

Eduqas A Level Music

AoS E: Into the Twentieth Century

Core Wider Listening: Ravel

Impressionism is a term borrowed from a style of French painting at the end of the 19th century. This style aimed not at exact representation (as in a photograph) but in capturing an *impression* of a scene, particularly through the subtle interplay of colours and light. It is characterized by vague, blurred outlines, and often captures a particular mood or atmosphere. Neither **Debussy** nor **Ravel** liked the term but there is no doubt that there are some similarities between the ambiguous harmonies and blurred structures of this music and impressionist painting.

Listen out for: colourful and often lush instrumentation, rich harmonies with added notes, exotic harmonies such as those based on whole-tone scales, traditional harmony, rhythm and melody is often quite blurred by these features

Core Wider Listening Work: IMPRESSIONISM

Composer	Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Work	String Quartet (1903), second movement

Introduction

Ravel's string is a student work written at the age of 27 and, although dedicated to his teacher Gabriel Fauré, is much more influenced by Debussy. Although the interest in harmonic and instrumental colour clearly owes something to his older Impressionist compatriot, this quartet is typical of Ravel's work in being somewhat more Classically oriented. This can particularly be seen in his conventional approach to form and phrase structure.

Structure

- Ternary form but it has several unusual features:
- The B section is much slower than the A section, being pretty much half the speed
- It is also contrasting in terms of key (hovering around Eb – a long way from the Aeolian opening) and textures, BUT
- It has many motivic links to the A material AND
- There is an extensive link back to the reprise of A, in which material from both sections is reworked and combined.

For reference, this is the form (with reference to figure numbers)

	A1 (Aeolian)
15	A2 (C# Dorian)
17	A3 (more chromatic)
18	A1 repeat with some small changes
19	A2 repeat
21	A3 repeat
22	B with elements of A2 in accompaniment (Eb major ish)
25	Combination of B theme with material from A in layers
26	Winding up for return of A section with pizzicato section back in tempo and playing with A1 material
27	A1 reprise
28	A2 reprise
30	A3 reprise

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Harmony and tonality

- The music is broadly tonal but has many modal inflections, beginning and ending in Aeolian mode (note also the whole-tone tinges in bar 8).
- The second idea is also modally inflected, being centred around C# Dorian (distinctive for its minor tonic chord but major subdominant)
- At the end of the first A section the first violin descends chromatically, there are a series of rich added note chords starting with an E dominant seventh, followed by G# and then C.
- the end of the movement is quite chromatic ending with an augmented sixth resolving not to V but to chord I in the last two bars. This sort of fine balance between colour and functionality is typical of Ravel – the meaning of the cadence is ultimately relatively clear even if the detail is not.

Melody and rhythm

- Ravel's writes fairly regular phrases (mostly two and four bars at the beginning at least)
- The melodic lines are also relative conventional in terms of their shape, in that they move mostly by step and small leaps (compared to Webern for example!)
- There are lots of repetitions of melodic and rhythmic motifs in the melody, again a conventional feature
- Although the melody is initially diatonic, it gets much more chromatic towards the end of the A section and in the B section, perhaps being more typically impressionist in these passages.
- There are many motivic connections between sections (compare the second violin accompaniment at 22 in the B section with the melody of the A2 section at 15 – same rhythm and similar profile) with larger and smaller chunks of melody developed and combined, particularly at the end of the bridge section back to the A reprise (see from Fig. 25).

Texture and sonority

Big emphasis on colour and effect as you might expect in impressionist music. Some interesting textures include:

- the rapid all-pizzicato texture at the beginning
- tremolos and rapid repeated figures in the second idea of the A section (figure 15)
- the layers built up just before the reprise, where the second violin plays the idea from the opening in triple stop pizzicato, against hush triplet arpeggios and a tune played in challenging double stopped octaves, all over a pedal
- The string writing requires a wide range of techniques and effects from tremolo, though rapid arpeggio figures to the use of mutes
- At the beginning of the B section, the cello has the melody whilst the violin II has the bass part with the viola in the middle (i.e. the texture is completely upside-down). This drastically changes the colour as instruments are not playing in their normal range or role.