

### Analysis Of Ravel's "Chansons Madécasses"

Maurice Ravel was a modern French composer who lived from 1875 to 1937. Between 1925 and 1926, Ravel wrote Chansons Madécasses ("Songs of Madagascar"), three compositions for voice, flute, cello, piano. The French poet Évariste de Parny provided the text in his collection entitled Chansons Madécasses. The three pieces premiered in Rome in 1926.

The first song, Nahandove, is about the poet's lover and their approaching meeting. The text is relatively explicit for its time and is supported by the music's visceral intensity. The piece is very calm, yet intense and tension-filled throughout. Marked *Andante Quasi Allegretto* at the beginning, the tempo quickens at measure 19. This tempo change occurs right before the text "Elle vient" or "she comes", demarcating the first real action of the poem, when the poet's lover finally approaches. The first stanza is more of an ode and calling to his lover; accentuated by the soft, calm wistfulness of the score's beginning. The piano remains the only audible instrument until shortly after this point, at measure 26 in which the cello enters (followed shortly after by the flute in measure 28) at the repeated words "C'est elle" ("It is her"). However, these words are not repeated in Parny's poem. Once again, the action of the text is emphasized; the actual confirmation of his lover's appearance is consummated by the emerging orchestration with a rising crescendo from piano to forte between measures 26-28. The climax of the song occurs shortly thereafter in measures 29-32, over the exclamation "Nahandove!" at the lover's arrival. Here, the flute and cello are their most active, with accented sixteenth notes 2-4 times per measure. In addition, the piano is accented for the first time on beats 1 and 4 (the strong beats of normal 6/8 time). A *Ritardando* follows, and the tempo

increasingly slows as the initial tempo returns in measure 35 and an even slower tempo (*Piu Lento*) at measure 41. An *accelerando* occurs at measure 51 preparing for the text “*Le plaisir passé comme un éclair*” (The pleasure ends like a flash). Thus, the swift tempo change has a startling effect, displacing the calm sensuousness of the song up till then. The tempo gradually decreases again however for the conclusion of the song. This slowing down both concludes the piece and harkens back to the beginning, in which the poet speaks of the joy of his lover’s upcoming visit, a joy that returns after she leaves in excited anticipation of her next visit.

The second song, *Aoua*, is much more dissonant, alarming and unstable than the first. It starts off at roughly the same tempo as *Nahandove*’s conclusion (*Andante*, 60 bpm) with *fortissimo* markings and an accented first beat in the new  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature. The first line is angry and sounds almost violent in nature: “*Méfiez-vous des blancs, habitants du rivage*” (“Beware of the white men who inhabit the shores”), warning the native inhabitants of the Madagascar islands against white men who trick natives into becoming conquered people. This siren-like and somewhat frightening warning is emphasized by the extreme dissonance in the piano, featuring 3 semitone dyad conflicts: G# against A as the two bass notes, D# and E in the upper bass left hand register, and F# and G in the right hand. The two dyad conflicts G#-A and D#-E can be viewed in perhaps the most tonal light as a leading tone to C major’s relative minor of a. The F# and G dyad conflict, on the other hand, may indicate a pull toward C major, with F# as the dominant’s leading tone. Whatever the case, these dyad conflicts can be seen throughout the remainder of the piece, in addition to general chromaticism and even remote sudden key changes to F# Major and B Major (seen in measures 25 and 38 respectively). A

tempo change to *Allegro Feroce* occurs at this B Major key change and at the text's first repeat of the opening words: "Mefiez-vous des blancs!" Similarly, a pedal tone returns there. While an F# pedal tone dominated the intro of the song (throughout Rehearsal 1), at the text's return a pedal dominant a half-step lower of F occurs for approximately the same duration. The return to the beginning is further consummated by the final return of the F# pedal tone in the last four measures directly after the last line of the text, fittingly "Mefiez-vous des blancs."

The last song, *Il est doux*, returns to the former calm and sensuousness of the opening song. Translated to "It is soft," the song indeed conjures feelings of soft comfort and relaxation with its *Lento* tempo, piano markings and light texture. Like the opening song, the poet's pleasure is owed to women, though this time a group of them that wish only to sing, dance and cook for him. Both the flute and cello enter with their own characteristic solos, perhaps each representing a unique distinctly lovely female attendant. The flute plays charming triplet figures while the cello articulates neighboring and descending harmonic tones. These separate soloist passages continue throughout the song, often with the instrument accompanied only by the singer at most, an example being the flute's solo in measures 10-14. This sparse texture, and the gradual entrances of the voice and instruments, often not fully overlapping, lend a relaxed, sweet and lazy-like feeling to the song, supporting the text's contented mood. These qualities, in addition to the consistent piano marking and relatively slow tempo all add to the overall soothing character.

Of the two recordings I listened to, Madeleine Grey's 1932 recording coached by Ravel, and Gerard Souzay's later recording, I came to prefer Madeleine Grey's. I noticed

that Souzay's recording was, on the whole, a bit faster than Grey's and felt that this took away from the extremely earthy and relaxed atmosphere of at least the first and last songs. I did really enjoy Souzay's voice in its directness and extremely clear articulation and diction. However, Grey's less, perhaps, consistent sound resonated with me more emotionally and brought out the nuances of the text in a way that Souzay's did not. I believe part of these differences was accomplished through Souzay's consistent use of vibrato, and Grey's relative lack thereof; Souzay's lending a more formal and polished color and Grey's a more simple, soft and mysterious quality. Perhaps this preference is not too surprising since Ravel was there to guide her and the rest of the player's in the direction of his artistic intentions.