodding bass and wispy harp chords also comes in for an incongruous change of topic, for by the concluding Habanera quintet his leitmotif has become dance-like, and thoroughly hispanicised. Earlier, in the passage shown in Example 2b, the gruff character of the motif gets noticeably 'feminised' as Ramiro's thoughts turn to Concepcion.

Setting aside Bergson's laws of inversion, we might simply take pleasure in the subtle emergence of Ramiro's leitmotif out of the Torquemada/clock motif near the beginning of the opera (Ex. 5), developing variation *par excellence* but not very amenable to hermeneutic exegesis. The muleteer's music goes on to aliment a feast of subtle variation throughout the opera that cannot always be explained by a vocabulary of legible signs and comical inversion. In short, the very flatness of the canvas pushes Ravel's ingenuity, inventiveness and craft to the 'surface', drawing attention to elegant variation as a worthy object of aesthetic attention in itself. 'It is neither truth nor probability that produces the beauty and charm of these tales: it

[56] Durand vocal score, 45, bar 7ff.

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Ex. 5: *L'Heure espagnole*, scene 1

is only the manner of telling them', Jean de La Fontaine once said about a collection of his poetry.[57] Imputing the expression of 'truth' to leitmotifs in other, more Wagnerian, contexts, we might apply Lafontaine's observation to *L'Heure espagnole*. Or we might look for worthy analogues of manner over content elsewhere in Ravel's life and work, even, for example, the exercise of judicious sartorial taste – for which he was well known. Ravel's generic understanding of opera buffa lurks

[57] Preface to *Contes et nouvelles I*, in *Œuvres: Sources et Postérité d'Esope à l'Oulipo*, ed. André Versaille (Paris, 1995).

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here as well. For the relevant aesthetic categories belong more to the pre-Romantic eighteenth century than to a post-Wagnerian climate, except of course that their rearticulation in a new environment produced a phenomenon that in itself was modern.[58] I would like (speculatively) to suggest, then, that when characters operate as stick figures and the action appears mechanical, leitmotivic development – so often freighted in criticism with hermeneutic exegesis and expressive function – leaves itself more exposed to admiration of musical craft for its own sake. Current critical practice militates against mere description of piquant effects, a tour of musical delights in a score – this use of the harp, that ninth chord – but in its particular deployment of a leitmotivic web, Ravel's comedy exerts gentle resistance to the surgical ambitions of the critic.

The critic Gaston Carraud, whom I cited earlier, noted that 'it is not that the characters aren't clearly and humorously depicted by motifs that follow them in a very Wagnerian way – oh horror! – in the orchestra during the action: but the listener does not get the impression of a real living soul'. Small wonder that for those conditioned to seek something else in leitmotivic recurrence, the result might appear arid and dehumanised: a virtuoso display, merely (to recall Rosenthal's words) 'an opulent demonstration'. Yet in view of Ravel's witty fusion of leitmotivic technique and allusions to opera buffa, both of them removed from their familiar habitat, to hold sophistication against him seems an unpersuasive critical strategy. In a Bergsonian world of comical inversions and living automatons, cleverness would seem to be the highest form of praise.

Appendix

Ravel's letter to *Le Figaro*, published 17 May 1911
location of autograph fair copy: unknown
location of drafts: Yale University, Beinecke Library, Koch Collection FRKF 26
[ ]= legible deletions in the drafts

Letter as published in *Le Figaro (*text in Ravel, *Lettres, écrits, entretiens*, ed. Arbie Orenstein, 118*)*

Cher Monsieur,

Ce que j'ai tenté, en écrivant *L'Heure espagnole*? C'est assez ambitieux: régénérer l'opéra-bouffe italien. Pourtant, cette œuvre n'est pas conçue dans la forme traditionnelle. Comme son ancêtre direct, *Le Mariage*, de Moussorgsky, interprétation fidèle de la pièce de Gogol, *L'Heure espagnole* est une *comédie musicale*. Aucune modification du texte de Franc-Nohain, hormis quelques coupures. Seul, le quintette final pourrait rappeler, par sa coupe, par ses vocalises, ses effets de voix, les ensembles du repertoire. A part ce quintette, c'est plutôt de la déclamation familière que de la mélodie. La langue française, aussi bien qu'une autre, a ses

[58] I take up some of these issues in 'Maurice Ravel: Private Man, Public Works'.

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accents, ses inflexions musicales. Et je ne vois pas pourquoi l'on ne profiterait de ces qualités pour tâcher de prosodier juste.

L'esprit humoristique de l'œuvre est purement musical: ici, le rire doit être obtenu, non pas, ainsi que dans l'opérette, par l'accentuation arbitraire et cocasse des mots, mais par l'insolite de l'harmonie, du rythme, du dessin mélodique ou de l'orchestration.

Croyez, cher monsieur, etc. etc.

Maurice Ravel

Draft, page 1

Cher Monsieur,

Ce que j'ai tenté, [avec l'Heure Espagnole] en écrivant l'Heure Espagnole c'est assez ambitieux: [faire revivre un genre] régénérer l'opéra-bouffe italien. [Mais dans une forme nouvelle] Dans le principe seulement: [Ce n'est] Cette œuvre n'est pas conçue dans la forme traditionelle [que cette œuvre est conçue.] Comme son ancêtre, son seul ancêtre direct*, le Mariage*, de Moussorgski [fidèle] interpretation fidèle [? directement] de la pièce de Gogol, *l'Heure Es.* est une *comédie musicale.* Aucune modification au texte de Franc-Nohain hormis quelques coupures. Seul, le quintette final pourrait rappeler, par sa coupe, ses vocalises, ses effets de voix, les ensembles du repertoire. [J'ai surtout, dans l'ensemble de cette œuvre, je me suis efforcé de me ?] A part ce quintette, c'est plutôt de la déclamation familière que du chant. La langue française aussi bien qu'une autre, a ses accords, ses inflexions musicales. [Et j'ai toujours pensé qu'il était inutile de prosodier à coté pour trouver les contextures mélodiques. Et j'ai toujours pensé que les contextures mélodiques n'exigent pas de prosodier de travers.] Et je ne vois pas pourquoi l'on ne profiterait pas de ces qualités pour tâcher de prosodier juste. L'esprit de l'œuvre est franchement humoristique. [Et] C'est [surtout] par la musique surtout, par l'harmonie, le rythme, l'orchestration [et non] que j'ai voulu exprimer l'ironie. Et non, ainsi que dans l'opérette, par l'accentuation arbitraire et cocasse des mots

Draft, p. 2

. . . faire revivre non l'opérette française légère et parodique, parfois sentimentale, mais l'ancien bouffe italien. Depuis longtemps, je songeais à un ouvrage musical humoristique. L'orchestre moderne me semblait justement pouvoir souligner, exagérer les effets comiques. En lisant l'Heure Es. de F. N. j'ai trouvé que cette fantaisie cocasse se prêtait à mon projet. Un tas de choses me séduisaient dans cet ouvrage: mélange de conversation familière et de lyrisme ridicule à dessin; atmosphere de bruits insolites et amusants qui enveloppe les personages en cette boutique d'horlogerie. Enfin la parti à tirer des rythmes pittoresques de la musique espagnole.

Draft, p. 3

Ce n'est pas [pourtant] dans la forme traditionelle de l'opéra-bouffe que cette œuvre est conçue. La pièce de F.N. n'a été nullement modifiée. Quelques coupures

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seulement. C'est la véritable comédie musicale. Le quintette final, seul, pourrait rappeler par sa coupe, les ensembles des ouvrages classiques. La seule tentative de ce genre est la comédie de Gogol *le Mariage*, mis en musique par Moussorgski. Cette œuvre est resté malheureusement inachevée.

Draft, p. 4

pas pourqoui l'on ne profiterait de ces qualités pour tâcher de prosodier juste. L'esprit de l'œuvre est franchment humoristique; mais c'est la musique surtout, l'harmonie, le rythme, l'orchestration qui expriment ici l'ironie. Et non ainsi

Draft, p. 5

pas pourquoi l'on ne profiterait de ces qualités pour tâcher de prosodier juste. L'esprit de l'œuvre est franchement humoristique. Mais ici, la musique surtout, l'harmonie, le rythme, l'orchestration expriment l'ironie. L'esprit [humoristique] de l'œuvre est [franchement] purement musical. [Je veux dire que ce n'est pas L'ironie est] Ici, le rire [doit] être obtenu, non [pas] par [les moyens habituels] ainsi que dans l'opérette, par l'accentuation arbitraire et cocasse des mots, mais par l'harmonie, le rythme ou l'orchestration

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