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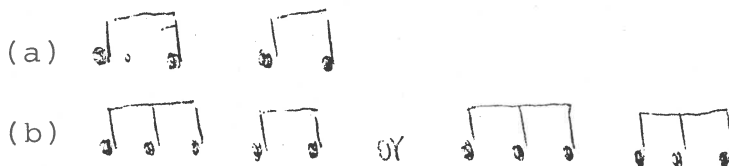
RAVEL'S HABANERA

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Introduction to Musicology  
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Although Ravel was familiar with both the Basque and Spanish languages, he was not fluent in either one.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this statement found in Orenstein's book Ravel: Man and Musician, an investigation was made into the music of the composer with particular interest on those works written in the Spanish idiom. In the catalogue of works listed at the end of the above-noted book, it was revealed that Ravel had written several compositions which reflected the Spanish genre and included three versions of the Spanish dance known as the Habañera.

A song and dance, the Habañera was thought to have come from Cuba, named after the capital, Havana<sup>2</sup> but early Iberian sources have indicated that its origin was Spain.<sup>3</sup> The music consists of a short rhythmic introduction, generally two bars, followed by two sections of 8 to 16 bars. Each section is preceded by the two bar opening and contrasts in key. If the first section is in a major key, the second section will be in a minor mode. The type of song found in the Habañera demonstrates the cante jondo singing style of the gypsies of Spain.<sup>4</sup>

The two main characteristics of the Habañera are found in its rhythm. The first (a) is a rhythmic figure which may be traced back to Ancient Persia and the second (b) is the tresillo or triplet.<sup>5</sup>



During the rhythmic introductions the dancers perform a slow, sensuous step which is stately and oriental-influenced. The step is accompanied by voluptuous movements of the arms, hips, head and eyes. Throughout the singing of the coplas (verses) the dancers stand quietly and accompany the singers with gestures of the hands and arms which take the form of arabesques and wrist rotations.<sup>6</sup> The dance is usually accompanied by a guitar and castenets or finger cymbals. The harmony and rhythm are fixed and the choreography follows certain fixed patterns of steps.

The original version of the Habañera by Maurice Ravel was written for two pianos and belonged to the suite known as Sites auriculaires. Ravel's Habañera reflects the fascinating rhythms and exoticism of the authentic dance. Ravel follows the form of the Iberian dance with a short 3 bar introduction of the old Persian rhythm in place of two and a major and minor section which is each preceded by the introductory rhythmic figure.

Throughout the work the element of the tresillo can also be heard. It is not known if the melody of Ravel's Habañera imitates the peculiar "shrill, high-pitched singing style of the Spanish flamenco"<sup>7</sup> since all true flamenco, as an expression of the soul, is strictly improvisatory and seldom, if ever, written down.

The hypnotic fluidity of the ancient Persian rhythm heard in the introductory bars of Ravel's Habañera is achieved, in part, due to a progression he uses over a C# pedal point. While the C# appears to be the tonic, the tonic in reality, is the F#. The repeated dominant becomes the established sound and is not in the least disturbed by its semitonal neighbours.<sup>8</sup>

Ravel's treatment of the reiterated dominant is a typical feature of the Habañera especially when it takes on the role of a quasi tonic.<sup>9</sup> This obsessive repetition of one note in its quasi tonic form is associated with incantation and when it opposes the melisma of the voice, the nuance becomes very characteristic of cante jondo andalúz.<sup>10</sup>

The original work for two pianos also contains many of the elements Ravel was to use in his later works such as pedal point, appoggiaturas and the ostinato.<sup>11</sup> Another example of this distinct ostinato element on the repeated dominant may be found in the Alborádo del gracióso from Miroirs.

Maurice Ravel wrote five autographs of the Habañera for two pianos. Four of these may be found in the private collection of Madam Alexandre Taverne in Paris and the other one belongs to Manuel Rosenthal.<sup>12</sup> Composed between 1895 and 1897, two of the versions from Madam Taverne's collection contain errors and omissions. The remaining two autographs as well as the one in Rosenthal's possession are considered to be the more accurate of the five. Each of the latter three autographs bears a quotation from Baudelair's exotic poem titled A une Damé creole.<sup>13</sup> It has not been possible to ascertain just why there are discrepancies between the five autographs.

The orchestral version of the Habañera, written in 1898, deviates only slightly from the two piano version and is 7 bars shorter. Whereas the introductory rhythmic figure had been extended to 3 bars for the two piano version, in the orchestral score, it was condensed to two bars thus adhering more closely to the original form of the dance.<sup>14</sup>

In 1907-08 the Habañera was once again transcribed to become the third movement of the Rapsódia Española. The autograph for two pianos was the first work to mark an important point in the musical language of Maurice Ravel and its impact was to be found in Debussy's Soirée dans Granada a few years later and some fifty years hence, in Messiaen's Turangalila.<sup>15</sup>

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F O O T N O T E S

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- <sup>1</sup>Arbie Orenstein, Ravel: Man and Musician. (New York: Columbia Press, 1975), p. 111.
- <sup>2</sup>Julian Ribera, História de la Música Arabe Mediéval y Su Influencia en La Española. (Madrid: Ed. Volvntad, S.A., 1927), p.n/a.
- <sup>3</sup>Arbie Orenstein, Ravel: Man and Musician. (New York: Columbia Press, 1975), p. 220.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 220.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 142.
- <sup>6</sup>New Grove Dictionary, Maurice Ravel: Technique and Works, p. 617.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 617.
- <sup>8</sup>Arbie Orenstein, Ravel: Man and Musician. (New York: Columbia Press, 1975), p. 142.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 142.
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 142.
- <sup>11</sup>New Grove Dictionary, Maurice Ravel: Technique and Works, p. 617.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 617.
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid, p. 617.
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 617.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 617.

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Good work. As discussed in class

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