

Vivid words on the piano: A study in finding relationship of Aloysius Bertrand's poem and Maurice Ravel's piano work *Ondine*

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Abstract

Maurice Ravel was twenty-one years old when he read *Gaspard de la nuit* by Aloysius Bertrand for the first time. Being a fan of literature, Ravel was captured by Bertrand's poems in which the elements of medieval Gothic atmosphere, dark fantasy, and romance could be found. Twelve years later his own piano suite with the same title was published, where he placed a poem before each of the three pieces; this suggests that he wanted the pianists to read, to understand, and to be able to follow the story when they play the music. This research is focusing on *Ondine*, the first of the set, by analysing from three points of view: the poem, the music, and the relation between the music and the poem. The aim is to find out how Ravel, with his background, musical beliefs, and craftsmanship, set the poem into a musical story and therefore could be used as a tool for an imaginative playing in performing this piece.

Keywords: Ondine; Maurice Ravel; Poem; Analysis; Aloysius Bertrand

Kata-Kata yang Hidup dalam Piano: Studi Hubungan Antara Puisi Aloysius Bertrand dan Karya Piano Maurice Ravel *Ondine*

Abstrak

Maurice Ravel berusia dua puluh satu tahun ketika ia mengenal *Gaspard de la nuit* yang ditulis oleh Aloysius Bertrand untuk pertama kalinya. Sebagai pecinta literatur, Ravel terpukau pada karya-karya puisi oleh Bertrand di mana di dalamnya terdapat gambaran suasana jaman Gotik, kaya akan fantasi mencekam dan romansa. Dua belas tahun kemudian ia mempublikasikan sebuah karya piano solo dengan judul yang sama, yang terdiri dari tiga bagian. Pada setiap bagian karya, Ravel menempatkan sebuah puisi di halaman pertama yang menyiratkan bahwa ia menginginkan sang pianis untuk membaca, mengerti, dan mampu untuk mengikuti alur cerita ke dalam permainan. Penelitian ini berfokus pada *Ondine*, bagian pertama dari set *Gaspard de la nuit*, dengan menganalisa dari tiga sudut pandang, yaitu puisi, musik, serta relasi antara puisi dan musiknya. Tujuan penulis adalah untuk mencari tahu bagaimana Ravel, dengan latar belakangnya, gaya bermusiknya, dan keterampilannya dapat menempatkan kata-kata puitis dari Aloysius Bertrand menjadi suatu cerita musikal, yang dapat digunakan sebagai panduan dalam gaya bermain penuh imajinasi ketika menampilkan karya ini.

Kata kunci: Ondine; Maurice Ravel; Puisi; Analisis; Aloysius Bertrand

Introduction

The romantic poet, Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841), inspired Ravel with mysterious, hallucinatory, infernal visions in his poems. Ravel said to his pupil Henrietta Faure that she should read the entire poem collection of *Gaspard de la nuit*, because it is marvelous, where all the Romanticism of the 19th century is found in this little old book (Zank, 2009).

Gaspard is a Persian word meaning royal treasures, jewel-like, thus *Gaspard de la nuit* is 'treasure of the night'. It is also the name of an old tower in Dijon. These origins and the Gothic architecture of Dijon give the mysterious, medieval atmosphere of the book. Ondine is legendary water spirit who was created by German writer Frédéric de La Motte-Fouquet in the 1811 novel *Undine*. The immortal water sprite goddess falls in love with a mortal, she is willing to leave her life in the sea and give up her immortality in order to be with the man. Bertrand's poem gives different story. Instead of wanting to go to the man's world, she seduces the man to come to her world. Here is the complete poem:

Ondine

..... *I thought I heard*
A vague harmony that casts spells in my sleep,
And near me spreads a whisper
Like an interrupted song of a sad and tender voice.

"Listen! -Listen! It is I, it is Ondine who brushes with these drops of water the vibrant panes of your window, lit by the melancholy rays of the moon; and here, in a robe of watered silk, is the lady of the castle who, from her balcony, gazes at the beautiful, starry night and the beautiful, sleeping lake.

Each wave is a water sprite swimming in the current, each current is a path that winds towards my palace, and my palace is built of water, in the depth of the lake, in the triangle of fire, earth, and air.

Listen! -Listen! – My father beats the croaking water with a greed alder branch, and my sisters caress with their arms of spray the cool islands of grass, of water lilies and gladioli, or mock the weeping, bearded willow as he dips his fishing line in the lake."

*

She finished her murmured song and begged me to put her ring on my finger, to be the husband of a water nymph, and to come down with her to her palace as king of the lakes.

And when I told her that I was in love with a mortal woman, she began to sulk in annoyance, shed a few tears, gave a burst of laughter, and vanished in a shower of spray which ran in pale drops down my blue window panes.

The quotation marks give the impression of a direct-indirect speech. However, according to Bruhn (1997), the last two stanzas use the first-person singular, indicating that the whole poem is from the man's point of view. He is telling a story and narrating the voice of Ondine which he thinks he is hearing. From the first to the third stanza there is the voice of Ondine as a playful, naïve, enthusiastic character who tells about herself, her home, her family, and the other character, a mortal woman who is nobler and rational. From the fourth stanza until the last one, the singing of Ondine ends. It is the man speaking, using a different way of narrating than the first three, in which the speech is more direct, less imaginative, and more logical by mentioning a statement and its reasons.

Ondine and the set of *Gaspard de la nuit* is an intellectual piano work with such a complexity, which could easily be a technical challenge for pianists. If Liszt has his 12 transcendental etudes, Ravel challenges us with his three poems of transcendental virtuosity. One needs to balance the challenge with a sensible story to make sense of the music. Here lies the need to read the poem by

Bertrand, understand it, and play the poetic melodies with imagination. To be able to have this imaginative playing based on the poem analysis is the goal of this research.

Research Method

This research is using the qualitative descriptive method. The data is obtained through various data collection from various sources without the intervention of variable, to be analyzed qualitatively. The process of data collection took place between January and August 2021 through books, articles, and online journals about composer Maurice Ravel, French music, *Gaspard de la nuit*, and prose-poem. The writer then analyzed the specific piece Ondine from *Gaspard de la nuit* on its structure, harmony, motivic materials, and interpretation.

Analysis

The three pieces of *Gaspard de la nuit*, although taken from different poems and musically not similar, are forming the elements of classical structure: an *allegro*, *adagio*, and a *finale* (Perlemuter, Vlado & Jourdan-Morhange, 2005).

Ondine itself is classical in structure. Although it is difficult to point out the exact form, a sonata form can be discovered in it, based on the themes that are presented. The exposition opens with the first theme, followed by the second theme in dominant (bar 32). The development explores both themes before comes to the recapitulation in bar 80 and ends with a coda. The whole piece consists of melodies that are played together with the ongoing thirty-second notes like a song with accompaniment.

Section	A					B
						
Measure	1	2	10	22	23 - 29	30 - 40
	Intro	theme 1	motive W	motive X	motive Y	theme 2
Tonality	C sharp major (7 sharps)					G sharp major

Table 1. Exposition

Section	A				B					
										
Measure	41-44	45	47-49	51	52 - 56	57 - 65	66 - 71	72	75-78	79
	<i>Theme 1</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>theme 1</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>theme 2</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>theme 2</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>X</i>
Tonality	D# maj		NO sharp			6 sharps		NO sharp	5 sharps	

Table 2. Development

Section	A		Coda	
				
Measure	80	84 - 87	88	89 - 91
	<i>Theme 1</i>	<i>motive W</i>		
Tonality	5 sharps	NO sharp	7 sharps (C# major)	

Table 3. Recapitulation

The Ravelian melody is characteristically a mixture of tonality and modality, as discovered in the first theme of *Ondine*, which starts as G# minor but two bars later become G# Mixolydian. For modality, Ravel used Dorian and Phrygian widely in his compositions. The second theme of *Ondine* is a Phrygian melody. These two musical modes are the characteristic tunes of Basque and Andaluc a folk songs that his mother used to sing him every night when he was young.

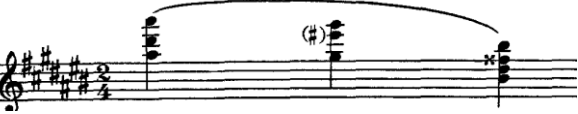
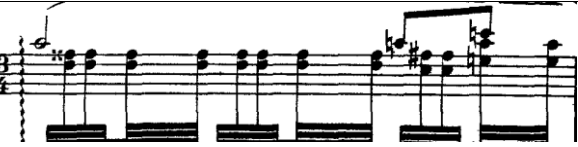
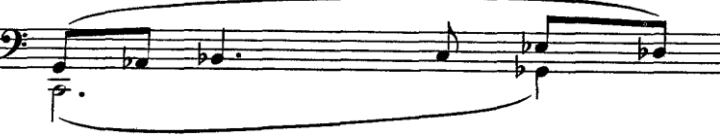
Theme 1	
Theme 2	
Motive W	 This motive is shared by both main themes. It appears the first time in bar 11 and is used as a part of the second theme as well.
Motive X	 The transition theme. This motive appears two times in the piece: first in bar 22, second in bar 72.
Motive Y	 This motive in appearance is always enveloped by motive X, thus it also appears two times: in bars 23 and 76.
Motive Z	 First time appears in bar 45, then bar 50, then bar 57-61; each time is in higher key and developed, bringing tension to build climax.

Table 4. Chart of Melodic Materials

Ondine continues the techniques that he used in other works with water theme, *Jeux d'eau* and *Une barque sur l'océan*. It has new innovations such as the opening figure, which challenges pianists with alternating chords with a single note in an irregular rhythm. For thirteen measures, the chords almost do not move from their position, the harmonies change by moving only one or two notes in each bar. In fact, this whole section consists of a continuous interlocking movement from both hands that does not extend more than one octave. This interlocking pattern is typical for Ravel, as also found in *Sonatine*, *Jeux d'eau*, and *Miroirs*.

The black-keys glissandos used in *Jeux d'eau* and *Une barque sur l'océan* appear here, both in right and left hand, as well as a white-keys glissando. The conventional white-keys glissando is commonly used by Liszt in his virtuosic pieces, but black-keys glissando with its pentatonic sound gives an exotic quality. Ravel often used black-keys glissandos which is not only making more difficult to play but also created less clear tonality (Eccles, 2004).

Relating the music and the poem

Based on the analysis of both the poem and the music, we can see that the five stanzas in the poetry can be matched with the structure of the music. Here is the relation, which will be used later to interpret the words to the musical notes.

Stanza	Bar
1	1-29
2	30-40
3	41-51
4	52-71
5	72-91

Table 5. Five Stanzas Matched with The Music Structure

Another significant aspect of this piece is the key signature. Ravel carefully chose them to follow the text and to describe the mood and characters in the poem. As the man is half-sleeping, he is in between the real and unreal realm. The two different worlds are symbolized by the glass of the window that separates him and Ondine. For this, Ravel chose seven sharps and no-sharp.

The piece begins with seven sharps, thus associated with Ondine, as she sings at the beginning of the poem. Then exactly in the middle of the piece, in the middle of stanza number three which consists of metaphoric sentences, Ravel put all the accidentals off. This moment is

also marked by a new melody (motive Z) which refers to the man. Seven sharp reflects the supernatural world; no-sharp reflects the natural. After this drastic change of keys at the center of the piece, Ravel put another two key signatures: six sharps and five sharps, before finally coming back to seven sharps.

Changes of key signatures

Bar 1	Bar 45	Bar 62	Bar 72	Bar 74	Bar 83	Bar 89
Seven sharps	No accidental	Six sharps	No accidental	Five sharps	No accidental	Seven sharps

Table 6. Changes of Key Signatures

It is noticeable that from the middle section (bar 45) onwards other key signatures appear but it always comes back to *no accidental*. ‘Seven sharps’ is the frame of the piece but ‘no accidental’ is the center. This is to suggest that the man, as the main narrator of this poem, is swayed by the two different worlds, by reality and illusionary experience, by the natural world (where he and the mortal woman exist), and the supernatural world (where Ondine exists).

The next section is relating the sentences of the poem to the music. Sections are divided by stanzas.

.... Je croyais entendre... Une vague harmonie enchanter mon sommeil



Figure 1. Ondine bar 1-2
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

The opening chord refers to the **epigraph** of the poem, which does not begin on the first beat but the third, as if in the middle of his sleep the man is slowly woken up by sound that came from nowhere. This harmony of C-sharp major with an added minor 6th makes the 'vague' tonality, representing the dreamy world of the man.

Looking at the setting, it is understood that the story is happening on a rainy night. The man is sleeping inside his chamber. Outside there is a lake, from where Ondine would appear. The repeating chord portrays this background setting, of the lake where the water is shimmering with the reflection of the moonlight.

“Ecoute! Ecoute! C’est moi, c’est Ondine”

(Listen! Listen! It is me, it is Ondine)



Figure 2. Ondine bar 3-4
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

Ondine starts her singing in bar 3; the first theme enters and it relates to the **first stanza** of the poem. The melody is sinuous and as a 'song', it is musically in a comfortable range for singer. This 'song' refers to the *“murmuring break out like the interrupted song of a sad and tender voice”*.

The B natural is immediately forming the G-sharp minor key, which gives a hint of bitonality because it's against the shimmering pattern of C-sharp major with added minor 6th. The bitonality supports the idea of 'vague harmony' and 'dreamy world'. Different atmosphere is

introduced by minor harmony in bar 8, when the theme is played in another key, A# minor against D# minor with added major 6th chord.

Ondine is calling ‘Listen!’ two times to seek attention from the man, to point out the moment when she introduces herself here. The main theme is repeated for the third time in arpeggiated octave. The water figuration becomes jumpy and the chord is missing its tonic. This ‘missing tonic’ will remain characteristic for the jumpy accompaniment (bar 37, 42, and 47), except in bar 80, the final presentation of the main theme.

In bar 14 we hear the change of melodic motive and the accompaniment, as the portrayal of Ondine *“who brushes with this drops of wáter the vibrant panes of your window, illuminated by the melancholy rays of the moon”*.

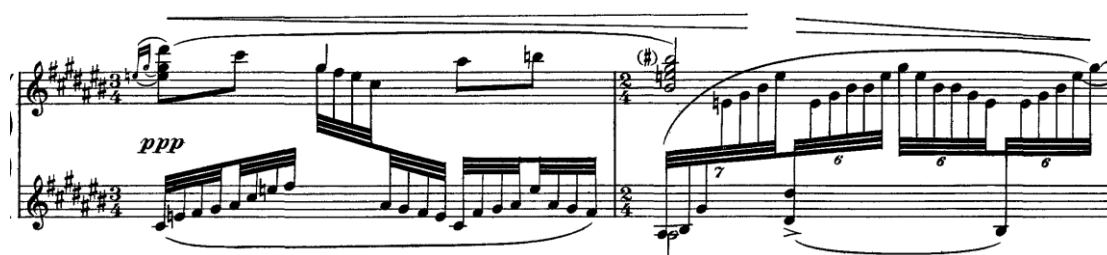


Figure 3. Ondine bar 14-15

Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

As happens in *Soupir*, the first part of *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* when Ravel changed the accompaniment from chords to arpeggio at the end of text *“Se trainer le soleil jaune d'un long rayon”* (Let the yellow sun drag itself out in a long ray), this arpeggio portrays the **moonlight that is illuminating the window panes**.

Then in bar 23, we are introduced to the mortal lady, represented by motive Y. It appears only one more time later after the climax of the piece, which corresponds with the poem mentioning the woman only in the first and last stanza. If we look at the accompaniment, they look very similar to the figures in the beginning. However, the shimmering pattern here is more regular. The pattern that accompanies Ondine is irregular, with the grouping of 3+3+2 from the repeating chord.

Example: Bar 1

Bar 23

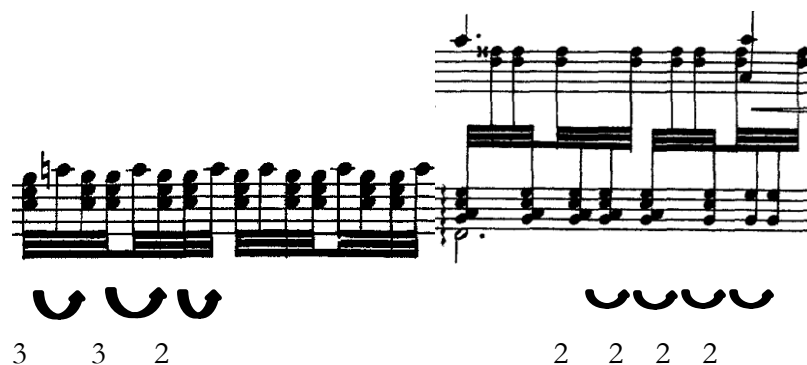


Figure 4. Ondine bar 1 and bar 23

Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

The shimmering pattern from bar 23-25 consists of D# minor 13th, F# minor 13th, A minor 13th, A# diminished 7th in their inversions. There is a pedal note (D#) that holds these chords, giving more ground and stability. The G# major scale (bar 22), B#7th arpeggio (bar 26), A#9th and B9 arpeggio (bar 28-29) are more conservative compared to the arpeggio of *Ondine* in bar 16 (C# minor with added major 6th). There is no sound of bitonality as we heard in the beginning. Here, as well as later in bar 76-78, the melody and the shimmering pattern are moving together in perfect parallel. All of these show the stability and nobleness of the lady, distinguished from Ondine's playfulness and unpredictability.

As we enter measure 30, it relates to the beginning of the **second stanza** in the poem. There is a clear division in the music, as in bar 29, Ravel marked *Un peu retenu* and then *au Mouvt* in bar 30. The shimmering chord of water figuration enters. It is the same as beginning in bar 1, except that this time is in G-sharp major with added minor 6th. This dominant chord shows classical harmonic progression. Then, the second theme appears, singing Ondine's sentence:

***“Each wave is a water-sprite swimming in the current,
each current is a path that winds towards my palace”***



Figure 5. Ondine bar 32 – The second theme
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

The progression of the imagery words (a wave...a current...a path) is heard in the music as we hear the second theme broadens in range. Melody is in octave and the shimmering pattern becomes jumpy. It is suggesting the difference between ‘*un ondine*’ (small wave) and a ‘current’. This current moves snakelike (*serpente*) towards her palace.

“My palace is built of water, in the depths of the lake, in the triangle of fire, earth, and air”

A ‘triangle’ is used to symbolize three harmonious elements in life (God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit; Father, mother, and child; Body, mind, and soul in human). In bar 37 after the jumpy movement, we hear an arpeggio coming in the left hand. For the first time in the piece, Ravel makes three-voice figure. Then the bass goes lower to F-sharp; her palace in the ‘depth of the lake’ means somewhat grounded and stable: we hear a repetitive melody and F-sharp 9th harmony that holds for the next three bars.



Figure 6. Ondine bar 36-39: Coming to three-voice passage; the F-sharp 9th harmony
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

The **third stanza** of the poem begins accordingly to the music in bar 41. As we can see here, Ravel followed the structure of the poem by putting the same introduction before Ondine

begins her singing. The shimmering chord is an introduction before Ondine enters with her tune, which is similar to the very beginning of the piece and it is the second A from the A-B-A structure of the poem.

“Listen! –Listen!”

My father beats the croaking water with the green alder branch”

The musical onomatopoeia of Ravel is shown here (‘croaking water’). In the middle of the shimmering motive, the sound of croaking water is expressed with a fast melodic figure on a high register, made of broken chords and scale.



Figure 7. Ondine bar 42: The croaking water
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

In measure 45, for the first time the melody (motive Z) is played in the low register, and the key signature suddenly changes from seven sharps to no sharps. This refers to the man's character. From the beginning until now, Ondine is singing about her world; everything is told from her perspective. These two bars are the first glimpse of the man that she longs to reach.

“The sisters caress with their arms of spray the cool islands of grass, of water-lilies and gladioli, or mock the weeping, bearded willow.”

The playful images of Bertrand’s metaphoric words continue. Their ‘arms of spray’ means the foam that is seen in the small waves, and they are touching the flowers and the willow tree on the lake. In the music, we can hear these waves (see examples below). In this passage of croaking water, caressing flowers, and mocking willow trees, the water figuration supports the playful images because of its jumpy movement.



Figure 8. Ondine bar 49: Mocking the willow tree
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

“She finished her murmured song”

As we come to measure 52, Ondine’s main song (theme 1) disappears. Here begins the **fourth stanza** of the poem. The accompaniment, shimmering water figure also suddenly disappears. Until bar 51, the texture of the piece is that one hand plays the melody, other hand plays the accompaniment. But here it is suddenly changed. The second theme is played simultaneously by both hands.

Change of character is also marked by the irregular rhythm of four against three in both hands, creating a dance-like movement. However, although the theme is mixed with the accompaniment, Ravel stated that the song (*le chant*) still has to be brought out and expressive.

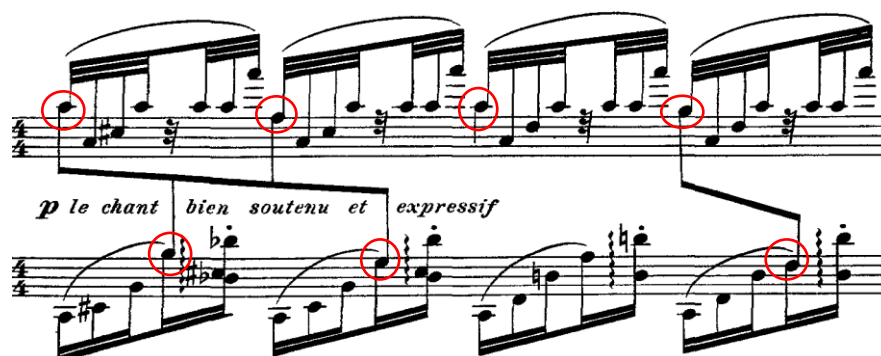


Figure 9. Ondine bar 52: The song / *le chant*
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

This “song” is her offer of marriage to the man. *“She begged me to put her ring on my finger”* which she repeats in bar 55-56 with intense dynamic marks *mf* and *f* (for the first time in the piece that it is not *p* or *ppp*).

Then we have the stormy passage in measure 57-65, when Ondine is offering her love but the man is hesitating. Written in three staves, motive Z is taken as the main melody, with a pedal note on the bass and water figuration on the right hand. Pedal note in Ravel's compositions is rare. It occurs in this piece only two times (compare to Debussy, who used pedal notes frequently to create a static effect. In Debussy's *Ondine* it appears fourteen times). In measure 57-61, the pedal notes, chords, and water figurations are creating dissonance and tension; this passage functions to prepare the climax.

In this stormy passage, Ondine asks him again *“to be the husband of a water nymph and to come down with her to her palace”*. But the man (motive Z) begins to voice his rejection. His hesitation towards Ondine is getting stronger; there is a building-up tension in each bar. Ondine realizes that she is rejected by the man in measure 62: there is descending arpeggio reaches low G-sharp on the bass and dynamically changes from *forte* to *piano* just in one beat.

The climax of the piece in measure 66 portrays Ondine's anger because of the rejection. Both hands are making arpeggio on the contrary movement that hit all register, expanding over six octaves of the piano keys. Rhythmically it is challenging (with seven against six, six against five, five against seven) and creating irregular sound like a big wave of water that is splashing everywhere. Then this crashing water gradually becomes softer and calmer. The big scale-arpeggios turn smaller, and in bar 70 the water figuration is back to the shimmering motive.

“And when I told her that I was in love with a mortal woman...”

Here is the beginning of the **fifth stanza**, as we notice in measure 71 that the key signature is back to natural. After calming down from the climax of splashing water, the man says his reason for rejection. The subject of ‘mortal woman’ comes back. This section is similar to measure 22-26. The accidentals disappear, and motive X appears again like a reminder of the first stanza. It is extended and accompanied by a glissando on the white keys.

In measure 74 we hear motive X again, this time is accompanied by black keys glissando because it turns to five sharps. Just like in measure 22-26, here motive X (measure 74 and 79) is enveloping motive Y (measure 75-78). The difference is that the notes surrounding the melody are not shimmering chords but an arpeggio, with D# as the central note.

The main theme appears again for the last time. *“She began to sulk in annoyance”*. We already heard the *T* (bar 72) and the *‘mortal woman’* (bar 76) and now Ondine is presented as the main theme. Amidst the calm atmosphere, the water figuration is the jumpy movement with minor harmony representing the sulking and annoyed Ondine. Here, for the second time appears a pedal note in the piece. It is preparing for the recitative. In bar 57 the pedal note is to create tension in building climax; here, it is to bring back the calm moments after dramatic climax.

In bar 83 after three bars of pedal note G-sharp, suddenly it turns unexpectedly to D minor. All key signatures are cancelled, from five sharps to no-sharps. In this bar, and only in this bar, Ravel put a stop in the music, as if to illustrate Ondine’s perplexed state because of the disappointing news. It is the saddest moment of Ondine’s character. Marked *Très lent* (very slow) in measure 84, we hear an unaccompanied melody. This recitative is Ravel’s literary expression for: *“She shed a few tears”*.

It is the complete motive W with a G-sharp at the end which makes interval minor 2nd from note A before ward. In bar 13 and 35 motive W appears and it always ends in major 2nd. So here Ravel shows the importance of minor 2nd by emphasizing with accent and short length of the previous note.

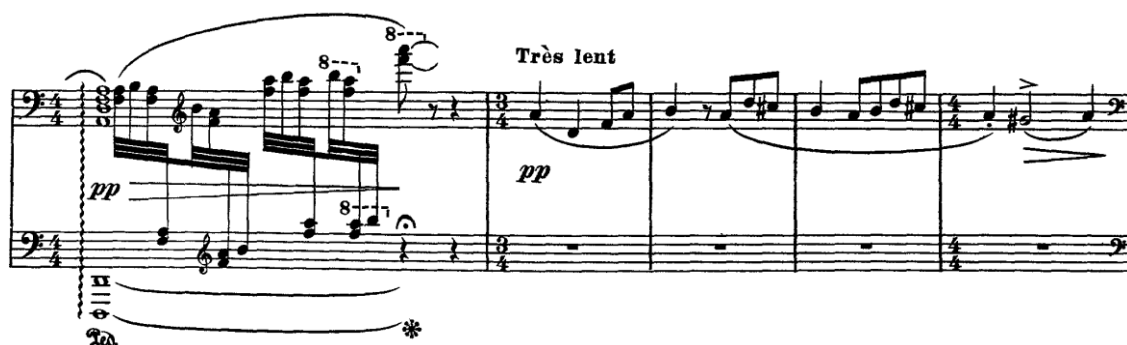


Figure 10. Ondine bar 83-87
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

Then perhaps as to portray Ondine's playful character, she immediately “*gave a burst of laughter*” in measure 88, continued with the “*shower of spray*” before she vanished away.

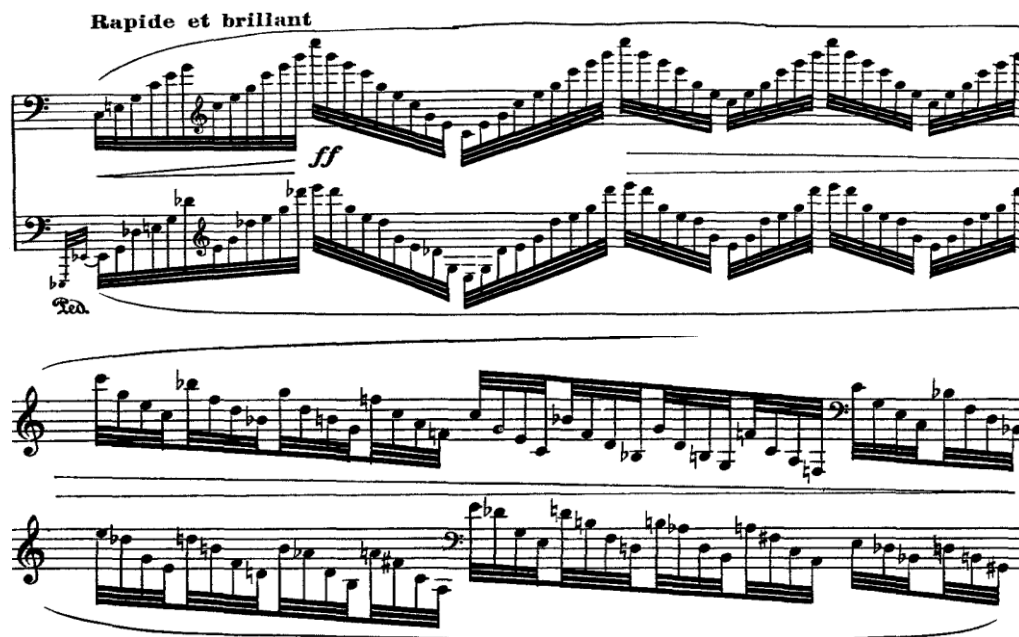


Figure 11. Ondine bar 88
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

In the last three measures, Ondine finally returns to the lake. The sound of water running by the window is heard in this arpeggio. The harmony is C# Major with added minor 6th, same as the opening chord of the piece. Ondine appears vaguely in the middle of a dream and disappears quietly, in which Ravel asked his student Vlado Perlemuter to play non-legato, recalling the pulsations of the opening (Perlemuter et al., 2005).

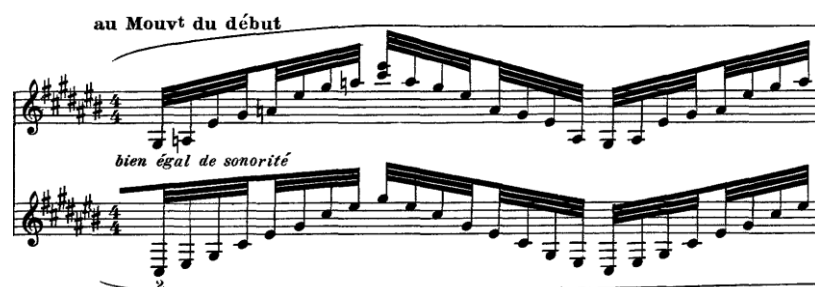


Figure 12. Ondine bar 89-91
Source: Maurice Ravel, *Gaspard de la nuit* (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1909)

Conclusion

When we see that Maurice Ravel put the poem by Aloysius Bertrand before each of the pieces in *Gaspard de la nuit*, it becomes clear that he would like the pianist to read through and be able to comprehend the words. Compared to the other pieces which were also inspired by a poem, *Gaspard de la nuit* is being the only one where he put the complete words on the music sheet. By analyzing the poem, the music, and trying to make a relation of both, it becomes a tremendous tool for the performer to grasp the musical story in each note.

This research involves a big amount of interpretation from the writer, for analyzing a piece of music also means interpreting the music itself. Therefore, although the tools which are used to analyze are taken from reliable sources, it might result in various opinions and interpretations from different performers. This interpretation is certainly useful for the writer to help in building an imaginative playing, not only by intuition but also by a clear understanding of the relation between the poem and the music.

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